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Improving the quality of building consent documentation

This article emphasises the important of building consent authorities (local city and district councils) having sound systems and procedures at the front counter when receiving and vetting building consent applications. It also emphasises to designers, builders and homeowner consent applicants the need for good quality consent documentation, with adequate detail and information to establish building compliance.

The quality of building consent documentation directly affects the timeliness of building consent processing and the quality and rigor of the compliance checking that then has to be done. Incomplete or substandard documentation that is accepted into a building consent authority's system usually results in delays and complications for processing staff, which can result in time consuming requests for further information having to be made. While timeliness is an important factor, the greatest risk to a building consent authority, and ultimately the building owner, if the building consent authority accepts substandard or incomplete building consent applications into its systems is that it may not make an informed decision about whether to grant and issue a building consent, It could even mean the wrong decision is made.

More compliance focus at the consent processing stage

The Building Act 2004 introduced a change to the building consenting and inspecting process from the former Building Act 1991. The Building Act 2004 places a greater focus on ensuring Building Code compliance is achieved at the design and building consent processing stages, before building work is approved and begins. This means building consent authorities need to pay more attention to the detailed content and quality of the plans, specifications and documentation submitted with a building consent application than in the past. In light of past performance issues in the sector this improvement was necessary.

Section 45 of the Building Act 2004 sets out in broad terms what an application for a building consent must contain. However, the Act does not define the form, content or quality of the plans and specifications of other information needed to support an application. The bottom line is that building consent authorities need the right amount of information with the right level of detail to help them make informed compliance decisions. Under the Building Act, building consent authorities can only grant a building consent if they are satisfied on reasonable grounds that the provisions of the Building Code would be met if the work is properly completed according to the plans and specifications that came with the consent application (section 49 of the Act refers).

The Act allows each building consent authority to determine what plans, specifications and other information it reasonably requires, which does allow for differences between jurisdictions to be managed locally.

There are both pros and cons to this situation, although local environmental difference (eg: ground conditions, very high sea spray or geothermal corrosion, very high earthquake or wind zones, or

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different effluent and storm water disposal requirements) can require different compliance requirements, the disadvantages are that we risk losing some of the national consistency and standardisation that a national Building Code and Act aims to achieve.

In recent years, many building consent authorities have strengthened their consent processing systems. They are now more conscious of ensuring that the consent documentation is thorough. The building consent authority accreditation scheme has been a catalyst for some of this work in recent years, as we have recent weathertightness failings and the lessons learnt there. The accreditation scheme under the Building Act requires building consent authorities to have effective systems and processes, as well as comprehensive guidance and consumer information about how they receive and vet consent applications to ensure they comply with the Building Act and Building Regulations (including the Building Code).

Room for further improvement

While most building consent authorities have strengthened their consenting systems, the focus now has to be on ensuring such systems are focused on the right issues and risks and being effectively implemented. While carrying out its performance monitoring responsibilities, the Department of Building and Housing sees many examples of building consent files across the country. Some contain clear and comprehensive building consent documentation, which enabled sound and very efficient consent processing and approval. However, other building consent applications still contain incomplete or substandard information or applications that are overly reliant on generic information that is not project specific. Such applications clearly do not fully demonstrate how compliance with the Building Code will be achieved. As such, they make the building consent authorities compliance-checking role harder to fulfil and more inefficient. The Department of Building and Housing has consistently advised that these applications should be rejected at lodgement stage, and the application requested to obtain the required information and re-submit their application again when it's complete. This is often the most overall efficient process.

Additional Guidance

As guidance the Department of Building and Housing published the following document: Guide to applying for a building consent (simple residential buildings) – which sets out the minimum expectations for building consent documentation requirements, and the Beginners guide to resource and building consent processes.

Both of these guides and others are available online at: www.dbh.govt.nz/publications-about-the-building-act-2004

For more detailed and locally specific guidelines and advice about consent documentation requirements talk to your local building consent authority (city or district council) or check out their website for their consent documentation and lodgement requirements.