

Environment Department Planning Division

Customer Satisfaction Survey

July/October 2011

1 Introduction

- 1.1 As part of our ongoing policy to improve the quality of our service, and particularly improve communications with applicants and others engaging closely with the planning application process, we have recently completed our second annual customer satisfaction survey. This survey supplements other methods by which we actively seek user feedback on our performance, including an agents' forum for planning agents, the Department's formal complaints procedure and the outreach planning surgeries which are held quarterly.
- 1.2 This year's survey ran from 25th July 2011 until the end of October 2011 and was sent at the decision stage to applicants and agents.
- 1.3 Of the 511 survey forms sent, 57 responses were returned giving a response rate of 11%. This is a similar response rate to that for last year's survey which was 12%. Although lower than the Department would like, this is a statistically significant rate of return which enables valid conclusions to be drawn.

2 Pre-application Discussions

- 2.1 In 2010, 61% of respondents had had pre-application discussions with a planning officer. Just over half of those discussions (53%) resulted in a change to the initial scheme.
- 2.2 In 2011, the proportion of respondents who discussed their proposal with a planning officer before they made their application has risen to 68.4% (an increase of 7.4% from 2010). This reflects the continued emphasis placed on pre-application discussions, the increased access to planning advice and the outreach planning surgery events which have raised awareness of the planning system and information available.
- 2.3 The proportion of respondents who made changes to their scheme as a result of those discussions also increased, from 53% in 2010 to 63.6% in 2011 (an increase of 10.6%). This continues to demonstrate the value of pre-application discussions in improving the quality of development proposals and has contributed to a

reduction in the Department's refusal rate for planning applications and in the number of consequent appeals.

- 2.4 In 2010, of those respondents who had discussions, 86% indicated that the decision reflected the advice given by the planning officer. However, 14% indicated that the decision was not consistent with the advice provided. This relatively high figure was of concern. As a result, new procedures were put in place for application case officers to 'flag up' to senior staff any potential departures from pre-application advice. Explanations are provided to applicants concerning the reasons for a change in view in the relatively few specific cases identified. This could be for example because further issues came to light as a result of consultations and publicity on the application. In addition, meeting notes are now issued following pre-application meetings as a record of the discussion and to ensure that all parties have a shared understanding of the issues raised and advice provided.
- 2.5 Despite these actions, however, the 2011 survey results indicate an apparent deterioration in consistency of decisions with pre-application advice, with fewer respondents (81.8% compared with 86% in 2010) who had discussions indicating that the decision reflected the advice given by the planning officer, and 18.2% (compared with 14% a year previously) indicating that the decision was not consistent with the advice provided. This is a worrying result which indicates that despite the measures put in place to monitor and respond to the issue in the light of the 2010 survey results, there remains a problem concerning the actual, or perceived, consistency of decision with pre-application advice.

3 Quality of Service Received

- 3.1 The 2010 survey results showed that 75% of respondents were satisfied with the service received. This reflected the considerable improvements made to processes and timescales for processing applications. Similarly, in 2010 76% of respondents felt that they received satisfactory advice and help in completing applications.
- 3.2 These indicators of service quality have improved; in 2011 79.2% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of service received and 79.6% of respondents confirmed that they were given the advice and help that they needed to submit their application. These improvements are very encouraging. Queries are also handled as efficiently as they were in 2010, with 68.7% of the 2011 survey respondents indicating that the Department dealt promptly with their queries, compared with 69% in 2010.
- 3.3 Access to information concerning the progress of applications remains a significant issue for applicants and their agents. In 2011 exactly half (50%) of

respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were kept informed about the progress of their application. However, this is a reduction of 5% compared with the 2010 figure which is regrettable. Notwithstanding this, the proportion of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were kept informed about the progress of their application has decreased from 21% in 2010 to 12.6% in 2011, representing an overall improvement in perceived quality of service.

- 3.4 The proportion of respondents who accessed the online information on the States website increased by 14.3% between 2010 and 2011, from 51% to 65.3%, reflecting greater awareness of the service and its benefits and the improvements made to the website and information provided, and representing further efficiencies for the Department and taxpayer.

