

The Killian Pretty Review

September 2008

Northgate Public Services response

Response

Introduction

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review's call for solutions. Planning has a powerful and vital role to play in place shaping and promoting community well being. It is essential that the planning process should be both efficient and effective, with enough flexibility to meet the challenges facing our communities.
2. Northgate's response is based on our long track record of working with local authorities for over twenty years in developing and modernising planning business processes, and in improving public access to the process.
3. As a leading provider of business process services to planning authorities, we are firm believers that there is a need for a radical overhaul of the system. This should enable planning to fulfil its potential in place shaping and promoting well being, and to making a real difference to the quality of life for all our citizens.
4. There have been positive developments in streamlining planning and integrating planning more effectively into back and front office functions, including the development of the Planning Portal, Fast Track and on-line eService Delivery Standards.
5. Although many local authorities with whom we work have made considerable improvements to their processes within recent years, their progress can be impeded by unnecessary controls at a national level, through a shortage of skills and resources and by lack of capacity to reengineer business processes.
6. If planning is to meet the challenge of sustainable transformation, this requires a more focused sense of delivering quality outcomes for our communities, based on learning, training and improvement; a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy; a shift away from an adversarial approach to a more inquisitorial one; and greater stakeholder engagement.
7. Our response focuses on the questions raised by the Review where we believe our particular expertise gives us insight into possible solutions. It is premised on the basis that all solutions should be based on quality outcomes which contribute to effective sustainable development.

Proportionality

8. (Q1) As the Review points out, for the majority of applications in the major, minor and other categories, the basic process used to determine the application is broadly the same.
9. We agree that there would be some merit in considering a more graduated approach to applications which would create a better fit between the resources available to local authorities and the task in hand.
10. Whilst there may be some concerns that this could increase the complexity of the system, on the other hand more effective streamlining could enhance the accessibility of the planning system for those who use it. It would also create an impetus to simplify processes wherever possible, and assist in creating a better match between the skills required to carry out particular functions and the resources available.
11. (Q3) There is a definite need to respond to the continuing skills and resources challenges effectively and efficiently. As the Review points out local authorities are challenged by a lack of appropriately skilled planners and the fact that different types of planning application require different skills. The recent report by the Communities and Local Government select committee has suggested that without urgent action nearly half of all planning posts in councils are likely to be affected by the skills shortage by 2012.¹
12. We believe that there are strong arguments for considering enhanced collaboration between authorities in terms of both sharing skills and sharing resources. This is particularly the case for smaller authorities which may not have the economic resources to maintain highly qualified planning professionals on a permanent basis.
13. Too many local authorities are currently not using their resources effectively because of lack of capacity to overhaul inefficient business practices. Whilst Communities and Local Government (CLG) has funded some work on business process review through the National Process Improvement Project (NPIP), we believe far more could be achieved through the development and communication of "model" best practice.
14. A holistic approach needs to be taken in relation to the control/management function. Planning officers currently devote time to a range of activities which could be carried out by non-specialists, for example, answering questions about whether planning permission is required.

¹ Communities and Local Government Committee - Eleventh Report, July 2008

15. More integration with front office solutions in citizen-relationship management could help to tackle skills shortages, ensure an accurate and consistent level of service and empower non-professional staff.
16. The greater use of technology and non specialist staff could be considered in areas such as acting as the first point of contact for general planning queries, validating planning applications, checking fees and information management and analysis.

Complexity

17. (Q4) Too often, the planning system is viewed by the public as an obstacle to their plans and a negative function of government, and its positive role in delivering sustainable communities not fully developed in practice or this role understood by the communities with which the process engages.
18. As we have said above, the development of online services, both through the Planning Portal and local authority websites has done much to improve access to simple, customer oriented information over recent years.
19. We believe that further improvements could still be made, particularly in relation to ensuring consistency of approach in providing local information through the adoption of best practice and in relation to planning application requirements.
20. The e-Planning element in the Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) has helped to improve local authority e-Planning services. The move from PDG to Housing and Planning Delivery Grant (HPDG) has involved the loss of the e-Planning element.
21. We believe that if the momentum is not to be lost, Communities and Local Government (CLG) should give thought to how it can incentivise local authorities to maintain/improve the availability of citizen centred e-Planning services in the future.
22. As a minimum, we believe that consideration should be given to regular evaluation of current service level provision. For example, an evaluation of services could be measured against the Planning and Regulatory Services Online (PARSOL) Better Planning Services Standards on an annual basis.
23. Northgate wholeheartedly supports putting sustainable development at the heart of the planning system. Recent reforms have introduced a spatial planning approach to delivering social, economic and environmental outcomes. As the Review points out, key to this is the idea of focusing on outcomes for the community and ensuring more effective collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders and organisations that are helping to shape local areas and local services.
24. The imposition of targets has created perverse incentives which can create a renewed focus on process rather than the desired outcomes. As such, they are ineffective in measuring the desired outcomes and do not focus effectively on quality.

25. There is a need to review existing targets to reduce perverse incentives, eradicate unnecessary bureaucracy and integrate useful supplementary information such as the measurement of invalidity, withdrawal and refusal rates.
26. The collection of effective management information should not impose undue burdens on local authorities and should be easily retrievable from current application management systems.

