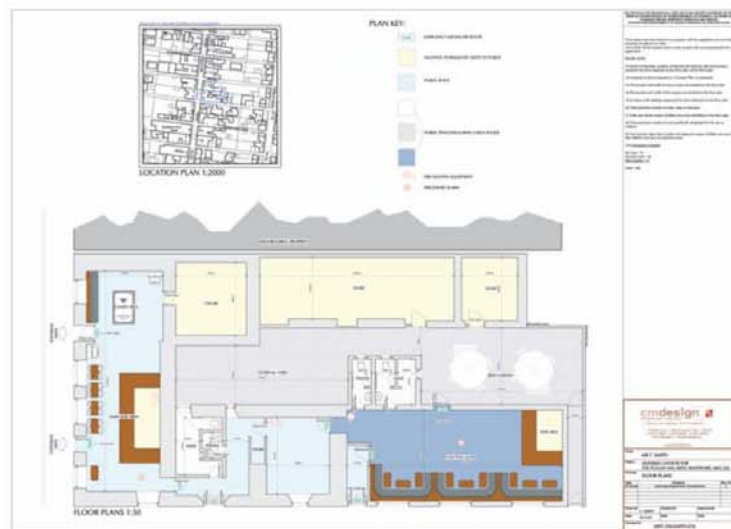


LICENSING: LAYOUT PLANS



These plans drawn up by Elgin's CM Design illustrate the complexity of the plans boards require.



Architects fear too many operators are leaving it too late to have plans drawn up.

The best laid trade plans

The new licence application process has brought no shortage of hiccups since the transition phase started in March, finds Scott Wright

IT'S probably an understatement to say the transition to Scotland's new licensing system has brought the trade its fair share of headaches.

Despite calls for better communication from the Scottish Government, and for more realistic time frames to help prepare applications, the system has been beset by controversy since the first deadline in March.

Of course, it takes time before the impact of any piece of legislation can be realistically assessed, and the consensus suggests it will be some time before we see whether licensing reform has brought any benefits to the trade.

What does seem to be beyond doubt, however, is that aspects of the transition have not been satisfactory for those directly involved so far – not least in terms of the new application process.

The new Act brings with it a brand new way of applying for a licence.

As part of an application, operators are required to submit an operating plan, in essence a trading 'bible', outlining in precise detail how they intend to run the business, from its hours of operation to whether children will be given access to the premises.

Applicants are also being asked, among other things, to provide new and detailed layout plans of their premises.

There is nothing in the Act to suggest it is mandatory for operators to enlist professional help to draw up the plans. In-

deed, one politician suggested that a piece of graph paper, and a sharp pencil was all applicants needed before having a go at drawing up their own plans.

The reality, however, is somewhat different.

In some cases, individuals who have tried to go it alone have seen their efforts fail to pass muster with the boards, and the advice from trade groups is that it's best to get a qualified person to do the plans for you.

The only snag is the cost. Estimates vary, but it's broad-

"The level of detail required means you should talk to an architect."

ly held that the cost of making an application under the 2005 Act – between licence fees and the cost of enlisting lawyers and architects – is likely to weigh in at between £3000 and £5000, depending on the size of the premises and the complexity of the application.

Clearly, as one regular SLTN columnist commented recently, it's going to cost licensees a lot of money just to do tomorrow what they already do today – far from an ideal scenario, especially given the worsening economic climate.

But while individual licensees

count the cost of transition, it has brought an opportunity for some businesses.

Licensing lawyers might have found the whole experience the most stressful of their professional lives, but they also probably haven't enjoyed such a rich seam of business before either.

The same may arguably be said of architects and architectural technicians around Scotland, too, who have been handed the task of drawing up layout plans for pubs, bars, clubs, restaurants, hotels and off-licence stores.

SLTN spoke to several specialists around Scotland to gauge how the transition period has affected their businesses – and it seems even in this profession not everyone is impressed with how the new system is being phased in.

Craig Mackay, of Elgin-based CM Design, told SLTN the transition, in his experience, has been more painful for those who had to make the jump first.

He said the start of the transition in March had "taken a few people by surprise", and had taken at least one "panic call" from operators urgently requiring layout plans at the eleventh hour.

And while he feels those with later deadlines, for example in October and January 2009, are in a more comfortable position, he still has concerns that parts of the trade continue to be in the dark as to what is required under the new application process.

"To go and have to spend mon-

ey on architectural fees, on top of all the other costs, does seem a bit unfair," he said, expressing sympathy with the trade on the costs.

"But the level of detail required means people really do have to go and speak to an architect.

"Licensees who have the June deadline had an opportunity to watch the plight of others and get their applications done in good time.

"I've no doubt, though, that there will still be some 'tail-end Charlies' who will end up in a last-minute panic."

In Ayrshire, Chris Pettigrew of Ardrossan-based Caltech Designs, also fears there is still a lack of awareness in the trade about the new system, despite the transition starting back in March.

He said that neither his own firm nor the two other practices in the area have been "deluged" with layout work, a situation he finds surprising given the

number of licensed premises in the vicinity.

And he told SLTN that licensees should not leave it too late before trying to secure architectural services.

"I'm not sure the penny has dropped," he said. "Either that

"What boards are looking for is more than achievable."

or they are waiting till the last minute. But if everyone does that there will be problems.

"The last thing we want is 300 businesses to descend on our office and ask for layout plans within a month – if they do that there won't be enough time to address any problems."

In Glasgow Caroline Foy, director of PlansandDrawings,

com, which provides architectural services, has welcomed the new stream of business licensing transition has brought, and reports that the firm has been working on layout plans for applicants since before Christmas.

Despite fears expressed early in the transition phase over the detail required by boards in the plans – in particular with regard to the calculation of shelving capacities in premises selling alcohol for consumption off the premises – her practice has found the experience challenging but satisfying.

"In general, if you do a survey you should take in every detail," she told SLTN.

"It should also benefit you [architectural firms] with regard to future jobs.

"The information boards are looking for is fine.

"It's a good level – what they're looking for is more than achievable."

Architect looks to future

AN Aberdeen-based architect has told SLTN he hopes the country's new licensing framework will lead to lasting relationships with clients in the trade.

Richard Tinto, of Tinto Architecture, said his business has enjoyed an upturn thanks to the transition to the new Act, with licensees approaching the firm to draw up layout plans for applications.

He hopes the work Tinto carries out between now and next September will cement links with operators in the long run.

"Going forward, because we now have a record of these plans on our computers, we're hoping clients come back to us if they want to make any changes to their plans or carry out renovations," he said. "Hopefully we're forming relationships for the long-term."

While some operators struggle to meet the costs of licensing transition, Richard says the short-term pain will perhaps be negated in the long-term, as the plans created now will only ever have to be altered

in the future if the owner decides to alter or extend the premises; in other words there should be no need for fresh drawings.

And, contrasting the views of other architects, he said awareness in the trade of the new legislation is improving.

"People are getting more organised," he said.

"Pre-March, there was some naivete, now it's [plans] one of the first things people mention."

"More people now seem to be aware [of the requirements]."