

BUILDING STANDARDS

Customer Engagement Focus Groups – October to December 2017

Between October and December 2017 four focus groups were held with staff from the Council's Building Standards Service and Customers, including architects, engineers and housebuilders. A number of themes emerged which are summarised in the "You said" section below. In response, the "We did" section sets out what we have done in response.

YOU SAID	WE DID
<p>Consistency: Sometimes Building Standards Reports are inconsistent with some reports being very long and others short.</p> <p>Some reports appear to be too diligent. There is a need to strike the right balance and be proportionate.</p>	<p>We are updating our procedures and providing training for staff. The aim is to get greater consistency.</p>
<p>Changes of staff can be an issue.</p>	<p>With the larger applications, we try to keep the same surveyor involved throughout – however this isn't always possible. Where it is not, our team managers have an overview of the application to ensure we are consistent in our approach.</p>
<p>STAS (type approval) applications shouldn't be reassessed.</p>	<p>Staff have been advised that only the aspects that should be checked are assessed – eg proximity of buildings to site boundaries, design of accesses etc.</p>
<p>Timescales: More should be done to reduce timescales</p>	<p>We have established a plan reporting team that focusses on smaller applications. This gives staff in our area teams more time to focus on larger / more complex applications.</p>

YOU SAID	WE DID
	<p>We have continued to allocate some of our work to partner local authorities. This helps us get closer to achieving our targets.</p> <p>We are ensuring vacant posts are filled.</p>
<p>Work should be re-allocated to others when surveyors are on holiday</p>	<p>We have established a plan reporting team which does this with smaller applications. We are looking to see how this approach could work in our area team which deal with the larger applications.</p>
<p>If applications are poor, we should return them.</p>	<p>Legislation allows us to return only a very small proportion of the applications we receive as most will comply with the basic legislative requirements for information needed.</p>
<p>Fire engineering checks can slow things down.</p>	<p>We have put in place arrangements to have fire engineering proposals independently checked where necessary. We encourage discussion around fire engineering aspects early in the process support greater use of pre warrant customer agreements (see below), as these should help ensure quicker processing of complex applications.</p>
<p>Priority applications should be identified.</p>	<p>We process disabled applications more quickly than others. Where there is a public interest in delivering applications these may be prioritised ahead of other applications.</p>
<p>Communications: The service should communicate when things are going to take longer.</p>	<p>We are working with colleagues in our Contact Centre with the aim of enabling them to be able to answer more.</p>
<p>Feedback is sometimes poor at initial stages</p>	<p>We are working to improve turn around times on initial reports. Now over 70% of applications have a first report issued within 20 working days. This is up from 10% in late 2016.</p>

YOU SAID	WE DID
Could team structures and contact details be published for teams.	We have general email address details for our teams on our Building Warrant Advice webpage. We encourage the use of these rather than individual team contact details so that if someone is out of the office / on leave etc, the correspondence can be seen by the team concerned.
<p>Paper vs Electronic: It would be better where paper copies of plans are required, that these are sought after the warrant has been granted rather than before.</p>	We are working towards having mobile electronic devices to do away with the need for paper sets of plans. The use of tablets is being investigated.
If quicker, can hard copy applications be made rather than electronic applications?	This can be done and can be helpful on larger projects where there is a high volume of individual drawings.
There are issues with eBuildingStandards with not all staff being aware of the process and drawings getting lost in the system.	We have commissioned the upgrade of our computer system. This will help ensure better electronic processing of applications.
More use should be made of meetings, if these help to resolve issues quicker.	Surveyors are being encouraged to use whatever means to resolve issues quickly, with meetings and phone calls often the best way to get resolution quickly.
<p>Methodology This is a useful document and we could do more to publicise it</p>	We continue to publicise the methodology at our focus group events and through other means. We plan to update it for the summer additional info and advice.
Some architects use “compliance documents” as a way of checking that all matters set out in the Technical Standards are covered. Could we develop approaches like these?	We encourage the use of approaches like this where it benefits individual architects / agents. We would not propose to create our own compliance document because of the risk aspects of the technical standards may be missed.

YOU SAID	WE DID
<p>Clarity is needed around staged applications</p> <p>Pre warrant agreements would be helpful with pre warrant discussions helping to unlock issues early.</p>	<p>Each application will have different requirements for stages so we've set up a "Pre Warrant Customer Agreements" webpage which explains how to contact us. The way an application is staged, can be discussed before the application is made.</p>
<p>Reallocation of work</p> <p>Work should be reallocated to other surveyors when staff are on holiday or are sick.</p> <p>Changes to staff can be an issue.</p>	<p>Our plan reporting team now does this. We are exploring ways of reallocating the larger applications where needed – but this has to be balanced against the knowledge that an individual surveyor will have built up around an application, as sometimes re-allocation can slow the process down.</p>
<p>Site Inspections</p> <p>More use could be made of clerks of works</p>	<p>The Council supports this approach but it is something for the industry to decide upon rather than something we can require.</p>
<p>Photographs: Better use could be made of these at the site inspection stage. .</p>	<p>We are developing new ways of working for site inspections and will be using photographic evidence, reports and other information to supplement the site inspections we will carry out.</p>
<p>Straightforward works should not require multiple inspections</p>	<p>Part of our new ways of working will result in a more risk managed approach to site inspections which will direct a greater proportion of our staff time towards those projects of greatest complexity and risk.</p>
<p>Inspections need to be done quickly particularly when houses are due to handover for clients.</p>	<p>We are developing a team of dedicated to site inspection. This will allow us to more quickly respond.</p>