

REPORT TO: DEVELOPMENT QUALITY COMMITTEE - 4 DECEMBER 2006

REPORT ON: DEVELOPMENT QUALITY SERVICE: CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS 2006

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & TRANSPORTATION

REPORT NO: 562-2006

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise the Committee of the results of a customer satisfaction survey in respect of the Council's development quality service which was undertaken between May and July 2006 and to seek approval for appropriate improvements to the operation of the service as indicated in the report.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Committee
- a Notes the content of the report and agrees with the recommended actions as outlined in Appendices 1 and 2 to the report;
 - b Agrees that this report and a full statistical summary of responses be made available on the Council's website.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

4 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The development quality service as outlined in the Council's Charter for the service approved in November 2005 emphasises that one of its principal functions is to facilitate the widest possible involvement of all Dundee's citizens in decision-making. As part of the process information and expert advice is freely available from the Council.

- 4.2 In this respect the following Key Themes are supported by the development quality service and by the outcome of the survey:

Key Theme 10: Access to the skills, knowledge and information needed to enable everyone to play a full part in society.

Key Theme 11: All sections of the community are empowered to participate in decision-making.

5 SUSTAINABILITY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no sustainability issues arising from this report.

6 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Although there are no direct equal opportunities implications arising from this report the relevant Local Agenda 21 Key Themes emphasise that the service is available to and received by all sectors of the Dundee community.

7 BACKGROUND

- 7.1 One of the Planning and Transportation Department's key strategic priorities over the period of its Departmental Service Plan 2004-2007 is:

"To increase our responsiveness to public opinion and requests for service provision".

- 7.2 This objective reflects the following relevant Key Values of the Council as a whole. The Council will:

- Inform, consult and involve users of Council services about what the Council is doing and how it is performing;
- Use care and courtesy when dealing with the public; and
- Work as a team to offer a co-ordinated and effective service.

- 7.3 Within the context of the Development Quality Charter which was approved by the Council in November 2005 the Council is committed to maintaining and enhancing its development quality service to, and in consultation with, stakeholders. Specifically the Charter provides that we will:

- Undertake regular Customer Satisfaction Surveys and publish the results; and
- Periodically review and update the Development Quality Service procedures to ensure efficiency and effectiveness are maintained for our customers.

- 7.4 The comprehensive survey which is the subject of this report further these commitments and has been used to inform progress or otherwise since a similar previous survey undertaken in 2003.

- 7.5 For the purposes of the survey the following stakeholder group were identified and surveyed as indicated below:

		<u>No.Questionnaires Issued</u>	<u>% Sample</u>	<u>No.Questionnaires Returned</u>	<u>% Response</u>
A	Applicants	126	10%	18	14.3%
B	Agents	100		42	42%
C	Community Councils/ Neighbourhood Representative Structures	10	N/A	3	30%
D	Consultees	9	100%	1	11.1%
E	Objectors	100	10%	21	21%
F	Councillors	29	100%	26	89.7%

- 7.6 The results and the comments attached by respondents was sufficiently adequate for the identification of service improvements where necessary.

- 7.7 A statistical summary of responses to each question posed to each group has been compiled and copies have been deposited in the Members' Lounges and will be available in the Council's Website.
- 7.8 Each questionnaire was targeted to the group concerned and therefore the questions varied across a range of topics. However, the broad categories of topic may be summarised as follows:
- a Accessibility of the service and the information/advice it provides.
 - b The helpfulness of staff.
 - c The quality of the Council's decision-making procedures.
 - d Knowledge and use of on-line planning services.
 - e The ranking of factors considered important in delivering an efficient and effective service.

It should be noted that the survey related to the core business of the service ie the processing of planning applications.

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 Appendix 1 to this report summarises for each stakeholder category their impressions of the DQ Service. Comments and points for action are included. It should be noted that it has not been possible to summarise each response to each question asked. A full breakdown is available in a supplementary report deposited in the Members' Lounges. This report will be made available on the Council's Website.
- 8.2 Each questionnaire allowed for the opportunity for free text comments and suggestions to be made. Those received, together with a considered response, are outlined in Appendix 2.
- 8.3 In addition, each stakeholder group was asked to rank (1 = most important; 5 = least important) the factors they considered most important in ensuring an efficient and effective DQ service. The results were as follows:

	Customer Care	Cost Effectiveness	Negotiating Better Development	Speed of Decision-making	Attention to Procedural Detail
Applicants	2	4	3	1	5
Agents	3	5	2	1	4
Objectors	1	4	2	5	3
CCs/NRS	2	2	1	2	2
Consultees	3	5	1	4	2
Councillors	1	5	2	4	3

- 8.4 In general, negotiating better developments and our customer care initiatives were ranked by most respondents as having greater important than the speed of determining applications. Whilst most appreciated the need for procedural accuracy most ranked cost considerations of least significance.