4 Planning Decision

- 4.1 In 2010, 92% of the 2010 responses were from people who were given permission. This has risen to 95.5% in 2011 and closely reflects the improved general approval rate which in turn reflects the emphasis on pre-application discussions and negotiation of improvements to schemes to seek to avoid refusals.
- 4.2 The proportion of respondents who indicated that they understood the reasons for the decision on their application rose from 83% in 2010 to 88.6% in 2011. This is a welcome endorsement of the significant steps taken to increase the openness and transparency of the planning process and availability of relevant information, including planning reports, consultation responses and through the open planning meetings.
- 4.3 One of the most serious areas of concern arising from the results of the 2010 survey related to respondents' perceptions of their treatment during the planning process. In 2010, only 68% of respondents felt that they had been treated fairly and politely and had had their viewpoint listened to, with 14% giving a negative answer on this question. In response, improvements have been made to our communications with applicants and other service users including better and more direct access to planning officers. The position has improved in 2011, with exactly three-quarters of respondents (75%) now responding positively. The proportion of respondents who felt that they have not been treated fairly and politely and had their viewpoint listened to is reduced to 4.6%, which although still of some concern is a considerable improvement on the 2010 figure. Overall, this indicator shows substantial movement in the right direction but there remains work to be done to improve customer perceptions of their treatment by the Department.

- 4.4 Respondents were also asked whether the overall quality of the service was better than expected. In 2010, just under half of respondents (49%) answered this question positively. This year, the proportion who answered positively increased by 7.8% to 56.8%. Conversely, the proportion who felt that the overall quality of the service was not better than expected halved from 14% in 2010 to 6.8% in 2011.
- 4.5 The 2011 survey included a new question designed to gauge respondents' perceptions as to whether the overall service provided by the Planning Division had improved significantly over the past 12 months. 25.7% of respondents felt this to be the case, whilst an additional 27.5% considered that the overall service provided has improved slightly. Only 12.5% felt that the overall service had not improved. This will be a useful benchmark against which to judge customer perceptions regarding improvement of the service in future years.

5 Individual Comments made by respondents

- 5.1 About one third of respondents in 2010 made individual comments and suggestions. These covered a wide range of issues. However, some general themes were apparent:

- the service was improving;
- the process still took too long;
- there was insufficient transparency in decision making.

Feedback received through comments from respondents also covered such topics as fees and charges, use of electronic communications, departmental procedures, and rules concerning use of camper vans on the Island.

- 5.2 In 2011, comments have been broken down into those relating to pre-application discussions, accessing the on-line information, and comments or suggestions generally about planning services.
- 5.3 In relation to pre-application discussions, the vast majority of comments received were positive, emphasising the valuable help and support given by the Department to both householders and agents who are considering making a planning application. One respondent commented that they always send drawings in before meetings and receive valuable feedback. Three negative comments were received, in relation to consistency of advice between officers, vagueness of advice and speed of response. One response suggested that officers could do more to advise on fees in meetings as this is one of the most common misunderstandings amongst our customers.

- 5.4 Comments regarding the on-line information and website were again largely positive, with respondents considering the system useful and informative. Some respondents however found the website difficult to navigate and the information difficult to access. Improvements are being made to address this issue. Other comments referred to the lack of information regarding the appeals process, which is also being addressed by the Planning Appeals Panel, and regarding the distinction between Planning and Building Control exemptions.
- 5.5 A number of general comments about the planning service have been received, ranging from expressions of great satisfaction and appreciation, to concerns about time taken, consistency of standards and outcomes, and suggestions such as regarding receiving applications electronically. Some customers commented that the Department's responses were timely and its staff are polite, helpful and considerate, whilst others perceive that planners still focus on the minutiae, overlooking the 'bigger picture'.
- 5.6 Overall, the comments made contain much which is positive and useful and appear to demonstrate that our customers have a greater involvement in and understanding of the planning process than may have been the case in the past, and that they are keen to encourage further beneficial service improvements to meet shared objectives – as one respondent says, 'lets all keep working together to improve the built environment'.

