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How government targets encourage delays, high cost and poor customer service to thrive in the planning process

ValueAdding.com has worked with many planning services within local authorities on projects to improve efficiency and customer service. When analysing working practices in depth, as we do for each project, we regularly discover that the pressure to meet government targets of 56 and 91 days for the process of planning applications has led to a deterioration in customer service, to higher costs and, in some cases, to poorer planning decisions.

Our findings from a range of projects are described below along with suggestions as to how other planning services can resolve these issues.

Current Situation

Completion dates for applications within our experience display the distinctive pattern shown in Figure 1. The exact shape varies slightly between authorities, but all are remarkably similar, with the same pattern emerging for both 56 and 91 day application types.

The remarkable feature of this diagram is the very high percentage of applications that only get completed just before the deadline. Some might believe that this proves that the target is only just achievable and that every (minor) application involves between 45 and 55 days work. However, this would be an erroneous deduction. Previous NAO guidelines suggest

that every officer handles 150 applications per year on average, equating to 1.46 days per application. ValueAdding.com's own analysis of direct process time for our client base indicates a similar number of days, albeit slightly higher at between 1.8 and 2.2 days per application per officer.



Adding the required consultation time of 21 days to this figure suggests therefore that, for any application completed on the last day, there are 33 days of delay in the process; a delay being any time the application is not being actively worked on. A delay can be caused by many things; the application might be in a file, or an in-tray, or in the officer's pending pile, but, wherever it is, it is not being actioned and is waiting for something. In our experience this is often a cultural issue, with many officers leaving their recommendation report writing until a few days before the target date looms.

Do delays matter?

Delayed decisions can have significant knock-on effects for both the planning service and for the applicant and for the relationship between them:

- ✦ *There is little time for any negotiation with the applicant and any possible discussions are fraught with an imposed time pressure;*
- ✦ *Failed negotiations can lead to unnecessary condition setting, withdrawals, appeals and enforcement activities;*
 - ✦ *Negotiated changes need to be rapidly progressed and processed. Fire-fighting of this nature is always high cost and disrupts the efficiency of other tasks;*
 - ✦ *Greater numbers of high priority applications impact the work of senior officers who have to check and authorise recommendations;*
- ✦ *'Fire' becomes the driver of all work. Each week brings new applications to be completed to meet the government target, reducing the overall flexibility of a management team to schedule both day to day and long term work. Meetings are cancelled or curtailed and other work, such as long term improvements, gets delayed or forgotten.*

Finally, from a customer service viewpoint delays matter greatly. If an applicant can be given a decision sooner, it improves plans, helps with their own decisions and shortens the overall implementation time-scales of approved schemes. And, ultimately, it improves customer satisfaction.

The benefits of reducing delays

It is generally agreed that certain applications can be approved with minor modifications to the submitted plan. This can often be achieved by good negotiation on the part of the planning officer. When successful, this leads to the following benefits:

- ✦ *Improved schemes that meet everyone's needs;*
- ✦ *Fewer or no conditions being applied to an application;*
- ✦ *Fewer withdrawals;*
- ✦ *Fewer appeals;*
- ✦ *Increased customer satisfaction.*

Conditions and appeals create higher costs

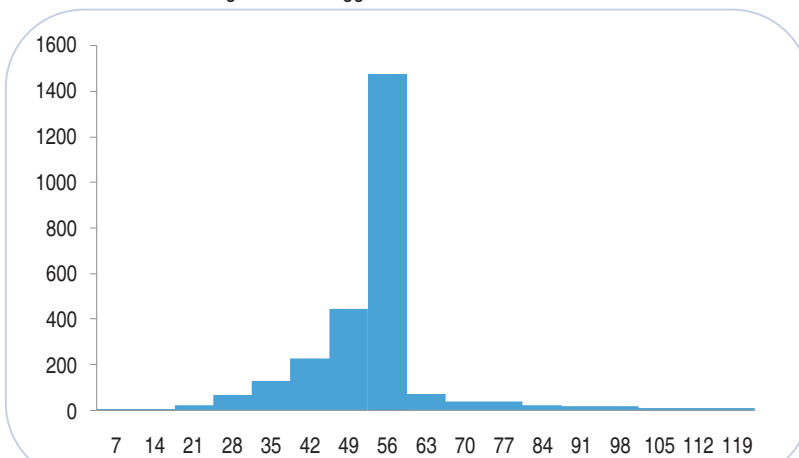


Figure 1: Number of minor applications by process day decided

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Delays in the planning process

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and, in some cases, significant ones for a planning service, without the benefit of additional revenue. There is also a case to be made that a poor service, creating low customer satisfaction, leads to increased enforcement activity and, consequently, higher costs, as frustrated applicants attempt short cuts and work at risk.

