

Customer Service and the Planning System

A Research Study

August 2018



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Report prepared by:
Pye Tait Consulting
Royal House
110 Station Parade
Harrogate
North Yorkshire
HG1 1EP

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author.

Report commissioned by:

Planning and Architecture Division
Area 2F South
Victoria Quay
Edinburgh
EH6 6QQ

Tel: 0131 244 7528
e-mail: chief.planner@gov.scot
web: <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/planning-architecture/>

© Crown Copyright 2018

Applications for reproduction of any part of this publication should be addressed to:
Planning and Architecture Division, Directorate for Local Government and
Communities, Area 2F (South) Victoria Quay, Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ

This report is published electronically to limit the use of paper, but photocopies will be provided on request to Planning and Architecture Division.

Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Introduction	7
3	Methods and Exemplars of Customer Service	10
4	Quality of Customer Service in the Planning System	17
5	Improving Customer Service in the Planning System	21
6	Conclusions	23

1 Executive Summary

About this research

In April 2018, The Scottish Government commissioned Pye Tait Consulting to explore how customer service is measured by a range of public and private sector organisations. The purpose was to highlight examples of good practice and forward considerations for strengthening customer service within the planning system. The research follows on the back of the 2017 People, Places and Planning Consultation. This envisioned a planning system in Scotland which is open for business, internationally respected and improves people's lives by creating better places and supporting delivery of good quality homes.

The research involved a desk-based review of customer service approaches operated by 25 organisations spanning local authority planning services, other local authority services, other public and private sector organisations, as well as a sample of firms that have won awards for customer service or achieved a recognised standard of excellence. In addition, 14 telephone interviews were completed, comprising seven planning authorities in Scotland, and seven stakeholders that work in relation to the Scottish planning system.

Methods and exemplars of customer service

The Planning Performance Framework (PPF)¹ in Scotland does not currently incorporate specific tangible measures relating to customer service delivery. Instead these are sought through a narrative commentary and via written case studies from planning authorities. A review of PPF reports reveals that some include evidence of customer feedback which is collected by various means including hard copy questionnaires, continuous online surveys and ad hoc focus groups.

Customer charters are used by several sampled organisations to communicate customer service commitments and ambitions, for the benefit of customers and employees. Building Standards services in Scotland adhere to a National Building Standards Customer Charter, which '*provides information about the minimum standards of service that all local authority verifiers should meet*'. This tends to be supplemented by local customer charters authored by building standards services.

Most of the 25 sampled organisations run some form of customer satisfaction survey which are mainly hosted online but in some cases conducted by telephone. Other innovative approaches, especially among private sector companies, include short email or SMS surveys that ask customers to rate the individual they spoke to. Such

¹ The PPF was introduced in 2011 by Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS) in conjunction with the Scottish Government.

sophisticated systems tend to work well for call centre services where staff may be incentivised in some way for high customer satisfaction scores.

Scottish planning authorities that carry out customer surveys tend to favour an online platform such as Survey Monkey, which they run and analyse themselves. Key issues include lack of consistency across Scotland in how, and how often, these are carried out; low response rates; and an apparent tendency for customers to conflate outcomes and service levels. Another perceived issue is survey fatigue, caused by customers receiving numerous requests from a range of organisations.

Several Scottish planning authorities, as well as other sampled public-sector organisations, host customer forums or focus groups to engage with customers, which helps to provide rich qualitative feedback. Most organisations examined for the research also publish details of their complaint-handling processes which invariably involve multiple internal stages of acknowledgement, investigation and attempted resolution via a response letter (with specific timescales for each stage) before referral to the relevant Ombudsman if the customer remains dissatisfied.

A range of different customer service standards operate across the public and private sector, with a common standard across Scottish local authorities being Customer Service Excellence (CSE). Planning authorities interviewed for the research gave mixed views as to the perceived value of such standards and accreditations in general. One mentioned that they are working towards CSE and feel this will give a sense of credibility to their customer service approaches. Others mentioned having limited awareness of such standards, with two expressing some cynicism that they can involve jumping through a lot of hoops.

