

**Environment Department
Planning Division**

Planning Customer Survey

August - October 2013

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The 2013 Planning Customer Survey is the fourth consecutive annual survey of planning applicants and their agents. It ran from 22 August – 1 November 2013. As well as 103 paper survey forms sent to applicants who did not employ agents the survey was communicated on-line to 87 regular planning agents. This yielded 44 responses in total (a 23% response rate).
- 1.2 The following report sets out the main findings of the survey, draws conclusions and makes recommendations. Where figures for the proportion of respondents are given, the corresponding figure for 2012 can be found in brackets or within the text following for comparison.

2 Pre-application Discussions

- 2.1 The proportion of survey respondents who had pre-application discussions with a planning officer is slightly lower than the 2012 figure but remains reasonably high, at 75% (80.5%), continuing to reflect the emphasis placed by the Department on pre-application discussions and the access available to free-of-charge planning advice. Similarly, the proportion of those pre-application discussions which resulted in a change to the initial scheme also remains high, at 66.7% (69.6%). This demonstrates the continuing value of such discussions in improving the quality of development proposals as reflected in the high proportion of planning approvals granted.
- 2.2 Whilst 88.9% (24 respondents) felt that the decision reflected the advice given by the planning officer, 11.1% (3 respondents) did not. This represents a considerable improvement on the 2012 position when the relative proportions were 78.3% and 21.7%. All three of these respondents then provided comments as to why they felt this might have been, which has provided helpful feedback for the Department to consider further. Eight out of 12 respondents to the question ‘could we have done anything better during your discussions with a planning officer’, said no, some commenting very positively on the help they had received. Four respondents felt certain aspects could have been improved and made suggestions accordingly.

3 Quality of Service Received

- 3.1 The proportion of respondents who expressed satisfaction with the quality of the service they received remains at around the three-quarter mark (74.3%). A similar

proportion (73.6%) indicated that they were given the advice and help they needed to submit their application, whilst 74.3% felt that the Department dealt promptly with their queries and just over half, 52.9%, felt that they were kept informed about the progress of their application. The figures for the first three of these indicators are better than those reported in 2012 (70.9%, 64.8% & 63.6%), with the last one being about the same (53.7%).

- 3.2 The proportion of respondents who accessed online information on the States website is slightly reduced at 77.1% (81.1%). In answer to the question 'do you have any comments or suggestions about the information provided', the majority of respondents (10) expressed satisfaction with the information and service, whilst four mentioned aspects where they felt improvements could be made. This feedback will be considered by the Department when making future IT related service improvements.

4 Planning Decision

- 4.1 In 2013, 90.6% of respondents had been given permission. This is slightly less than the proportions reported in 2010 and 2011 (92% & 95.5%), but higher than the proportion in 2012 (84.6%). In fact, refusal rates have consistently not exceeded 10% for many years and are currently less than 9%.
- 4.2 75% (88.7%) of respondents indicated that they understood the reasons for the decision on their application, which is somewhat lower than previously, whilst a much higher proportion (84.4%) than in 2012 (69.2%) indicated that they had been treated fairly and politely and had had their viewpoint listened to.
- 4.3 Respondents' views in 2013 as to whether the overall quality of the service is better than expected are also improved on previous years, with 58.1% (43.4%) of respondents now answering this question positively.
- 4.4 The 2013 survey also reveals continuing improvements in the overall quality of service provided by the Planning Division, with 37% of respondents answering that the overall service has improved significantly over the past 12 months, and 33.3% indicating that the overall service has improved slightly. This compares with figures of 32.7% and 30.6% in these categories in 2012 and 25.7% and 27.5% in 2011.

5 Individual Comments made by respondents

- 5.1 In response to the invitation to make suggestions or comment about planning services generally, a number of responses have been received, from 16 respondents, covering a range of topics. These include:-
- Registration information requirements/communications
 - Suggestions for further exemptions from planning control
 - Use of and familiarity with the Fees schedule
 - Further promotion of 'green' technology

- Conditions applied to planning permissions
- Availability and ease of access to guidance material
- Consultations with other States departments
- Proportionality and vision of planning
- Advice and approach to Protected Buildings
- Pre application advice
- Building Control newsletter

5.2 The majority of these comments were positive and supportive of the work of the Department. One respondent referred to the 'good teamwork' that exists. All of the helpful feedback provided will be carefully considered and used where possible to inform decisions on future service developments and procedural improvements.

5.3 Interestingly, no comments were received directly in relation to speed of decision, reflecting the dramatic improvements made in this respect over the last few years. Over the last six months, the Department has met and exceeded its service delivery targets for speed of decision, with 80% of planning decisions over that period issued in 8 weeks and 93% within 13 weeks.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 The annual customer survey provides information and insights into important aspects of the Department's performance and service delivery. The 2013 survey, which is the fourth run by the Department, elicited a good response and has provided useful feedback concerning the quality of service currently provided by the Department and suggestions for aspects to be considered further. The overall picture painted by the 2013 survey is positive. Key findings are that pre-application discussions remain well used and continue to have a positive influence on the quality and outcome of applications; customers also continue to benefit from access to information using the planning Websearch whilst levels of satisfaction and perceptions of the overall quality of service remain high, generally exceeding those reported last year.

6.2 The outcome of this survey and feedback received will where possible inform service developments and improvements over the coming year and a number of specific recommendations follow. In addition, some recommendations from previous years remain relevant and are therefore also included below. Some of these recommendations, such as regarding on-line submission of applications, are realistically not likely to be concluded within the next 12 months and are dependent on funding.

Recommendation 1:

Continue to reinforce through staff appraisals, training and development the principles of good customer service; ensure that planning officers are well equipped to provide clear and robust advice at the earliest stage of consideration of a proposal and provide ongoing training regarding fees and use of conditions.

Recommendation 2:

Adopt and issue further guidance relating to the planning process (e.g. householders' design guide, protected buildings technical advice notes, and regarding consultations routinely undertaken on planning applications).

Recommendation 3:

Continue to improve openness of communications and access to information concerning the planning process and progress and outcome of individual applications within it.

Recommendation 4:

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

Recommendation 5:

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 6:

Undertake public consultation, including regarding planning exemptions, as part of the current review of the planning Law and Ordinances and invite feedback to be taken into account in the review process.

- 6.3 As in previous years, and in line with the Department's commitment to openness and transparency of the planning process, this report will be made available on the States Website.

Jim Rowles
Director of Planning
20th December 2013