9 CONSULTATIONS

- 9.1 The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services), Depute Chief Executive (Finance) and Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning) have been consulted and are in agreement with the contents of this report.

10 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 Questionnaires issued to stakeholders May 2006
- 10.2 Statistical analysis of responses to questions

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23 September 2006

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APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP**Applicants**

78% of respondents sought advice Development Quality staff at the pre-application stage with 67% finding the advice given useful or very useful.

Comment/Action: Noted. Supports the priority which the Council gives to negotiating better developments.

89% of respondents found our application forms and guidance notes easy or very easy to understand and complete.

Comment/Action: Noted. The Council should ensure that these standards are maintained when standardised national forms are designed.

72% of respondents were unaware that further guidance on the Council's procedures for determining applications was available either in booklet form or on the Council's Website.

Comment/Action: This requires further attention as the Council rolls out further e-planning services and other complementary publicity material.

84% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the time taken to reach a decision on their application whilst a similar % considered that value for money was gained given the value of fee payable.

Comment/Action: Noted. However, it should be noted that as planning becomes more complex and as workloads continue to increase stakeholders should appreciate that it may take longer to decide applications in the future.

95% of respondents rated the helpfulness of staff as good or very good.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction. These standards to be maintained.

95% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service overall.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction. These standards to be maintained.

Agents

74% respondents frequently or very frequently engage in pre-application discussions and 93% found these discussions useful or very useful.

Comment/Action: This engagement is welcome and in the majority of cases results in a better quality of development. However, this work takes time and must be balanced against lengthening overall application processing times for other applications requiring no negotiation.

98% of respondents found it easy to contact the appropriate officer whilst a similar % were either satisfied or very satisfied with the responses from staff concerning the progress of applications.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction. These standards to be maintained.

88% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the time taken to reach decisions on their applications.

Comment/Action: Such a satisfactory outcome is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of significantly increasing workloads in all categories and relatively static case officer resources.

A little over 50% of agents were aware that the Council's procedures for determining applications were either published in booklet form and on the Council's Website.

Comment/Action: This is disappointing and further attention to awareness building and publicity will be necessary as the Council rolls out its e-planning strategy.

Whilst the vast majority were aware information on planning applications was available on the Website, only 29% were aware of our interactive webpage relating to the need for planning permission.

Comment/Action: This is disappointing and further attention to awareness building and publicity will be necessary as the Council rolls out its e-planning strategy.

57% of respondents are likely to submit planning applications including drawings and fees online when this facility becomes available.

Comment/Action: Not a particularly encouraging outcome. Further market research with agents will be necessary prior to launching the facility for submitting on-line applications.

88% of respondents considered that the Council acted fairly in dealing with their submitted applications (only 4 respondents were dissatisfied).

Comment/Action: Noted. The responses of dissatisfied customers may have been influenced by their disappointment at the decision rather than how it was arrived at.

93% of respondents considered the attitude and helpfulness of staff to be good or very good. 95% considered that their clients had received "value for money" from the service.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction. These standards to be maintained.

Objectors

72% of respondents found the neighbour notification information supplied by the applicant satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Comment/Action: Noted. The procedures involved are set out in current legislation. However it is anticipated that these procedures will be improved when the Planning Bill is enacted.

57% of respondents did not make arrangements to view the application placed at Tayside House prior to making their comments. 43% of respondents when asked did not give a reason why they had not done so.

Comment/Action: This is of concern if it is reflective of the approach of objectors in general. Clearly objections should only be made when the plans have been viewed and understood. Neighbour Notification guidance noted should be reviewed to emphasis this point and greater awareness of Web facilities publicised.

81% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the terms of the acknowledgement letter they received explaining the Council's procedures for determining applications.

Comment/Action: Noted. This correspondence has recently been improved further following the Council's decision to review deputations policy.

