

Planning Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 8 December 2016

Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy – progress report and next steps

Item number	8.1
Report number	
Executive/routine	Routine
Wards	All

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Customer Engagement Strategy and set out further changes to the Planning and Building Standards service.

A number of changes have been introduced over the past year in terms of customer contact and how planning application and building warrant enquiries are handled. Whilst progress has been made in a number of areas, some aspects of the strategy require further work and this report sets out a process to refocus the strategy.

Links

Coalition Pledges	P15 , P28 , P40
Council Priorities	CO23 , CO24 , CO25 , CO26
Single Outcome Agreement	SO1

Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy – progress report and next steps

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee:
 - 1.1.1 Notes the progress with the customer engagement strategy; and
 - 1.1.2 Agrees to refocus the strategy as set out in the report.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Planning Committee approved the Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Service Charter on 3 December 2015. The strategy and charter reflect the objectives of the Council's transformational change programme and channel shift agenda. These aim to support customers in the use of online services, and to refocus staff time on assisting with more complex applications and other statutory processes.
- 2.2 Changes to the service were introduced from December 2015 onwards. During this period changes have been made to a number of customer-contact areas such as the planning and building standards helpdesk, online information and transactions.
- 2.3 Discussions on the implementation and benefits of the charter and strategy have continued over this period with the Customer 1st Project Board. The Board, which is made up of architects, planning agents and Council officials, has informed both the process of change and subsequent outcomes.

3. Main report

Customer Engagement Strategy and Planning Charter

- 3.1 Following consultation with stakeholder groups, the Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy was approved by Planning Committee on 3 December 2015. A new Customer Service Charter was also approved as part of this process. Since approval, the service has been implementing the changes and monitoring their impact.
- 3.2 The main themes of the Strategy and Charter includes:
 - 3.2.1 Focusing pre-application advice on those developments which would benefit most from it – large, contentious or complex developments. A pre-application enquiry form was part of the proposals.

- 3.2.2 Changing the Planning and Building Standards help desks to a morning only service (9am-1pm). This started in December 2015 with support staff 'triaging' calls from the public to give initial advice on finding online information before passing the call to the duty planner or surveyor.
- 3.2.3 Changing online content with a "Knowledge Based" website proposed to find the answers to common planning and building standards enquiries.
- 3.2.4 Delivering channel shift and moving customers to self serve to find information online.
- 3.2.5 Improving community engagement with an updated Planning Concordat.
- 3.2.6 Improving application performance as a result of planners and surveyors having more time to deal with applications rather than enquiries.

Outcomes

- 3.3 A 'benefits tracker' approach has been used to monitor areas which have had successful outcomes. There has been a reduction in pre-application enquiries, the refreshed Concordat has led to customers making greater use of the online submission of planning and building warrant applications. However, improvements in other areas have been constrained by a limited shift of customers from direct contact to self serve options.
- 3.4 The development of a Knowledge Base for Planning and Building Standards customers to access has been held back due to other priorities of the Council's Transformational Change programme. Discussions are continuing with the Transformational Change team to take this forward.
- 3.5 Channel shift requires behavioural change which cannot be expected to be delivered in only 12 months. However, the problem is exacerbated by customers being unable to find all the information they need online. This may in part be due to the variety of complex enquiries the service gets from different customer groups but it does emphasise the continuing need to develop a Knowledge Base in the longer term. In the shorter term there is a need to re-focus the Customer Engagement Strategy to make it work more effectively.

Re-focusing the Customer Engagement Strategy

- 3.6 By reducing the helpdesk opening times, it was expected that customers would be encouraged to self serve using Planning and Building Standards online content which is comprehensive. However, customers continue to request advice and help through speaking to a member of staff. Customers suggest they are unable to find or understand the online information and therefore make the call to the helpdesk. Call volumes to the Planning and Building Standards helpdesks have been monitored since the middle of January this year. The number of calls has averaged around 900 calls each week with a spike during the summer months of over 1,200 calls in one week.
- 3.7 In reviewing the strategy, there is a need to consider what are the root reasons for people trying to contact the service directly rather than finding the information

online. The issues centre around agents who want progress updates on their application, householders who want to alter or extend their property and businesses enquiring about changes of use. Application updates and general advice enquiries are the main subject of phone and email traffic to the helpdesk. Is this therefore imperative that it is made easier for customer to find this information by themselves. The issue needs to be re-defined from 'how do we reduce contact' to 'how do we make it easier for the customer to self serve and consequently reduce contact with us.'