Quality of customer service in the planning system

Planning authorities in Scotland place strong importance on delivering high quality customer service but feel constrained by limited staff and financial resources. Stakeholders generally echo these sentiments and there are clear issues in terms of inconsistency of service, both within and between local authorities in Scotland. This partly comes down to differences in how specific aspects of legislation are interpreted. It can also manifest in how customers are dealt with by individual staff, the commitment and investment of a particular planning service to customer service standards (such as Customer Service Excellence) and how authorities seek customer opinions and measure/track their performance.

Digital technologies offer opportunities as well as threats to good customer service. E-planning appears to be very well received among local authorities and stakeholders, notably for supporting a more transparent and flexible service. However, the growth of digital communication channels means that many organisations are choosing to rely more and more on remote customer engagement, for example through FAQs and live chat sessions. These are becoming commonplace across the public and private sectors but care is needed to ensure customers with perhaps quite complex and bespoke queries know where to go for information, how their queries will be dealt with and in what timescale.

Improving customer service in the planning system

Feedback suggests that the Scottish Government could do more to increase the emphasis placed on customer service within the planning performance framework. At present, the planning performance framework lacks clear, tangible and nationally consistent measures to track customer service. Lessons could be learned from the building standards system, which incorporates a Key Performance Outcome relating to improving the customer experience. This is primarily measured through customer ratings sought through an annual customer satisfaction survey. The fact this survey is run independently at a national level, but with local reporting, helps to enable performance to be consistently measured and benchmarked across Scotland, with consortium groups helping to identify lessons that can be learned.

There is general agreement among planning authorities and stakeholders that more could be done to share best practice, for example via forums and capacity building events. Several planning authorities interviewed for the research feel that customer perceptions would be enhanced through better awareness and understanding of the positive benefits that result from the planning system.

Customer satisfaction with planning is complicated by the fact the outcome of a planning application can influence how customers typically perceive the service. The nature of planning means that in some cases customers will 'engage' with the system as objectors and feel they have not been listened to where the decision does not go in their favour. This may not necessarily be the case and means that planning authorities need to work harder to proactively engage a broad cross-section of customers, including local communities in a positive way and as early as possible during the planning process.

2.1 Background and purpose of the research

Delivering excellent customer service requires firm and long-term commitment at all levels of a system, organisation or network. Implementing major changes or improvements can often require a culture change that needs time to permeate through teams, processes and operations. Such change needs strategic foresight, a clear implementation plan, buy-in from all those involved, effective use of available resources, and a regular cycle of evaluation to measure performance, change and continuous improvement. Above all, it depends on the views of customers, being responsive to their needs and managing expectations within available resources.

The 2017 People, Places and Planning Consultation set out a vision for the planning system in Scotland to be open for business, internationally respected and a conduit for improving people's lives by creating better places and supporting delivery of good quality homes. The consultation raised concerns that planning services are currently under-resourced and that costs to applicants should be better aligned to the services provided. However, a condition of any fee increase would be that planning authorities deliver better customer service and improved performance. Key themes within the consultation included the need for strong leadership and smart resourcing, for example capitalising on the efficiencies and customer benefits to be gained from the digital transformation of planning services.

The Scottish Government commissioned this exploratory research to gather intelligence on how customer service is measured by a range of organisations (public and private sector, within Scotland and beyond) with respect to services provided to the general public. It sets out to show examples of good practice and suggestions that could help to strengthen quality of service and respond to the current ambitions of the planning system.

Research objectives:

- Identify existing customer service standards across local authorities in Scotland and the levels these are measured against for quality assurance purposes;
- Explore and report on other methods and exemplars of customer service to establish where lessons can be learned by the planning service, including innovative approaches;
- Present potential approaches, techniques and measures (including resource requirements) that could represent good practice and be easily adopted by planning authorities.

2.2 Methodology

The research was undertaken between April and June 2018 involving a desk-based review and telephone interviews.

The desk review explored a variety of organisations' approaches to delivering and measuring customer service. These organisations (classified into five groups) are listed in Table 1. The review involved sourcing and examining a range of documentation and resources available in the public domain.

