

**Environment Department  
Planning Division**

**Customer Satisfaction Survey**

August/October 2012

**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 third 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 householder advice surgeries that are held regularly at locations accessible to the community.
- 1.2 The 2012 survey ran from 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012 until the end of October 2012 and was sent at the decision stage to applicants and agents.
- 1.3 The 2012 survey was more targeted than those in previous years. As well as 95 paper survey forms sent to applicants who did not employ agents the survey was communicated on-line to 80 regular planning agents, with reminders sent to encourage response. This yielded 77 responses in total (an increase on the 57 responses received in 2011), which represents a response rate of 44%. This is significantly higher than the response rates in 2011 and 2010, which were 11% and 12% respectively, and is a good rate of return.
- 1.4 As this is the third annual survey undertaken, the information gained enables comparisons to be drawn between the most recent results and those obtained in 2010 and 2011.

**2 Pre-application Discussions**

- 2.1 In 2010, 61% of survey respondents had had pre-application discussions with a planning officer. This proportion rose to 68.4% in 2011 and in 2012 stands at 80.5%. This is an excellent result which reflects the emphasis placed by the Department on pre-application discussions. It also reflects the increased access to planning advice over recent years and raised awareness of the planning system and information available.
- 2.2 In 2010, just over half of those pre-application discussions (53%) resulted in a change to the initial scheme. In 2011, this proportion had increased to 63.6%. The 2012 survey has revealed a further increase to 69.6% of respondents who made changes to their proposal as a result of pre-

application discussions. This trend demonstrates the value of such discussions in improving the quality of development proposals. They also contribute to the Department's continuing relatively low refusal rate for planning applications, which in turn leads to relatively few consequent appeals.

- 2.3 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 figure was of concern and, as a result, new procedures were put in place to 'flag up' any potential departures from pre-application advice and provide explanations to applicants concerning the reasons for a change in view. In addition, meeting notes are now issued as standard practice following pre-application meetings to confirm the content of discussions and conclusions reached. Furthermore, the issue was specially raised and discussed with the Agents' Forum following the 2011 survey, which indicated that 81.8% of respondents who had discussions felt that the decision reflected the advice given by the planning officer but 18.2% did not.
- 2.4 The 2012 survey not only asked respondents to confirm whether the decision on their application reflected the advice given by the planning officer, but in cases where a negative answer was given also asked the respondent to comment on why they thought this might have been. Whilst 78.3% (36 respondents) felt that the decision reflected the advice given by the planning officer, 21.7% (10 respondents) did not. Seven of these respondents then commented further.
- 2.5 Most if not all of the comments appear to relate to circumstances where planning permission was refused. In one case issues relating to neighbour amenity appear to have resulted in refusal of permission. The respondent queries why this was not apparent at the start of the process, although it could be that the officer's site assessment or matters raised in representations received from neighbours resulted in a different decision to that originally anticipated. In other cases it appears that internal consultations within the Department on policy or design issues may have triggered refusal contrary to initial indications. One respondent acknowledged that their proposals were contrary to advice given in the past and were not in keeping with the style of the building. Another however points to particular difficulties they have experienced in relation to applications relating to protected buildings.

### **3 Quality of Service Received**

- 3.1 The 2010 survey showed that 75% of respondents were satisfied with the service received. In 2011 this had risen to 79.2%. This reflected the considerable improvements made to processes and timescales for processing applications. Similarly, in 2010 76% and in 2011 79.6% of respondents felt that they received satisfactory advice and help in completing applications.

