

# **Planning and Building Standards Customer Forum**

**20 June 2017**

## **Our Action Plan**

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## Introduction

The Planning and Building Standards Service held its first customer forum on 20 June 2017. The forum provided an opportunity for customers to engage face to face with managers of the service and, importantly, to let us hear the views of our customers.

Over 50 people attended the forum, representing a wide range of our customer groups including community councils, architects, planning consultants, surveyors and agents. Team managers and officers from the Planning and Building Standards service facilitated round table discussions. Feedback from the forum has been very positive and there are clear themes from the event that require positive actions:

- **Communication** – the need to be better at responding to emails and phone calls promptly, better ways of updating applicants on application progress, improved working with community councils, better information from the Customer Contact Centre;
- **Customer** - More consistent approach required, better help and guidance on community engagement, help desk improvements;
- **Resources** - Use discretionary charging for some services, increase use of self-certification, more staff to handle workload, staff training, improve staff morale, faster enforcement, better guidance;
- **Technology** - Better updates on application progress, portal improvements; and
- **Processes** - Improve timescales, review reports and conditions with applicant, code of practice for staff, align development consents, better consistency, better joined up working.

Following the customer forum, we have been looking at ways to take forward change to address the suggestions we received. A report to the [Planning Committee](#) on 17 August set out our Customer Engagement Strategy and how we intend to take forward some of the actions.

This action plan shares with you, our customers, how we can improve our service within a context of limited staff resources and increasing demand. We have divided it up into short term, medium term and long terms actions to illustrate priorities to allow us to monitor progress.

Comments on the action plan can be emailed to [planning.servicedelivery@edinburgh.gov.uk](mailto:planning.servicedelivery@edinburgh.gov.uk)

## Next Steps

Work is underway on most of the short term actions. Building Standards Focus groups commenced in October 2017; Planning quick guides are almost complete; and a fast track team for straightforward building warrants has been set up. This work will continue and it is hoped the customer experience of our service will improve.

A further Customer Forum will be held in May/June 2018 and you will be kept up-to-date with progress in the meantime.

## Short Term Actions (3 to 6 months)

No.	Suggested action	What we do already	What we can do better – future actions
1	Pre-application advice improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Free pre-application advice on major applications and complex local developments;</li><li>- Consultee/key agency meeting for every major development</li><li>- Clear guidance set out in our <a href="#">Customer Charter</a> and <a href="#">webpages</a> on pre-application advice</li><li>- <a href="#">Pre-application advice request form</a> on Council website</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Give robust and consistent pre-application advice at the discretion of the team manager;</li><li>- <a href="#">quick guides</a> to help our customers with straightforward questions</li><li>- Customer Focus groups to get new ideas and feedback</li></ul>

2	Improve timescales for building warrant processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overtime to clear backlog;</li> <li>- Aberdeen City and Argyll and Bute Councils processing some building warrant applications;</li> <li>- Recruitment of building surveyors;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fast track team for straightforward applications</li> <li>- Upgraded IT systems</li> <li>- Building Standards Customer Focus Groups</li> </ul>
3	Aligning other consents with planning permission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Listed building and conservation area consent handled by planning application case officer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Road Construction Consents process review – ongoing.</li> </ul>
4	Improve consistency between transport officers advice and Designing Streets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transport officers now integrated into planning teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Officer training in Designing Streets; and</li> <li>- Liaison with transport officers on improved pre-application advice.</li> </ul>
5	Re-notify neighbours of amended drawings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neighbours notified where amendments raise new planning issues (at discretion of officer)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep officer procedure note under review</li> </ul>
6	Update customers on changes to case officer		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce process for customers to be notified of change in case officer in the event of long term sickness or staff leaving.</li> </ul>
7	Communicate and support implementation of Developer Contributions and Infrastructure Delivery Supplementary Guidance		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developer workshops to work through case studies/good practice;</li> <li>- Notes on how to apply guidance to be shared with customers; and</li> <li>- Provide contact details to provide support in applying Guidance.</li> </ul>
8	Improve information from Customer Contact Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular liaison meetings with Customer Contact Centre managers;</li> <li>- Trained staff dealing with Planning and Building Standards enquiries;</li> <li>- Front counter help desk service available 9am to 1pm, including call backs to customers; and</li> <li>- Building standards email address directs customers to area teams.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Re-training of some Customer Contact Centre staff</li> <li>- Clarify when call back should be requested from help desk planner/surveyor;</li> <li>- Monitor types of enquiry and gaps in information;</li> <li>- Update calls script;</li> <li>- Review results of building standards customer survey for feedback on help desk enquiries.</li> </ul>
9	Make Planning and Building Standards structure online		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Put diagram of structure of service on web pages and planning blog.</li> </ul>