Table 1 Organisations sampled for the desk review

<p>Local authority planning services:</p> <p>Aberdeen City Council Dundee City Council Perth and Kinross Council Leeds City Council Planning Services Swale Borough Council Planning Services</p>	<p>Other local authority services:</p> <p>Angus Council Building Standards Argyll and Bute Council Building Standards Aberdeenshire Council Building Services Kettering Borough Council Warwickshire County Council</p>
<p>Public sector:</p> <p>Driver and Vehicle Licencing Agency (DVLA) The Department for Work and Pensions The Insolvency Service The Intellectual Property Office Security Industry Authority</p>	<p>Private Sector:</p> <p>Barclays Direct Line EasyJet National Express Tesco</p>
<p>Holders of excellence standards/award winners:</p> <p>AXA PPP Healthcare – <i>Feefo Gold Trusted Merchant</i> Registers of Scotland – <i>Holder of Customer Service Excellence</i> Sapphire Independent Housing – <i>Holder of Customer Service Excellence</i> Scottish Water – <i>Institute of Customer Services highly ranked</i> Virgin Money – <i>Winner of Voice of the Customer Awards 2017</i></p>	

In-depth telephone interviews were undertaken with seven Scottish planning authorities and seven other stakeholder organisations (Table 2). Discussion topics covered approaches to measuring and monitoring customer service; customer service standards and accreditations held (including the perceived value of these); customer service strengths and weaknesses in the planning system (including e-planning); and suggested improvements.

Table 2 Telephone interviewees

Planning authorities	Other stakeholders
City of Edinburgh	Historic Environment Scotland
Dumfries and Galloway	Homes for Scotland
Fife	Royal Town Planning Institute
Glasgow	Scottish Civic Trust
Highland	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Perth and Kinross	Scottish Natural Heritage
Scottish Borders	Scottish Water
	Scottish Environment Protection Agency

3 Methods and Exemplars of Customer Service

3.1 Planning Performance Framework in Scotland

Planning authorities in Scotland work to a national Planning Performance Framework (PPF)². They each prepare an annual PPF report which includes a qualitative story of that year's performance supported by case studies and a commentary on proposed improvements for the year ahead. National Headline Indicators (NHIs) are used to provide more measured information on performance covering the major themes of: Development Planning; Development Management; and Enforcement Activity.

The PPF does not currently incorporate specific tangible measures of customer service delivery. Instead these are sought through a narrative commentary and via written case studies. Evidence requested includes positive actions that the planning authority has taken to support sustainable economic growth, initiatives to work consistently with stakeholders and deliver a positive customer experience, such as:

- Evidence of success from development plan action programmes, pre-application processes and policy in practice;
- Protocols and relationship management to ensure reliability of advice and working timescales with stakeholders;
- Clear project management for development planning; and
- Communications strategy through customer service charters, customer surveys and local forums.

A high-level review of PPF reports reveals that some include evidence of customer feedback which is collected by various means including hard copy questionnaires, continuous online surveys and ad hoc focus groups. These appear to be valuable to planning authorities but do not offer consistent metrics to allow performance benchmarking at a national level.

3.2 Customer charters

Customer charters are popular mechanisms for communicating commitments to customer service, for the benefit of customers and employees. These are published by most organisations sampled for the desk research. For commercial organisations the

² The PPF was introduced in 2011 by Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS) in conjunction with the Scottish Government.

tone of these tends to include promotional messages for example *'nobody will try harder for our customers than we do'* and *'serving Britain's shoppers a little better every day'*. Public sector organisations tend to strike a more formal tone in their charters, with headline messages such as *'provide an accessible, responsive service and do what we say we will do'*.

Local Authority Building Standards services in Scotland collectively adhere to a National Building Standards Customer Charter, which *'provides information about the minimum standards of service that all local authority verifiers should meet'*. This gives customers the assurance that a consistent, high quality service should be delivered no matter which local authority provides the service. The national charter is augmented by local authorities' own local commitments, for example:

"We aim to exceed the Council's Corporate target of 84% for customer satisfaction rating the Service as good or excellent."

Argyll and Bute Council Building Services

"Maintain an overall national customer satisfaction rate above 7.5."

Aberdeenshire Council Building Services

Planning authorities in Scotland tend to use their own customer charters to set out the duties of their service. Those interviewed say this helps to manage customer expectations and reduce the volume of unnecessary communication.