- 3.2 For 2012, these indicators of service quality have declined, although they remain reasonably high; 70.9% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of service received and 64.8% of respondents confirmed that they were given the advice and help that they needed to submit their application. This apparent fall could potentially be because overall service levels and hence customer expectations are considerably higher than in previous years. In 2012, 63.6% of respondents indicated that the Department dealt promptly with their queries, compared with 68.7% in 2011 and 69% in 2010. This apparent decline is despite the establishment of the Planning Services e-mail address, which enables much greater direct access to planning advice and allows queries to be dealt with quickly and efficiently, and the continuation of the duty planner system where callers to the Department by telephone or in person can have direct access to advice from a planning officer.
- 3.3 Access to information concerning the progress of applications is still a significant issue for applicants and their agents. In 2012, 53.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were kept informed about the progress of their application, the figures in 2010 and 2011 being 55% and 50% respectively. However, the proportion of respondents in 2012 who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were kept informed about the progress of their application is 22.2%, which is similar to the 2010 figure of 21% but considerably higher than the 2011 figure of 12.6%.
- 3.4 On the other hand, however, the proportion of respondents who accessed the online information on the States website has increased dramatically over the last three years. In 2010, 51% of respondents reported that they had accessed the on-line information, rising to 65.3% in 2011. In 2012, this figure has increased again to 81.1%, reflecting much greater awareness of the service and its benefits for applicants, as well as representing further efficiencies for the Department and taxpayer.

#### **4 Planning Decision**

- 4.1 In 2010, 92% of respondents had been given permission. This rose to 95.5% in 2011. In 2012, however, this proportion has fallen to 84.6%, with 15.4% of the 2012 respondents having been refused permission. Comparing these figures with the relatively consistent refusal rate of less than 10% indicates that a higher proportion of refused applicants responded to this question in 2012 than was the case in previous years. This in turn could potentially explain some of the poorer satisfaction levels reported earlier.
- 4.2 The proportion of respondents who indicated that they understood the reasons for the decision on their application remains constant between 2011 and 2012, at 88.6% and 88.7% respectively, having risen from 83% in 2010. This remains 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 In relation to respondents' perceptions of their treatment during the planning process, the 2012 results are similar to those reported in 2010, with 69.2% of respondents in 2012 feeling that they had been treated fairly and politely and had had their viewpoint listened to, compared with 68% in 2010. This only marginal improvement over two years is rather disappointing given the significant improvements made to our communications with applicants and other service users during that period, including better and more direct access to planning officers, as well as the encouraging survey results in 2011 when 75% of respondents responded positively to this question.
- 4.4 Respondents' views in 2012 as to whether the overall quality of the service is better than expected are also broadly similar to those in 2010 when just under half of respondents (49%) answered this question positively. In 2012, the proportion who answered positively is slightly less at 43.4%. The proportion who felt that the overall quality of the service was not better than expected was also broadly similar at 14% in 2010 and 16.9% in 2012.
- 4.5 These rather disappointing results are however counterbalanced by respondents' views concerning improvements to the overall service provided by the Planning Division. The 2011 survey included for the first time a 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. This question has been repeated in the 2012 survey. In 2012, 32.7% of respondents felt that the overall service provided by the Planning Division has improved significantly over the past 12 months, whilst an additional 30.6% felt that the overall service provided has improved slightly. This is a welcome significant increase over the 25.7% and 27.5% responses in these categories in 2011 and shows that despite the somewhat poorer results recorded in some areas of the survey this year the Planning Division's overall service is still improving.

## **5 Individual Comments made by respondents**

- 5.1 In 2012, as 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.
- 5.2 In relation to pre-application discussions, the vast majority of comments received, from the 24 respondents who answered this question, are positive, emphasising the valuable help and support given by the Department to both householders and agents who are considering making a planning application. Respondents considered the process to be well informed, clear and helpful, fair, positive, very informative and said that positive information and guidance and good and sound advice was given. Some negative comments were also received, with concerns particularly expressed about the length of

wait for a meeting, that officers should have been more firm and direct in discouraging an unsuccessful application and in identifying significant issues at an early stage, and highlighting more general issues of consistency, experience, perceived 'pettiness' and a perception that the personal tastes of some officers might affect their advice.