6 Conclusions

- 6.1 The use of pre-application discussions has increased over the year since the last survey. This has resulted in more changes being made to proposals which has increased the quality of schemes and has helped to reduce the planning refusal rate. Access to on-line information has also increased with resulting benefits accruing to customers, the Department and taxpayers.
- 6.2 Despite actions taken since the last survey to address the issue, perceived inconsistency of decision relative to pre-application advice is still a cause for significant concern and the position has actually deteriorated since last year. It is hard to understand the causes of this perception, particularly given that refusal rates remain low and have actually reduced during the past year. This issue must therefore be investigated further as a priority.
- 6.3 Notwithstanding this issue, levels of satisfaction with the service offered by the Department have increased over the year, with nearly 80% of respondents now expressing satisfaction with the quality of service received and the advice and help available when submitting an application. The proportion of respondents who felt that the overall quality of service was better than expected has also

increased, and 53% of respondents consider that the service has improved over the last 12 months.

- 6.4 Whilst understanding of the reasons for decisions reached has increased to nearly 90%, there remain concerns about the level of information available concerning the progress of an application. Despite some improvements there remains a need to further actively promote communication and to explain progress during the stages of consideration of an application.
- 6.5 Performance against the key indicator of fair and polite treatment of customers and listening to their viewpoint has improved significantly since last year, undoubtedly reflecting in part the greater appreciation of negative perceptions revealed by the 2010 survey and the strong desire within the Department to proactively address the issue. Improved communications and more direct access to planning officers have also assisted the improvements made in this area. Complacency would be inappropriate however and further work still needs to be done to improve customers' perceptions of their treatment by the Department.
- 6.6 The many positive individual comments made by respondents also support the view that significant improvements to overall performance and customer service have been achieved, particularly in relation to pre-application discussions and appreciation of the help and advice given by the Department's staff. Concerns about timescales for dealing with planning applications are much diminished from previously, reflecting the performance improvements made on the basis of published targets as recommended in the Shepley Report.
- 6.7 Where negative comments or suggestions for service improvements have been made, these provide valuable feedback on potential areas for improvement or development. For example, consistency and precision of advice, and the availability and ease of access to information concerning issues such as fees, appeals and exemptions are all areas to be addressed, along with the potential for future development of systems which allow for the electronic submission of applications. Appreciation of the 'big picture' is essential and it is for the Department to demonstrate that this is achieved in its more detailed day to day work.
- 6.8 The customer satisfaction survey provides vital information and insights into important aspects of the Department's performance and service delivery. The overall picture painted by the 2011 survey is one of considerable positive improvement, marred mainly by the deterioration of perceptions of consistency of decision with pre-application advice. A number of other areas as mentioned above also deserve further attention and the following recommendations are designed to address the issues raised and help to secure further improvements in customer satisfaction which should be reflected in the 2012 survey results.

7 Recommendations

7.1 Recommendation 1

Consistency of application outcome relative to pre-application advice

Through the Guernsey Planning Agents' Forum, request agents to identify any cases where they feel that the decision has not reflected the planning advice received. Continue to require planning case officers to identify cases where their recommendation departs from pre-application advice and document the reasons for this. Investigate these cases and report the outcomes of these investigations to the Agents' Forum and use the results to inform any necessary procedural changes and to identify and address any training and development needs.

7.2 Recommendation 2

Keeping people better informed about the progress of their application

Continue to improve openness of communications and access to information concerning the planning application process and the progress of individual applications within it. Relevant information channels include the Department's website, the Planning Services e-mail box, planning meetings and discussions with planning case officers.

7.3 Recommendation 3

Fair and polite treatment

Continue to make positive progress against this indicator building on the good results achieved so far in terms of providing high standards of customer service and ensuring that customers are treated fairly and politely and have their viewpoint listened to.

7.4 Recommendation 4

Access to planning information

Improve information available to customers in relation to matters such as fees, appeals and exemptions, and seek to publicise effectively how the Department's work focuses on the 'big picture' in terms of planning issues for the Island whilst carrying out its detailed day to day functions.

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