

**NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**SCRUTINY PANEL 3 CUSTOMER SERVICES**

**THURSDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2012**

**ITEM 5c**

**RESPONSE OF:**

**SUSAN BRIDGE**

**Head of Planning**

1. The Department operates a separate system to the corporate Customer Contact Centre and has its own customer service telephone help line for Development Control and Building Control

Planning does not use the Contact Centre because of the volume and technical nature of the calls received in the department daily. The Department has at least one Support Officer on telephone duty throughout the working day and a duty Planning Officer is also available. This service is provided between 8.30 – 5 pm Monday – Thursday and 8.30 – 4.30 pm on Friday.

Planning and Building Control have separate contact telephone numbers. Planning is on the ACD system whilst Building Control is on a group link so customers can always reach an officer. This is essential in view of the fact that Building Control offers the service in competition with the private sector.

In addition, there is always one Support Officer to deal with Planning or Building Control customers in the One Stop Shop for face-to-face enquiries and the Duty Planning Officer is also available to discuss matters in the One Stop Shop.

The Department rarely, if at all, receives complaints about its customer service.

2. Customers are encouraged to access information through the web-site although generally first-time customers will visit the One Stop Shop or telephone the Department. A member of staff is always available to explain to first-time customers how to access on-line services, including downloading application forms, relevant leaflets and information on the Planning Portal.

The Department is reducing the number of paper copies of information, encouraging customers to access information on line which is freely available and free of charge.

The Department does not use social networking sites, although the Joint Planning Unit has a Facebook page and Twitter where they advertise any events held, consultation dates, any documents that are being published and Committee dates.

3. Frequent users of the service are called or visited annually to up-date them on changes to the Planning Portal and encouraged to submit planning applications on line. This has led to significant efficiencies as all applications submitted to the Portal can be transferred electronically

into Fast Planning, whereas paper copies have to be scanned and manually inputted.

Building Control is not as advanced as Planning in the use of on-line systems, primarily because there is no BC equivalent to the Planning Portal. However, improving customer access to BC information and services through the internet is a workstream for 2012/2013.

Occasional customers are encouraged through the initial contact by telephone or One Stop Shop to submit on-line and a member of staff is available in the Planning area of the One Stop Shop to assist them to submit on-line.

Policy information is available free of charge via the internet. Paper copies are always subject to a charge.

4. Paper copies are still available for customers who do not have access to the internet, Customers can also come into the One Stop Shop where there are information leaflets available.
5. Planning is not a service which needs to be advertised, other than if we are changing systems or there is a legislative change. These changes are advertised through the web-site and frequent users of the service will be notified by e-mail or telephone.
6. Generally the One Stop Shop has worked well. However, the Planning area is too small and the signage is poor. Improving the appearance and profile of the Planning area is a priority project in 2012/2013 as we expect an increase in usage with the transfer of planning powers from WNDP.
  - 6(a) The best feature is the appearance and spaciousness. The self serve area also works well for repeat customers.
  - 6(b) The Meet and Greet and reception area does not work well. Visitors who have appointments should be met without having to queue to see the receptionist. There should be a meet and greet person to direct visitors to the Planning area and/or ring the officer who they are meeting. Visitors have been known to queue for 20 minutes to be attended to.
7. Visitors can be made to feel uncomfortable when entering the One Stop Shop if there are people congregating in what can appear to be an anti-social manner in the courtyard area and around the entrance. The courtyard should be better policed. Signage to the appropriate sections should be more prominent within the One Stop Shop.

8. N/A
9. Planning and Building Control give excellent customer service. They advertise through using CD Rom, leaflets in One Stop Shop, site signs, promotional products and also the Planning and Building Control web-site.
10. Telephone is the most frequently used medium, although I understand that the planning web-site are the most used pages of the internet.
11. The only emergency service that the Department provides is in respect of dangerous structures. Access to this is most frequently through the 'blue-light' services. Details are also posted on the internet. The call centre has the relevant contact details.
12. Every 6 months the Support Officers receive relevant customer refresher courses and are trained to escalate difficult customers and issues to managers. These circumstances are comparatively rare due to the nature of the service.
13. This is very rare, but staff have access to support if it should ever be required.
14. Staff will discuss sensitive or difficult situations with their line-manager and in team meetings.
15. Monitoring of planning customers takes place through Fast Planning when:
  1. a planning application decision notice is made
  2. an enforcement job is closed

Customers receive an automatically generated feedback survey and monitoring questionnaire. These are returned to the Community Engagement Officer in the Planning Team who inputs them onto a database. Any specific issues requiring attention or compliments are directed to the Development Control Manager. A report is generated on an approximately 6 monthly basis and contains actions to be considered by the Planning Management Team which are identified from the feedback received.

Monitoring questionnaires are also input into a separate monitoring database to protect customers' identity.

Relatively small numbers of feedback forms have been returned which makes patterns in the data difficult to detect, e.g. between July 2010 – May 2011 a total of 99 forms for development control were received (1134 were sent out). However over time, and particularly when planning powers are returned from WNDC a more robust sample should be achieved and will therefore prove more useful to refining procedures and systems.

16. Planning does not really use the One Stop Shop or the Contact Centre as a shared service.

17. N/A

18. None