- 5.3 Comments regarding the on-line information and website, from 25 respondents, were again largely positive, with respondents considering the system relatively easy to use, useful, clear and informative, quickly updated and a good resource. Many respondents however found the new States website difficult to navigate and the information difficult to access. Other comments referred to the basic nature of the Planning Websearch 'progress bar' and suggested that more information and detail regarding the status and progress of an application would be useful, particularly regarding any delays at specific stages, and that a link be provided to a pdf of the submitted application drawings. Other specific comments related to availability of advice and guidance, fee scales and categories and scope for further exemptions from planning control.
- 5.4 A number of comments about the planning service generally were received, from 35 respondents, covering a range of issues. The majority of comments are positive about the service received, for example that there is good access to planning officers and information and that the service was helpful and polite and made the application uncomplicated. One respondent said that they had a very pleasant experience with all staff and others noted that they were very impressed with the courtesy and helpfulness of the planning officers they spoke to and that 'communication was very effective'. One respondent said that 'the improvement in services to applicants is far better than in previous years, when you did not have a clue as to whether permissions would be given or not. At least the planning officer can guide you, and in his report to you can state the comments that he made to you'. Another said that the Department should 'keep up the good work'.
- 5.5 Some comments however express concerns that performance and quality of customer service may vary, with some planning officers offering a good proactive service and others less so, and it is suggested that cultural change may still be required. Others question the clarity of terminology used by officers, attitudes to design matters, consistency of approach on some specific matters between planning and building control, and query whether some rules and regulations are outdated. It is also suggested that more staff are required to deal with planning applications and with scheduled buildings. One respondent suggests that resources should be increased sufficiently to enable most planning applications to be dealt with in six rather than eight weeks.
- 5.6 Further comments concern administrative or procedural matters such as the availability of advice and guidance relating to specific situations such as for minor variations to approved plans, how fee queries are handled,

requirements for duplicate original documents and other information, length of time applications stay on the website, sending of copy correspondence to clients, ease of obtaining scaled site location plans and cover arrangements for applications when staff are on holiday. Two respondents commented that it would be beneficial if applications could be submitted on-line and another suggests a 'fast-track' scheme for major commercial applications.

## **6 Conclusions and recommendations**

- 6.1 The 2012 survey was more targeted than in previous years and this has resulted in a good response rate of 44%. It is likely that more professional agents have responded this year. It also appears that a greater proportion of those refused consent have responded (15.4% of respondents relative to a refusal rate for applications over the year of less than 10%).
- 6.2 One of the most encouraging results from the 2012 survey relates to pre-application discussions, both in terms of the increase in take-up by applicants and agents of the opportunities for such discussions and the greater proportion of changes made to schemes which improve the quality of proposals; over 80% of respondents had pre-application discussions and almost 70% made some change to their proposal as a result. Similarly encouraging is the increase in the use of the on-line services and information, with over 81% of respondents accessing the on-line information, with resulting benefits for the customer, the Department and the taxpayer.
- 6.3 Another very encouraging result is that over 63% of respondents felt that the overall service provided by the Planning Division has improved in the last 12 months, with nearly one third of respondents judging this improvement to be significant.
- 6.4 In addition, nearly 90% of respondents report that they understand the reasons for the decision on their application, which demonstrates that the significant moves made to increase the openness and transparency of the planning process over recent years have been largely successful.
- 6.5 However, the results for fair and polite treatment and overall service quality being 'better than expected' remain disappointingly at or around 2010 levels. Furthermore, results relating to consistency of decisions with pre-application advice show a decline from previous years, despite the various measures put in place to deal with this issue, although the specific comments made by respondents in relation to this do provide some useful pointers to inform further investigations and action. The results relating to the general level of service received are also somewhat lower than the 2010 levels despite improvements in 2011. These matters therefore require further attention.

### **Recommendation 1:**

**Continue to reinforce the principles of good customer service through staff appraisals and training.**

**Recommendation 2:**

**Ensure, through ongoing training and development, that all planning officers are well equipped to provide clear and robust advice at the earliest stage of consideration of a proposal particularly having regard to likely planning policy and design issues.**

**Recommendation 3:**

**Remind applicants and agents that the Department openly invites them to raise any instances where they perceive inconsistency between advice and decision. The reasons will be investigated and an explanation provided.**

- 6.6 Keeping applicants and agents informed about the progress of their application remains a significant issue despite the increased use of the on-line information and greater access to case officers and general advice. There remains a need to further actively promote communication and to explain progress during the stages of consideration of an application.