- 3.8 There is also a need to move away from bigger solutions to smaller incremental changes which make a difference – doing a little with certainty, rather than a large amount that might not work. Re-focusing language on positive incentives such as 'following the guidance will help you get planning permission' should also be considered. As the helpdesk customer service is at no cost to the customer, with professional staff giving advice, this service is heavily used. As a free advice service, no amount of positive incentives on their own will change this. It has to be acknowledged that some customers will still need direct advice and that service provision should be made for that.

Changes

- 3.9 A number of changes are proposed to the strategy including the following:
- 3.9.1 The main focus will be on improving the Council website to help the customer find the information they need;
 - 3.9.2 Interactive online forms for pre-application and general advice will help to capture what the customer wants so answers can be improved;
 - 3.9.3 If the customer does need to contact the service, this will eventually be through the Customer Hub (Contact Centre) where staff are better placed to deal with the volume of calls;
 - 3.9.4 The use of videos and storyboarding will be promoted as more accessible ways of finding information;
 - 3.9.5 Easy read guides and an interactive house which shows what works require planning permission will be produced as a priority; and
- 3.9 The relationship between customer service and lean reviews will be more closely aligned. Only by improving efficiency and improving performance can customer service and satisfaction be improved.
- 3.10 The proposed changes will complement the Council's overall review of service delivery which focuses on the three key themes of new ways of working, lean and agile services and working with partners.

Customer engagement

- 3.11 To support these proposed changes and engage various customer groups in this process, it is intended to seek further customer feedback on the services provided. As part of this, an initial survey of agents has been undertaken which has raised a number of issues about the changes. Appendix 1 sets out the issues and response to these. In summary, this includes:
- 3.11.1 The new helpdesk opening times and call options system have resulted in a general reduction in customer service;
 - 3.11.2 Email and telephone are the preferred method of contact with visiting the helpdesk the least preferred method;
 - 3.11.3 Planning enquiries are generally well handled, however, the length of time taken to respond is an area of concern ;
 - 3.11.4 The handling of general Building Standards enquiries have overall low levels of customer satisfaction;
 - 3.11.5 The agents noted that online planning advice was easy to find and use; and
- 3.11 The main issue raised was the lack of staff resource, particularly within the Building Standards service and the impact this is having on customer service.
- 3.12 The feedback from agents reinforces a number of assumptions about the Planning and Building Standards customer service and the proposed changes in the strategy are aimed at addressing these issues.
- 3.13 An ongoing process for engaging other customer groups such as those who comment on planning applications and applicants and community groups will be developed to allow feedback on the service they received. Short exit surveys will be used on decision notices, on email responses and, where possible, after telephone contact. The feedback from this will give an indication of where the changes are working and where improvements are needed.

4. Measures of success

- 4.1 Refocusing the customer engagement strategy is an opportunity to introduce small steps towards change and help customers to make greater use of online information and transactions. The reduction in the number of telephone calls to the Planning and Building Standards helpdesks will be a key measure of success alongside customer surveys which monitor levels of satisfaction.

5. Financial impact

- 5.1 There is no direct financial impact arising from this report. However, in line with the Council's Transformational Change programme, there continue to be opportunities to improve the delivery of services with a focus on reducing costs.

6. Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

- 6.1 There are no perceived risks associated with this report. The report has no impact on any policies of the Council.

7. Equalities impact

- 7.1 The Equalities and Rights Impact Assessment indicates the following:
- The proposals will enhance participation, influence and voice as they promote better online services available to all whilst still allowing scope for direct contact where still required. They also set out what service standards the customer can expect;
 - There are no infringements of Rights under these proposals;
 - There are no identified positive or negative impacts on the duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation;
 - The proposals promote the duty to advance equality of opportunity as they promote better and more accessible information systems which would benefit all whilst ensuring any groups who need bespoke advice still have access to this service;
 - The proposal to ask customers to self serve online may affect some groups such as those with disabilities and those of a different race. However, the strategy states that a direct service will still be provided for those who need it; and
 - The proposals promote the duty to foster good relations as they make clear the service standards that can be expected and so promote understanding.

8. Sustainability impact

- 8.1 The impact of this report in relation to the three elements of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 Public Bodies Duties has been considered. The outcome is summarised below:
- The proposals in this report will have no impact on carbon emissions because the report deals with customer engagement;

- The proposals in this report will have no effect on the city's resilience to climate change impacts because the report deals with customer engagement;
- The proposals in this report will help achieve a sustainable Edinburgh because they promote equality of opportunity by making services more easy to understand and accessible;
- The proposals in this report will help achieve a sustainable Edinburgh because they will assist the economic well being of the City by concentrating our resources where they will facilitate major development.