Case Study Customer Charter (Extract) – Sapphire Independent Housing

Our mission is to improve lives and value people. We aim to achieve this by having clear guiding values, supported by robust strategic and operation plans that:

- put the needs of our customers first;
- help service users and staff reach their full potential;
- demonstrate continuous improvement; and
- demonstrate fairness, equal opportunities, diversity and respect for all.

At Sapphire Independent Housing we want to ensure that we offer the best possible customer service. We have developed these standards so that you know what you can expect from us. If you have any ideas on how we can improve our service we would love to hear from you.

When you phone us, we will answer the phone quickly and greet you in a friendly and professional manner. When you leave a message for one of our staff we will aim to return calls within 24 hours although occasionally it may take longer to fully deal with queries. We will acknowledge emails and letters within three working days. If for any reason the query is taking longer we will let you know the expected timescale.

3.3 Surveys

Most of the 25 organisations examined for the research run some form of customer satisfaction survey (including all public-sector organisations). These surveys are mainly hosted online although some are undertaken by telephone.

Private sector organisations seem most likely to have sophisticated systems which can relate customer feedback to the individual employees who served them. Direct Line has developed the 'MyCustomer' system which collects over 150,000 monthly responses from customers and provides daily feedback to employees, helping them to adjust their processes and improve customer experience. Yorkshire Water has recently deepened the level of information captured so that customer feedback can be linked back to the individual operator level in the contact centre.

Public sector surveys tend to segment their findings by customer type. Stated objectives for these surveys tend to share similar messages for example The Insolvency Service states this as *'To help the agency gain a better understanding of its customers' expectations and perceptions'*, and the DVLA states *'To find out where private motorists and commercial drivers are dissatisfied, and identify areas for improvement; and to measure overall reputation'*.

The DWP makes extensive use of telephone surveys. Its annual 'Claimant service and experience survey' achieved responses from 15,000 claimants of ten different benefits in 2016/17. The analysis and reporting ascertained levels of overall satisfaction among

different benefit claimants and explored other measures including communication, digital services, perceptions of staff (including ease of access, getting it right, keeping customers informed, and right treatment) as well as resolving difficulties.

Among Scottish planning authorities that carry out customer surveys, these have generally moved away from paper-based to online delivery methods (for example using the Survey Monkey platform), which keeps costs lower and can make the administration of surveys more efficient.

Planning authorities report some difficulties in defining and reaching their varied customer base to understand their needs and obtain feedback. One interviewee made a comparison between planning and building services, stating that while building services might have two customers i.e. the applicant and/or an agent, each planning application has several customers including: applicants, agents, objectors and neighbours.

Following a review of a sample of PPF reports, customer survey activity appears to be inconsistent in approach and varying in frequency across Scotland. A key issue for planning authorities appears to be low response rates and an apparent tendency for customers to conflate outcomes and service levels. In other words, if a planning decision works against the customer then they may be more likely to respond unfavourably about the service they receive. Another perceived issue is survey fatigue, caused by customers receiving numerous requests from a range of organisations.

“Two weeks after a planning decision, the team leader runs a report and sends out an email link to customers to complete a twelve-question Survey Monkey questionnaire. That allows for feedback and leaves contact details for follow-up if they want.”

Scottish planning authority

“We send out a thousand paper surveys, at great expense, and might get twenty-seven back.”

Scottish planning authority

“An issue identified at the HOPS meetings as a Scotland-wide concern, is the difficulty in obtaining a statistically meaningful/representative number of responses to customer surveys. As more and more companies and bodies seek customers’ opinions, ‘survey fatigue’ is becoming a factor, with people only being likely to respond if they have had either a particularly good or a particularly bad experience.”

Dumfries and Galloway PPF report

Case Study Customer Survey (Summary of Themes) – Building Standards, Scotland

- About you and your application
- Meeting your expectations
- Progressing your application
- Quality of service
- Communications
- Accessibility
- Overall satisfaction and final comments

Case Study Customer Survey (Measures of Reputation) – DVLA

Reputation is measured against Needs, Trust, Advocacy and Feeling:

- DVLA meets my needs as a customer
- I trust DVLA as an organisation
- I feel I am treated as a valued customer by DVLA
- I would recommend DVLA services to others
- I believe DVLA takes customer views seriously
- I believe DVLA understands my needs

3.4 Forums

A number of Scottish planning authorities make use of customer forums or focus groups to engage with customers, which can either be in place of or in addition to surveys. Invitees include the likes of agents, architects, developers, individual applicants and community councils. One planning authority interviewed for the research believes these provide good levels of feedback, although it can be harder to engage planning application objectors to attend.