Even a small percentage improvement in these non-value added activities can easily deliver significant efficiency savings to the entire service budget. These activities typically amount to around 20% of the entire budget, with management costs representing a further 9%. (Different authorities have different figures of course).

How can delays be reduced?

ValueAdding.com has delivered projects in over a dozen planning services and, in the course of doing so, has found that some services, in fact certain officers, experience low levels of delay in their processes. These officers also experience the lowest levels of appeals against their cases. In the application receipt, registration and vetting processes, we

found some clients taking an average of six days to process an application, where other similar clients take only three.

In each project ValueAdding.com initiated process improvement teams to reduce delays and increase the level of appropriate negotiation. As noted above, many of the causes of delay were found to be cultural, with many officers believing their way was the most efficient. By actively reducing every minor delay, and eliminating its root cause, we were able to get the better process to prove itself.

Drivers of success

Changes put in place as a result of our projects were successful because they were supported by the following key drivers:

- ✦ *A clear business case derived from an authority's own data and current levels of performance;*
- ✦ *A monitoring mechanism to confirm and feedback that real improvements were being achieved;*
- ✦ *Leadership from the management team to tackle and resolve any resistance to change;*

- ✦ *Real examples of best practice processes from previous projects to show the way;*
- ✦ *Involvement of staff in resolving the causes of delay.*

In each project the business case focused on:

- ✦ *Improving the quality of the planning decision;*
- ✦ *Increasing customer satisfaction with the service;*
- ✦ *Reducing the level and cost of non-value added activities.*

It was **not** focused on doing more work or working harder; although improvements in these areas tended to come from using a better process. Analysis techniques applied by ValueAdding.com included Rough-cut Activity Based Costing. This ensured a structured and rational approach to the realisation of efficiency savings and enabled our clients to predict when cashable savings would occur.



For more information please contact Paul O'Reilly

Implementation success following NPIP BPI work in planning

During 2008 ValueAdding.com worked with the London Borough of Lewisham and the three Yorkshire councils of Hambleton, East Riding and Leeds on Phase 2 of the National Process Improvement Project.

The aim of the project, which focused entirely on the planning process, was to provide a blueprint for councils to resolve common issues and challenges through collaborative working and the analysis of current working practices. The analysis was structured around three methodologies: Process Mapping; analysis of systems data (Ibox, Northgate etc) and Rough-cut Activity Based Costing.

Each council also had its own transformation and process improvement objectives to help deliver the longer-term planning goals set out in its Local Development Framework. These included:

- ✦ *Making best use of electronic methodologies;*
- ✦ *Improving performance against national indicators;*
- ✦ *Improving customer experience and satisfaction;*
- ✦ *Making efficiency savings and determining how to make the best use of resources;*
- ✦ *Improving the efficiency of the overall planning process and reducing processing time;*
- ✦ *Improving NI14 'Avoidable Contact'.*

Successful set up

After agreeing the recommendations for change, ValueAdding.com supported Lewisham, Hambleton and East Riding councils in preparing for implementation. Our experience shows that carefully planned and efficient set up is key to the successful delivery of a change programme.

ValueAdding.com began by dividing the agreed changes into manageable bite-sized chunks called work streams. We then worked with work stream team members to understand **how** changes would be made, **who** would be responsible for delivering them and **when**. Risks associated with the changes were also identified, as were the key measures required in order to realise the expected benefits. Training and communication with staff, customers and stakeholders are vital elements of a successful implementation programme and teams were encouraged to build provision for these into their plans. For any implementation project, this approach develops buy-in and ownership from staff, as they work to create their own individual plans.

Once the work stream plans were completed, ValueAdding.com pulled them together into an overall implementation plan for the project. This has enabled the project manager for each council to track progress easily and ensure that key milestone dates are met. The

plans were discussed and handed over to the project manager as part of ValueAdding.com's implementation pack, which also included a range of project management templates.

Keeping on track – supporting the project manager

Once implementation begins, ValueAdding.com recognises that regular support and challenges from an external viewpoint can assist in keeping a project on track. We support the project manager by monitoring key milestone dates and checking progress against target performance measures; ensuring that improvements are made on time and that the agreed benefits are realised as expected.

"Being challenged by someone who is outside the council but who understands our objectives was useful because ValueAdding.com is less inclined to accept anything but real evidence. For example, when I said "we have ditched the paper copies of Part 1", I knew I would have to show them the empty cabinet and when I claimed that "we now show our incomplete applications on line" they want to see it working!