Whilst all respondents apart from 2 confirmed they had received a copy of the final decision notice from the Council, 43% considered that this was inadequate in informing them of the decision and the reasons for it.

Comment/Action: Noted. The cover letter accompanying the decision notice should be reviewed to ensure that objectors know how they may access the report and Minutes relating to the decision concerned.

Community Councils/NRS's and Other Consultees

It is considered that the response levels in respect of these categories was so small that no reliable conclusions could be reached.

Comment/Action: Regular meetings with the Dundee Civic Forum should be maintained to discuss Development Quality procedures and to continue to emphasise the importance of responding to consultations. Annual meetings with principal statutory consultees should be held in order to ensure a structured approach to obtaining feedback.

Councillors

100% of respondents found the attitude on helpfulness of DQ staff to be good or very good and all respondees were either satisfied or very satisfied with the responses received to queries on behalf of themselves or their constituents. In all but two cases feedback from constituents rated the service good or very good.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction.

77% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the current scheme of Delegation whilst 31% were dissatisfied with the current arrangements for the hearing of deputations.

Comment/Action: See comments in Appendix 2 in response to free text comments by Councillors on the subject of deputations.

All respondents considered the quality of reports to DQ Committee and the verbal responses of officers to questioning to be either good or very good.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction.

58% of respondents considered that the DQ service including the planning enforcement service had improved or significantly improved over the past 3 years whilst a further 30% had considered that there had been no change.

Comment/Action: Noted with satisfaction. Such a perception is particularly valued during a period when workloads and the expectations of stakeholders have considerably increased in the face of relatively static resources.

APPENDIX 2: SPECIFIC COMMENTS MADE BY RESPONDENTS

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
Applicants No of free text comments received : 3 (from 18 returns)	"We had to chase up our application at all stages it would be better not to offer unrealistic timescales to applicants."	Applicants are advised in guidance notes to continually liaise with case officers on progress with applications. It is very rarely possible to be precise about decision-making timescales.
	(a named case officer) ... "has been understanding, practical and very approachable throughout the planning process."	Comments noted with appreciation.
	"on the two occasions that my wife and I met your representatives they were very polite and helpful. They showed a real interest in the work being done. We were impressed and very satisfied."	Comments noted with appreciation.
Agents No of free text comments received : 6 (from 42 returns)	"we do not often require to make applications to Dundee City Council."	No comment.
	"Our experience with other local authorities indicates that Dundee City Council Planning Service offers the best service and accessibility. This is very much appreciated."	Comments noted with satisfaction.
	"for Neighbour Notification I would prefer that the period was 21 days"	The new Planning Act will introduce a 21 day timescale for Neighbour Notification.
	"... none of this really matters compared with tensions and anomalies between the planning department and the Councillors." (Example to preference for townhouses over flats mentioned.)	This comment is not entirely understood and is not accepted as valid. Does not relate to the quality of service but rather to a planning policy issue.
	"I think the planning application forms should be standard across all of Scotland."	This is to happen as an outcome from the Planning Act presently in the Scottish Parliament.

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
	"sort out the Website to become properly active and accessible. Planning and warrant drawing information is not currently accessible and not every application is timeously added into the system."	Our DQ Web pages are continuously updated and improved. "Public Access" is a new and developing facility although as soon as applications are "registered" as opposed to "received" they are automatically uploaded. To be kept under review.
Objectors No of free text comments received : 7 (from 21 returns)	"the notification from the applicant was received several days after its dating ... your department readily agreed to an extension."	The new Planning Act will make planning authorities responsible for efficient and effective Neighbour Notification in response to acknowledged criticisms.
	"the whole tone of the (neighbour notification letter) was that it didn't really matter who objected or why." "Consultation before plans are made would help ... there is no use objecting because the Council does what it likes." (telecommunications developments and PPP schools projects offered as examples).	The terms of the letter issued by applicants is prescribed in the legislation. Likely to change when planning authorities become responsible for Neighbour Notification. Prior consultation is an integral part of the preparation of local plans. The second point is not agreed. The Council in every case takes account of all valid planning representations made by third parties.
	"Information received (neighbour notification by the applicant) was very sketchy with little substantial content."	See above. Should improve when the legislation is changed.
	"I was never notified that I could make a personal representation to Committee."	In future all applicants and objectors will be advised in writing when the relevant applications are on a Committee Agenda. Nevertheless procedures are outlined in acknowledgement letters and on the Website.