9. Consultation and engagement

- 9.1 The Customer 1st Project Board, has continued to meet over the past year with Board members providing feedback on the changes and outcomes. This level of engagement will continue.
- 9.2 Feedback on the changes has also come through other means such as events with agents earlier in the year, comments from customers and the aforementioned recent survey of planning agents.
- 9.3 As set out earlier in the report, the Planning and Building Standards service will develop and deliver a range of methods to receive ongoing customer feedback on various aspects of the service.

10. Background reading/external references

- 10.1 Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Service Charter
http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/49102/item_71_planning_and_building_standards_customer_engagement_strategy_and_service_charter

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11. Links

Coalition Pledges	<p>P15 Work with public organisations, the private sector and social enterprise to promote Edinburgh to investors</p> <p>P28 Further strengthen our links with the business community by developing and implementing strategies to promote and protect the economic wellbeing of the city</p> <p>P40 Work with Edinburgh World Heritage Trust and other stakeholders to conserve the city's built heritage</p>
Council Priorities	<p>C023 – Well engaged and well informed – Communities and individuals are empowered and supported to improve local outcomes and foster a sense of community.</p> <p>CO24 – The Council communicates effectively internally and externally and has an excellent reputation for customer care</p> <p>CO25 – The Council has efficient and effective services that deliver objectives</p> <p>CO26 – The Council engages with stakeholders and works in partnership to improve services and deliver agreed objectives</p>
Single Outcome Agreement	<p>SO1 Edinburgh's economy delivers increased investment, jobs and opportunities for all</p>
Appendices	<p>Appendix 1 – Summary of agents feedback</p>

Appendix 1

Planning and Building Standards agents survey – feedback

Agents who have previously or regularly use the Planning and Building Standards service were asked for their views on the changes which were introduced in December 2015. This included changes to the helpdesk opening hours, how we handle building warrants, pre-application enquiries, new procedures for checking warrants/planning applications and a new procedure for applications that do not require planning permission.

The changes were introduced as part of the [Customer Service Charter](#) and [Engagement Strategy](#), which were approved by Planning Committee in December 2015.

77 responses were received, with the majority of responses from architects. The following is a summary of the feedback.

Service	Comment	Response
Reduced helpdesk opening hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall the majority of respondents felt this had reduced the level of service • Accept the need for change but doesn't always suit business hours and can be inconvenient • Direct access to officers has been maintained when applications have been allocated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted - not all our customers have made the shift to using online services and still rely on the helpdesks. • The 9am-1pm opening hours will be retained however calls will be transferred to the Customer Hub (contact centre) to improve monitoring and performance. Duty officers will still be available to take calls • Noted but the change allows resources to go in to application processes • Noted and this will continue
New telephony system (call options)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers were split on no noticeable change and this reducing customer service • There have been some difficulties getting through with longer waiting times for calls to be answered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted • Noted – work is progressing with the Customer Hub to address the issue of call volumes
What are agents preferred method of contacting us?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly email but a combination of phone calls and emails are best • Overall there is some issue with calls/emails not being responded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted • Note – progress is being made to recruit new planning and building standards

		officers. This will help to reduce enquiry times and improve customer service
How do agents rate the handling of planning and building standards enquiries?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a general satisfaction levels with the quality of the correspondence received from the service with main issue being the length of time taken to get advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted – new online general enquiry forms are being developed which will help to ensure we receive the correct information and provide advice on larger more complex cases
Is it easy to find and use our online Planning guidance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of respondents agreed it was easy to find and use • Points raised included the application of the guidance, not being specific enough and it doesn't always cover the issue you are dealing with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted – the planning guidance is reviewed annually and the feedback will be used as part of this review
Is it easy to find and use the Building Standards technical guidance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most agents were aware of the guidance but had issues with its whereabouts on the Council website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted – the Building Standards web pages have now been renewed with a new web page dedicated to advice. This includes the Technical Standards, Scottish Government advice and a preliminary enquiry form.
Submission of online Planning and Building warrant applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of agents prefer to make applications online • Despite this, issues were raised by some agents about payment methods, limitations on files sizes and submitting additional information • A number of positive comments were made about the new eDevelopment site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noted – over 80% of planning applications are made online and over 50% of building warrants online • Noted - as eDevelopment is managed by the Scottish Government this feedback be shared with them
General comments	<p>Comments were made about a range of issues including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve communication, consistency and clarity of advice • Improve online information and mapping • Length of time taken to deal with applications/enquiries • Increase staffing levels • Keep customers up to date on progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website content and general advice are part of ongoing reviews • Recruitment of both planning and building standards officers is underway which will improve performance