“In 2017 we decided face to face consultation would be better so we invited eighty agents and community councillors to a mixed round table discussion from which we formulated an action plan.”

Planning authority

As with customer surveys, planning authorities publish details of forums and focus groups in their PPF reports. Customer groups invited to forums tend to be similar for all authorities, although there are variations between authorities in how many forums are held, over what frequency, and for whether there is a particular agenda for the sessions. There is evidence that other public-sector organisations are also making use of forums or similar events, to gather customer feedback.

“During 2017-18 we will develop more informal engagement channels, better communications and host an expanded annual forum, Insolvency Live!”

The Insolvency Service

3.5 Complaint handling

Most organisations examined for the research, publish details of their systems, protocols and service level agreements (SLAs) for registering and responding to customer complaints via their website, in telephone or in person. These usually involve multiple internal stages of acknowledgement, investigation and attempted resolution via a response letter (with specific timescales for each stage) before referral to the relevant Ombudsman if the customer remains dissatisfied.

AXA PPP Healthcare publishes and measures complaints received as a percentage of policies, for example *“during the six-month period ending 31 December 2017, AXA PPP Healthcare Limited received 7.16 complaints for every one thousand policies in force.”*

Case Study Complaints Policy – Direct Line

Our staff will attempt to resolve your complaint immediately. If this isn’t possible, we promise to acknowledge your complaint within five business days of receipt. In the unlikely event that your complaint hasn’t been resolved within four weeks of its receipt, we’ll write and let you know the reasons why and the further action we’ll take.

Within eight weeks of its receipt we’ll either issue you with a final response letter detailing the outcome of our investigation and our decision, or a letter confirming when we anticipate to have concluded our investigation.

Some planning authorities interviewed for the research mentioned having a formal process in place by which themes of complaints are identified and reported quarterly to a management team.

3.6 Customer service standards

A range of different customer service standards operate across the public and private sector – summarised below.

Customer Service Excellence (CSE): This was developed to offer a practical tool for driving customer-focused change within organisations. The foundation of this tool is the CSE Standard which tests in great depth those areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude. There is also emphasis placed upon developing customer insight, understanding the user’s experience and robust measurement of service satisfaction.

Some local authority services in Scotland (including planning and/or building standards) have achieved CSE status. Pye Tait's previous research for the Building Standards Division (BSD) identified that those services holding the standards were proud of this status, that they worked hard to maintain a high standard of service, and valued CSE as evidence to internal colleagues and customers of the level of customer commitment offered.

Among planning authorities interviewed for the research, there are mixed views as to the perceived value of customer service standards and accreditations. One mentioned that they are working towards CSE and feel this will give a sense of credibility to their customer service approaches and help to focus staff on continuous service improvement. Others mentioned having limited awareness of such standards, with two expressing some cynicism that they can involve jumping through a lot of hoops and that it can be hard to determine the difference and impact that the standards can have.

Other recognised standards and accreditations which can help to underpin good quality customer service include the following:

Investors in People (IiP): IiP is an internationally recognised Standard for better people management. Based on 25 years of leading practice, it is underpinned by a rigorous assessment methodology and a framework which reflects the latest workplace trends, essential skills and effective structures required for performance success. Accreditation against the IiP Standard is expected to denote a great employer, an outperforming place to work and a clear commitment to sustainability.

ISO 9001: Published and overseen by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), the ISO 9000 standard is a collection of management principles designed to ensure that an organisation's quality management systems meet the needs of customers, staff and other key stakeholders. Within this structure, ISO 9001 concerns the requirements those companies must fulfil if they want to successfully meet the standard. To register for ISO 9001, an organisation must have implemented and documented an independently audited quality management system.

Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT): The CSMT was developed by the Improvement Service and launched in 2010, providing a national standard for local government and partners to evaluate customer service performance. The CSMT was used as a starting point for the development of the first national customer survey questionnaire for the BSD and provides another useful resource for identifying best practice and common themes in measuring good customer service.