10	Ask agent to provide paper copies of application if requested	- Edinburgh Planning Concordat makes provision for paper plans to community councils	- Pass community council requests for paper copies onto agents.
11	Changes to the acknowledgement system for building warrants so that the customer has the name of the surveyor dealing with their case from the early in the process.		- New system to be put in place for letters to be issued when case officer is known
12	Preparation of 'how to videos' to show the customer how they can do various activities online such as searching for guidance or checking whether they need planning permission and how to comment on planning applications;		- Videos to be prepared and posted online.
13	Increased use of support staff to assist with technical tasks within the team and so free up time for better customer engagement	- Agency staff already being used for technical tasks	- Prepare business case for support staff; and - Use increased revenue from application and warrant fees to fund.
14	Staff training for improved customer engagement	- Monthly training workshops on a range of issues including complaints and customer care issues	- Staff training programme to be extended
15	Better use of help desk planners and surveyors to respond quicker to general enquiries	- More calls and emails now being send to help desk with faster turn around	- Inform contact centre when to arrange customer call back with help desk planner and building standards officer.
16	A review of communication channels including out-of-office messages and auto-responses to help manage customer expectations about how quickly the service is able to respond.	- The Building Warrants general mailbox has been closed and customers are now directed to the team mailboxes for a quicker response	- Out-of-office messages to be reviewed to give the customer more information - Auto-responses to be reviewed to be more informative.

## Medium Term Actions (6m to 1 year)

No.	Suggested Actions	What we do already	What we can do better – future actions
1	Clarity of decision making in reports of handling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Report editing and checking procedures are in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review report writing style; and</li> <li>- Report writing training for planners.</li> </ul>
2	Better use of processing agreements or agreed project plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Web information on <a href="#">major developments</a> available including use of processing agreements</li> <li>- Request extensions of time to resolve cases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promote the use of processing agreement or other agreed project plans on major and complex local development applications;</li> <li>- Consult with industry on removing barriers to the use of processing agreements; and</li> <li>- Peer review with other local authorities their experience of successfully using processing agreements.</li> </ul>
3	Advise clients of draft conditions before decision issued to ensure the conditions are feasible and reduce S42 applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Draft conditions sent when requested.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff training on conditions;</li> <li>- Update conditions procedural note and circulate to planning staff;</li> <li>- Include a period to review draft conditions in processing agreements or other agreed project plan; and</li> <li>- Send draft conditions to agent for major applications</li> </ul>
4	Review validation guidance for planning and building standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improvements made to processing system for validation of applications</li> <li>- Methodology prepared and published on submitting a building warrant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adopt national planning validation guidance promoted through Heads of Planning Scotland;</li> <li>- Set parameters for applications to be determined invalid and returned;</li> <li>- Review the way we received planning and building standards fees, including ceasing the acceptance of cheques.</li> </ul>
5	Improve processing timescales for S75 legal agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Model legal agreement drafted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promote understanding amongst applicants and agents of the use of S75; and</li> <li>- Implement model S75 legal agreement to simplify process and make more efficient.</li> </ul>

6	Support Community Councils better by acting as a mediator and providing advice on major or complex applications	- Edinburgh Planning Concordat reviewed and updated in 2016	- Make community councils aware of our commitments in the Edinburgh Planning Concordat and the support we can provide.
7	Public representation on Edinburgh Urban Design Panel (EUDP)	- Undertake annual review of EUDP and report to Planning Committee.	- Identify potential for public representative and justification in terms of skills balance; and - Discuss with Edinburgh Urban Design Panel members during annual review of panel's operation.
8	Support Planners to have the confidence to negotiate improvements to proposals		- Consider design resource as part of processing agreement for large and complex application; - Design training for planning staff; and - Team resource of a design expert to support staff who do not feel confident or have the necessary skills.
9	Overtime for planning to reduce backlog and improve increased average timescales for major, local and householder applications	- Overtime offered but no take up at present	- Add overtime planning resource to reduce back log in applications, legacy cases and reduce average timescales for major, local and housing applications.
10	Write shorter reports where possible		- Use of fast track decisions; - Updated report writing guide; and - Update and circulate short report procedural note.
11	Remove barriers to a paperless planning and building standards system	- Paperless IT systems being promoted in Building Standards	- Improvements to IT and document holding system; - Work with Scottish Government to resolve E-Building Standards; and - Work with Scottish Government on Review of Planning system to establish future IT requirements.



## Long Term Actions (1 year +)

No.	Suggested Actions	What we do already	What we can do better – future actions
1	Re-establish the historic environment and conservation team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conservation team in Planning Initiatives takes forward new conservations areas, guidance and character appraisals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explore whether there is a need to re-establish a historic environment and conservation dedicated team;</li> <li>- Consider how we can improve our management of Edinburgh’s historic environment and retain skills and share knowledge in this area; and</li> <li>- Staff training.</li> </ul>
2	Give an Edinburgh weighting to staff salaries to reflect increased cost of living in the City		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investigate need for a staff weighting to retain and attract staff to work in Edinburgh based on the increased cost of living for the City;</li> <li>- Review staff turnover; and</li> <li>- Peer review pay grading with other planning authorities.</li> </ul>
3	Promote job swaps with private sector		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job swaps with private sector to improve skills and knowledge.</li> </ul>
4	Stage by stage updates of progression of application from validation to completion of development	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investigate IT requirement to automatically notify of application progress;</li> <li>- Work with ICT to improve planning portal and other systems; and</li> <li>- Review process in other planning authorities.</li> </ul>