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
	"Felt I was informed but you have to extend your publicity as many neighbours feel disenfranchised."	See above.
	"Not enough publicity for some aspects of planning eg Houses in Multiple Occupation. Need to raise the profile of such things."	Only certain categories of application are subject to statutory advertisement. The raft of new measures in the Planning Bill should ensure even wider publicity and positive consultation with communities by developers of larger projects.
	"Access to plans outwith normal working houses eg Saturday morning."	The Council, as an alternative, is enhancing its on-line facilities in line with Scottish Executive encouragement. Weekend opening has been considered in the past and rejected for practical and security reasons.
	"The objections by tenants etc should be taken more into consideration."	All objections, whatever their sources, are taken into account as long as they are relevant to planning and the application concerned.
	"Visits should be made to objectors so that their views can be discussed further."	This is not a practical proposition. However any objector is invited to discuss their concerns with the case officer allocated to a particular application.

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
Community Councils and other Neighbourhood Representative Structures No of free text comments received : .. (from 3 returns)	<p>"As a minimum we (a specified Community Council) expect the planning department ensured the local plan was complied with rather than the local plan being watered down to reflect sub standard development. We have failed in this unambitious goal and wonder whether we should stop wasting our time on consultations where the decision has already been made or where our opinions are not considered important." (This represents the personal views of the respondent on behalf of this Community Council.)</p>	<p>In deciding applications the Council must make decisions in line with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. It is therefore a matter of treating each application on its merits against these statutory requirements. Therefore not in every case will the strict application of local plan policy be appropriate or in the best interests of good decision making.</p> <p>Input to decision making by Community Councils is valued and listened to prior to any final decision being taken. The final points are therefore collectively rejected as an accurate reflection of the facts.</p>
	<p>"The vast majority of our Community Councils do not have the ability to check the Website."</p>	<p>Although this alternative is encouraged and preferred, paper lists of Weekly Lists are available on request from the department.</p>
	<p>"Follow up information would be useful to let the group know where we are with the plans being adopted."</p>	<p>Although objectors to applications are informed of decisions, it is not practicable to inform all stakeholders of decisions reached on <u>all</u> applications determined.</p>
Consultees No of free text comments received : 0 (from 1 return)	None	-

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
<p>Councillors No of free text comments received : .. (from 26 returns)</p>	<p>"Less delegation. Re-establishment of the visiting Sub-Committee. New build/extensions in conservation areas to be much more sympathetic to area."</p>	<p>The existing Scheme of Delegation is likely to be reviewed in 2007 when the new Planning Bill is enacted.</p> <p>The re-establishment of the Visiting Sub-Committee has been previously considered and rejected by the Council.</p> <p>It is considered that the standard of design in conservation areas is satisfactory and enhances their appearance.</p>
	<p>"Last minute hearings at DQ are time consuming. They make for very long meetings.</p> <p>"The procedure for allowing applicants/objectors to speak really need tightened."</p> <p>"The length of meetings does not make for good decision making. Shorter meetings allow for better scrutiny and input."</p> <p>"Rota for DQ meetings rather than whole Council would improve the service."</p>	<p>Several Councillors raised the same or similar points about deputations policy. This matter was reviewed at the meeting of the Development Quality Committee in Sept 2006.</p> <p>In future only bone fide applicants/agents/supporters or objectors will have the right to request to be heard as a deputation provided a formal and timeous written request is made.</p>
	<p>"The only occasion when I have had real grief with the department was when an objector who wished to appear as a delegation missed the meeting because he did not realise the application was to be heard that evening ... I wonder whether there should be a mechanism where an objectors can indicate that they wish to appear and can be notified accordingly."</p>	<p>Applicants/agents and objectors will be advised in writing when the application in which they have an interest has been placed on a DQ Committee agenda.</p>

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
	<p>"The present Committee structure/length of meetings of DQ Committee will require review in longer term."</p> <p>"DQ Service is overall exceptionally good and staff most knowledgeable and helpful."</p>	<p>This is a matter for consideration by the Council in due course.</p> <p>Noted with appreciation.</p>
	<p>"When it is a conservation area and the rules have been breached action should be taken regardless of race, colour or creed or if it is a new person to the country, city or area."</p>	<p>Like every service the Council provides, the DQ Service is totally non discriminatory and provides an equal service to all its customers irrespective of race, colour or creed.</p>