4 Quality of Customer Service in the Planning System

4.1 Importance of customer service in planning

Planning authorities interviewed for the research all agree that customer service is hugely important, a key priority to their organisations, and at the heart of continuous improvement. One stressed that local authorities are there to provide a public service and that it's important that commitment to good customer service is ingrained in the culture and process.

A key challenge to delivering good customer service can be the risk of confusion between 'service' and 'outcomes'. In other words, if customers do not receive the decision they hope, this can shape their views on the quality of service they feel they have received. This issue is not unique to planning but emphasises the importance of planning authorities keeping customers informed, being empathetic and providing clear justifications in a helpful and constructive way. Planning authorities and stakeholders emphasised the importance of letting customers know when delays or other issues may be outside the control of the planning system.

Customers of the planning system can be internal (within the Council) as well as external, including a wide range of individuals and organisations that become involved during consultations. Indeed, one planning authority made the point that planning is more 'public facing' than many other departments in the Council, requiring innovative approaches and effective community engagement skills to ensure that local decision making is informed and transparent.

Wider stakeholders agree that quality customer service is important, especially in development planning (when promoting plans) and that it should be equal to good decision making. For them it is important to have the opportunity to contribute to local plans and be able to galvanise members into responding.

Stakeholders generally feel that planning authorities take customer service seriously although one commented that this could be brought out more strongly in the performance framework. Linked to this is a suggestion that the Scottish Government should apply more weight to customer service when reviewing planning authority performance. One stakeholder feels that the focus should be on good decision-making, with customer service being a cross-cutting measure to ensure effective communication of progress and outcomes.

4.2 Customer service strengths

For planning authorities, the foremost perceived strengths of the system are transparency, flexibility and accessibility. They believe that with increasing amounts of

information being placed in the public domain, customers have better access than ever before to information they might want for whatever purpose.

Planning authorities consider their public and community engagement activities to be a key strength, especially reaching diverse groups and enabling a variety of viewpoints to be taken into consideration. Linked to this, one mentioned that they would like to do more to celebrate the positive achievements of planning so that customers recognise what has been delivered and protected.

Two planning authorities specifically mentioned their complaint handling processes and that they have SLAs in place to deal with those within set timescales, ensuring customer expectations are managed and that they are kept informed.

“It’s essentially a free service. We provide a range of contact points for customers and have targets for picking up voicemails and responding to emails. If a customer leaves a message, an officer will get back to them within three working days. That’s a commitment.”

Planning authority

Stakeholders acknowledged the speed of the process and that this appears to have improved in recent years with good feedback being provided to applicants. One stakeholder noted that planning authorities seem to be thinking more and more about the ‘customer journey’ and how to ensure they handle that process effectively, i.e. putting the customer at the heart of what they do. Another observation is that planning authorities are increasingly taking a ‘client-led’ approach, for example through pre-application meetings and forward planning.

4.3 Customer service weaknesses

Planning authorities consider the main customer service weakness to be insufficient financial and staff resources. This reportedly affects their ability to communicate with customers as often as they would like. Conversely, one planning authority mentioned a tendency to become involved in protracted discussions where applications are refused, which can limit time available for other customers.

The planning system also appears to be constrained at times by factors outside authority control. This includes customers’ expectations of communication frequencies being higher than what can reasonably be delivered; as well as the fact planning authorities say they need to work within a legislative framework which “customers don’t always understand”. However, one mentioned that discretion can sometimes be used where it would be in the public interest to go the extra mile.

“We only have to notify within 20m radius of a development. If we stuck to that rule we’d have dissatisfied customers as those living just beyond that radius might still be affected.”

Planning authority

One planning authority mentioned the fact there is always an “injured party” where planning is concerned, emphasising once again that perceptions of customer service can be lowered if customers do not always have the outcome they wanted. Another mentioned that the bar can sometimes be set too low for attendance at public consultation meetings. They feel that putting more focus on community engagement would help to ensure more people pick up on what is happening in their community so they do not risk feeling disenfranchised.

Stakeholders echoed planning authorities in their observation that planning teams seem to suffer from depleting budgets; revenue not being ring-fenced within the service; and resources being over-stretched. This, they feel, can affect morale among planning officers.