Engagement

27. (Q9) Ensuring effective and efficient engagement with all affected by and interested in the application is critical to planning for sustainable development. Increasing emphasis has been placed on using e-communications to enhance the process. Yet while there have been improvements, around a quarter of local authorities do not currently have an online statutory register, where consultees and neighbours can view planning application details and drawings, with further authorities having poor quality or partial online registers. As we have discussed above, further consideration needs to be given to incentivising local authorities' provision of e-Planning services to enable them to more effectively engage with consultees and their citizens.
28. The national e-Consultation Hub which is currently being developed by the Planning Portal has the potential for further improving the consultation service. It will do this by improving the speed of consultation through electronic delivery; using a rules base to ensure that the correct consultees are consulted at the beginning of the process; and providing feedback to both local authorities and the consultees on their performance (both in terms of time and effectiveness of their processes).
29. At present, there are no plans to require local authorities to make use of the e-Consultation Hub and consideration should be given to how local authorities could be incentivised to make use of the system to maximise the potential improvement that could be made as a result of its introduction.
30. (Q11) Effective community involvement requires an innovative approach to communications. Too often, the public have little understanding of the planning process and fear that they have limited control over developments which affect their quality of life. On the other hand, developers can complain that too much community involvement creates unnecessary delays and impedes effective development.
31. Effective community involvement requires access to good, customer oriented information on planning applications. For example, online access to the planning register and planning application drawings can allay fears about the impact of developments and lead to more informed comments and engagement. In addition, greater use should be made of stakeholder dialogue and mediation to reduce the adversarial approach and improve engagement.
32. (Q13) As the Review points out, research has shown that less than two percent of consumers find out about a planning application from an advertisement in the local newspaper. This would suggest that advertising in local newspapers is an ineffective and

costly means of engaging the local community and that local authorities should be given the discretion whether or not to use newspapers. Local authorities already have to state their approach to community engagement on planning applications through their Statement of Community Involvement.

33. If the statutory requirement to advertise in local newspapers was removed, local authorities should be required to review their communications measures and at the very least should be required to advertise applications on their websites.
34. (Q14) Much more could be done to further encourage the use of e-Planning in practice as we have indicated throughout this document. The following could be considered:
 - a. further simplifying and improving the current Standard Application Form (1APP) to make the submission of e-applications more attractive: our experience is that the current 1APP is cumbersome and can look daunting, especially to occasional/first time users;
 - b. further developing the NPIP to establish model processes which make the most effective use of e-planning and minimise the existing “wasted effort” within the planning system, for example, many local authorities are currently printing and posting five or six copies of applications to consultees;
 - c. taking measures to ensure all local authorities implement online statutory registers to enable effective e-consultation across the country;
 - d. taking action to ensure the successful roll out of the e-Consultation Hub to improve consultation performance and minimise delay;
 - e. driving rollout of best practice to local authorities through the Planning Advisory Service and evaluating local planning authorities’ delivery of e-Planning services against the PARSOL Better Planning Service Standards to ensure the progress made to date is not lost.
35. (Q17) There are a range of other measures which could be considered to help improve the speed and responsiveness of the planning application process.
36. Very often in the past, insufficient time has been allowed to manage change effectively. Even relatively small changes in legislation, such as fees changes, can have a significant adverse impact on the processing of applications if insufficient time is allowed between the publishing of the legislation and its implementation. The timescale for the implementation of any new legislation must take account of the time needed to effectively inform the users of the system of the changes; and to enable the Planning Portal and local authority systems providers to make any necessary related changes to their systems.
37. There is potential for local authorities to make further efficiency gains through reviewing their business processes and through the use of the (IT) systems they already have in place.

38. All too often, insufficient resources are invested in obtaining maximum functionality from technology by equipping people with the relevant training and development.
39. Northgate's experience is that although IT projects may be delivered successfully, all too often they fail because of poor overall programme management. Too little consideration is given to joining up systems and considering the impact of new technology on employees, members of the public and users of the services.
40. Prior to new systems being introduced, staff need to be prepared, the impact on services analysed, and planned for and pre-emptive measures put in place to meet new demand.
41. Consideration should also be given to transforming relationships with the private sector in order to generate more effective and efficient services. Performance partnerships offer public sector organisations a new way of working with the private sector to build up capacity.
42. Sustainable performance partnerships between the public and private sector involve knowledge and skills transfer as an integral part of performance improvement. They offer the public sector a new and innovative way of working than the traditional consultancy approach outlined in the select committee report referred to above.² They operate within more flexible framework contracts and fees are directly linked to performance improvement. For example, in one case, the performance partnerships involving Northgate and the Planning Service of a unitary authority took the latter from poor to top quartile levels and generated on-going annual financial improvements of over £500,000 within 12 months of the relationship being forged.

² Ibid

For more information

Russell Osborne
Managing Director
Land & Property
Northgate Information Solutions
Peoplebuilding 2
Peoplebuilding Estate
Maylands Avenue
Hemel Hempstead
Hertfordshire
HP2 4NW

russell.osborne@northgate-is.com

www.northgate-is.com

Kathy Sutton
Fellows' Associates
90 Long Acre
London
WC2E 9RZ

ksutton@fellowsassociates.com

About Northgate

Northgate Information Solutions is a leading provider of innovative services to the public sector and utilities markets. It is committed to high quality public services and understands the public sector. That knowledge is core to its business. Northgate's task is to enhance public value through the intelligent use of people and technology, and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate assists the public sector to promote community well-being by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services based on clear and detailed information; by engaging with public sector employees to transfer and enhance skills; and by working with public sector management to enhance performance management.

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