**Recommendation 4:**

**Continue to improve openness of communications and access to information concerning the planning application process and progress of individual applications within it. This includes encouraging direct contact/discussions at key stages between applicants/agents and planning case officers and ensuring that applicants/agents have convenient access to appropriate staff to discuss matters relating to their development proposals.**

- 6.7 The 2012 survey has generated considerable specific feedback through the comments made on a wide range of issues, as summarised in section 5 above. Overall, the comments made are generally positive, reflecting the service improvements that have been made. Where negative comments or suggestions for service improvements have been made, these provide valuable feedback on potential areas for improvement or development. For example, provision of consistent and direct advice by planning officers, improvements to the layout and ease of use of the website and in relation to guidance material provided, a more sophisticated application tracking system and the ability for the electronic submission of applications are all important aspects which need to be considered further.

**Recommendation 5:**

**Adopt and issue further guidance relating particularly to design issues (e.g. a householders' design guide) and with regard to how minor variations are dealt with.**

**Recommendation 6:**

**As part of consideration of enhancement/replacement of the existing IT applications platform investigate potential for on-line submission of**

**planning applications and creation of a more sophisticated application tracking system.**

**Recommendation 7:**

**Continue to work with the States IT Department regarding location and ease of access to planning documents and information held on the States Website.**

- 6.8 The issue of resources has been raised by some respondents and warrants specific mention. Following publication of the Shepley Report in 2008, further resources were obtained in accordance with the recommendations of that report and along with the introduction of the new Law in 2009 and various process changes and efficiencies these enabled the Planning Service to improve its performance significantly in many areas, particularly in relation to turnaround times for planning applications. More recently, however, as part of the States-wide Financial Transformation Programme, resources available to Planning Services have reduced, including the loss of one senior post in Development Control. Despite these financial and staffing constraints, the Department remains fully committed to continuous improvement of its processes and performance, building on the successes of recent years and capitalising on the experience and professionalism of its greatest asset, its staff.
- 6.9 Interestingly, although mentioned by a few respondents, concerns about timescales for dealing with planning applications do not feature prominently in the feedback, which reflects the significant improvements made in turnaround times for most applications on the basis of the published targets as recommended by the Shepley Report into the Planning Service. With regard to specific comments received about timescales, over 40% of decisions on planning applications are currently made within 6 weeks and it is unlikely to be practical to increase this proportion much further given the planning process, which includes the need for site notices in most cases, and without further resources. Major developments use more staff resources and involve staff at a more senior level. By their nature they are of greater public interest and require input by other bodies through consultations, both within and outside the States. No compelling case has been made to prioritise certain commercial applications, over and above the normal timescale targets which apply to all applications. With regard to economic performance, it should be recognised that even domestic development has a positive impact on the local economy through employment of builders and purchase of related goods and services. It is not therefore recommended that there be any change to the current approach in relation to these matters.
- 6.10 Regarding legislation, the Fees Ordinance has recently been amended by Regulations but the Exemptions Ordinance and other parts of the current planning legislation will be subject of structured review in the near future.



**Recommendation 8:**

**Publicise the scope and timescale for the review of the current planning legislation (Law and Ordinances) and invite feedback on areas of concern to be taken into account in the review process.**

- 6.11 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 2012 survey is generally positive, particularly in relation to the success of pre-application discussions, the take-up of available services on-line and customer perceptions that the overall service has continued to improve over the last 12 months. Against this, some indicators have fallen or failed to rise which will be addressed further, along with specific points raised in the valuable and welcome feedback received from our customers. These matters are the subject of the recommendations set out above, some of which, such as regarding on-line submission of applications, are realistically not likely to be concluded within 12 months and are dependent on funding. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that by addressing the recommendations of this report the Department will be able to secure further improvements in customer satisfaction which should be reflected in future survey results.
- 6.12 In line with the Department's commitment to the openness and transparency of the planning process, this report will be made available on the States Website.

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**29<sup>th</sup> January 2013**