“There is a notable lack of expertise in building conservation. Planning authorities seem to need to rely on other organisations for this.”

Stakeholder

One stakeholder noted that customer service seems to be increasingly migrating to online platforms, for example FAQs being promoted over and above phone and email support. Whilst online help tools can be useful, there is some criticism that they can be overly generic and a cause of frustration for customers where they feel that one-to-one support is not openly available.

Other observed weaknesses include lack of consistency in approaches and processing times both within and between planning authorities and insufficient early engagement in consultations, with statutory consultees sometimes brought in too late in the process.

4.4 Effectiveness of e-Planning

Planning authorities interviewed for the research overwhelmingly believe that e-planning has had a positive effect on customer service. Despite some reported teething troubles with the software (such as online payment processing and system upgrades), the perceived benefits include more efficient information flows, better prioritisation of work, reduced printing costs, and greater transparency/easier access to information by the public.

For planning authorities, e-planning is bringing a cultural change, although some work is needed to help customers embrace it and adopt e-planning as the new norm. One authority mentioned having introduced charges for paper-based applications which, within two weeks, led to an apparent increase from 84% to 93% in the percentage of online applications. They have also brought in additional charges for telephone (rather than online) payments and run workshops to help smaller and more resistant agents adapt.

“It’s about how you work with the customer to bring them on the e-planning journey with you and change their mindset. In the long run the customer benefits because it speeds up the service.”

Planning authority

“We want to think next about interactive chat facilities and other innovative approaches to customer engagement.”

Planning authority

Stakeholders echoed planning authorities in terms of the improved transparency and accessibility that e-planning offers, as well as enabling stronger collaboration on applications. One stakeholder mentioned that e-planning has helped to improve consistency between planning authorities due to a common application form. A perceived downside is that the process risks shifting the emphasis away from a “personal service”, although it is noted that there is still the option to engage with planning officials where necessary.

5 Improving Customer Service in the Planning System

5.1 Achieving greater consistency

Planning authorities and stakeholders share concerns that there is a lack of consistency in processes, enforcement and quality of service across Scotland, making the point that agents working across multiple geographical areas are most sensitive to this. It is recognised as a cause of frustration as it can lead to a lack of predictability for customers.

“There are different ways of calculating housing land supply and some planning authorities charge for pre-application advice whereas others don’t.”

Stakeholder

There are several reasons given for the lack of consistency. Firstly, there is an acknowledgement that differences in geography across Scotland are likely to influence local priorities, along with the need to be accountable to local managers and differences in resource levels. However, whilst planning authorities all work to the same legislation, they admit to not always interpreting specific elements in the same way.

Planning authorities feel that clearer national guidance on implementing legislation would help to improve consistency across the Scottish planning system. This would apply not only to Scottish Government-issued guidance for planning authorities, but guidance which sets out the rights and responsibilities of customers. As an example, one authority praised work that has been done already to create commonality through the ‘validation standards’, reducing the extent to which planning authorities can make their own interpretations.

5.2 Improving customer service delivery

There is general agreement among planning authorities and stakeholders that more could be done to share best practice between authorities, for example via forums and capacity building events. The Heads of Planning network is praised as an effective facilitator although stakeholders question the extent to which planning authorities collaborate as effectively as they could. Specific mention was made of the Improvement Service which could arguably be utilised more effectively to improve service standards.

Several planning authorities feel that customer perceptions of the planning system would be enhanced through better awareness and understanding of the positive benefits that result from the planning system. They suggest this could be achieved through a clearer customer charter and more proactive promotion of the beneficial community outcomes from planning. At present they feel that the general public often engage with the system from a negative standpoint, for example when raising objections, which could impact on their overall perceptions.

Planning authorities are concerned that current resourcing levels mean there is limited capacity for extensive proactive customer engagement. They feel that statutory fees could potentially be raised and would ideally like to see the system move towards full cost recovery.

Other suggestions for improvement include developing a national customer journey for the planning system, potentially following a similar format to that recently created for building standards. This could offer a one-stop-shop for information, a step-by-step guide to the planning process and links to additional resources. One planning authority advocated making more use of interactive online 'live chat' sessions to make the best possible use of digital technologies.

5.3 Measuring customer service in the future

Planning authorities agree that measuring customer service is important and indicated that there could be a place for a specific key performance measure to directly address customer engagement within the performance framework.

Planning authorities and stakeholders are generally warm to the idea of introducing an annual national customer survey for planning in Scotland. Given that a variety of approaches are currently used, it is felt this could bring consistency and comparability to how customer feedback is gathered, collated and reported. Of use would be reporting at national and local (i.e. planning authority) levels, as well as benchmarking group reports, to aid best practice discussions.

However, some planning authorities have expressed a preference for a more flexible local approach and maintaining ownership of customer feedback. This, it is argued, would allow them to ask their own questions, conduct customer engagement research using mechanisms that suit them, and follow up directly with customers on any issues raised. The risk of 'survey fatigue' is another potential barrier raised, and whether a national survey might be too generic unless planning authorities had the opportunity to contribute their own questions each year.

6 Conclusions

Defining and better understanding customers of the planning system

A clearer picture is needed of who, precisely, are the customers within the planning system, how they engage and interact with the system and similarities/differences in their needs and expectations.

By fully understanding 'the customer', planning authorities should be able to better plan for and tailor their service accordingly. Linked to this, there appears to be an appetite for an interactive 'Customer Journey' tool which could help to set national expectations for customers, as well as clarifying their rights and responsibilities.

A need for greater emphasis on customer service within the planning performance framework

There is a case for the Scottish Government (Planning and Architecture Division) to consider placing more emphasis on customer service through the planning performance framework.

Achieving this would require consultation with planning authorities across Scotland to agree on the current issues, available resources and to ensure strong buy-in to the rationale and shape of any changes made. Introducing new customer-focused performance measures could go some way to improving national consistency in service quality.

Improving consistency in how customer service is delivered and measured

There is a need for greater consistency of customer service, which could be achieved through:

- 1) clearer guidance for planning authorities to minimise disparities in interpretation of specific aspects of legislation; and
- 2) developing a national customer survey for planning (for which there is warm support) that asks common perceptual questions of customers across all authorities in Scotland.

Developing and running a national survey could potentially help to create a level playing field in how customer service is measured, permit unbiased analysis and reporting, and provide a baseline for performance benchmarking and annual improvement tracking by the Scottish Government. Planning authorities would want to be closely involved in the

survey question design and the building standards survey could be used as a starting point since this has already been informed by desk research of good practice.

It would seem sensible that any such national customer survey for planning is externally commissioned to capitalise on resources available from a specialist agency to facilitate the survey and local reporting. This would help to minimise the resource and cost burden on planning authorities although some human and IT resources would be needed to keep a clear log of customer data, including names, contact details and the nature/value of their application to enable survey results to be cross-tabulated in different ways.

This approach would require local authorities to share their contact details with the independent agency so that the agency can invite them to take part. This would be compliant with GDPR due to the customer research being in customers' legitimate interests, however, it would require planning authorities to explain how customers' data is used in a GDPR-compliant Privacy Policy.

Important considerations ahead of deciding on a national survey should be what the implications are for existing local survey activity run by Councils. Some may stop in favour of the national survey, while others may continue since they get good value from the feedback they receive. Whilst there is clearly an exacerbated risk of survey fatigue by running a combination of national and local surveys, planning authorities should not be discouraged from using their own methods if they find these valuable, but a national survey could be more readily relied upon for consistently worked out performance scores.

Sharing good practice in customer service

The Scottish Government and Heads of Planning Scotland have a role to play in helping to advocate and promote good practice sharing across the current benchmarking groups.

There are mixed views among planning authorities as to the relative merits of national standards and accreditations for customer service, therefore local authorities that have completed or are progressing towards their accreditation, would be well placed to speak to others.

A good example is the 'Customer Service Excellence' (CSE) standard which has been tried and tested by a number of local authorities in Scotland, including some building standards services and planning services. Those that have achieved CSE are generally proud of this status as evidence to internal colleagues and customers of the level of customer commitment offered.



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

© Crown copyright 2018

OGL

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3 or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at www.gov.scot

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-78781-117-1 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, August 2018

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS448886 (08/18)

W W W . G O V . S C O T