"I believe that having this scheduled time for 'challenge' is the most important aspect in

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Implementation success *continued from page 2*

ensuring successful delivery. With it comes the discipline of making the checks against progress and spotting and dealing with problems before we go live to the public." Tim Wood, Development Manager/Project Manager, Hambleton District Council

Achievements so far...

All four NPIP councils have started to implement changes and are making excellent progress, as these four short case studies highlight:

Hambleton District Council

Hambleton implemented its first 'quick win' back in January this year, when it eliminated the paper 'Part 1' for public viewing of applications. Customers are now encouraged to view files on line or in the customer service centre (CSC), guided by trained CSC officers. A ValueAdding.com consultant played the role of a 'mystery customer' in the CSC and found the experience easier and more professional as staff were quickly able to pinpoint their exact requirements as opposed to trawling through page after page in the paper file. Non-value added time spent printing, filing and copying has been saved and staff are now

able to focus on value adding activities instead.

Customer service staff now capture all contact details on the CRM system and use scripting to resolve simple enquiries at the first point of contact. Both the Hambleton web site and public access have been greatly improved to enable customer self-service and reduce avoidable contact with the department. Staff recognised the success of their efforts to promote the electronic submission of applications with 70% of submissions received electronically in May – the highest in the Yorkshire and The Humber region. Correspondence at each stage of the process is now electronic wherever possible.

Validity of applications

A major achievement for Hambleton was the recent creation of the 'validation team'. In the past, one officer was responsible for validating all applications; causing bottlenecks and delays. 55% of all applications were invalid on receipt and the policy of sending invalid letters to customers resulted in high volumes of queries back into the department and non-value added time spent chasing customers. Existing technical support staff have now

been trained to validate applications; enabling the creation of a fast track process for simple applications. Hand offs have been eliminated and the same officer now handles a case from receipt to validation to the issuing of consultation responses. The validation team is encouraged to discuss problem applications with case officers; this can often shed light on an issue that was highlighted during pre-application discussions meaning an application may not need to be classified as invalid.

In addition, for invalid applications, the team now telephones applicants/agents in the first instance. In a recent example, the validation officer telephoned the applicant on a Friday afternoon to explain the reasons for invalidity and the customer came into the CSC first thing on Monday morning with the required documentation. The customer was delighted as the application was valid that day and there was no unnecessary delay to the process.

Electronic case file

Another major achievement for Hambleton has been the implementation of workflow

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Local government: Reflections on a short sojourn

Andrew Woodhouse, one of our senior consultants, has recently rejoined ValueAdding.com after a short spell working for a unitary local authority in corporate IT. Here, he reflects on some of the key issues that occupied his attention and that he believes are indicative of broader trends and concerns.

Almost inevitably, change management continues to be one of the biggest challenges in local government. Increasingly, local councils are being expected to deliver consistent savings and efficiencies at the same time as managing the impact of new technologies. These are driving radical shifts in the organisation of staff and the delivery of services – often in what seem like truncated timescales.

Working at the heart of one of these technologically driven change programmes suggests the following lessons:

- ◆ *Senior management buy-in is essential;*
- ◆ *Middle managers will support a programme more readily if they can see tangible rewards in staffing or budget terms;*
- ◆ *The current technological base must be clearly understood;*
- ◆ *Despite widespread use of IT systems, there is still a worrying lack of even basic IT skills at all levels and this is often a real barrier to understanding and implementation.*



It is axiomatic that senior management needs to support any change programme in order to ensure its success and my recent experience supports this wholeheartedly. In particular, it can help ensure adherence to timescales, re-allocate appropriate budgets as necessary and manage the inevitable turf wars. Without its support, programmes drift and it is too easy for squabbles to emerge over resources, timescales, benefits and credit. Further, given the hierarchical nature of local government, more junior managers need to know that they

have support before implementing sometimes painful change processes. Without visible backing, middle managers simply will not implement the more difficult elements.

My final observation concerns the fascinating area of corporate culture and, in particular, how this can act as an invisible barrier to change and improvement. Throughout the UK, local government re-organisation has been taking place since the mid 1990s. Now, further cross agency working is bringing together staff from councils and from other public sector bodies such as the health service and education. Although these partnerships should be delivering better and more seamless public services, too often internal difficulties can cause delays, minimise savings and even lead to the abandonment of projects. When staff in the same organisation are still given different holiday entitlements fourteen years after re-organisation and buildings are badged with a bewildering array of signs, logos and the crests of former bodies, these are surely visible signs of an equally confused and divided approach to corporate identity and priorities.



Andrew can be contacted via our website www.ValueAdding.com

Implementation success *continued from page 3*

which has enabled the creation of electronic case files. Officers are notified of a case from day 1 and there is now clear visibility of work across the department with the full history of a case available at the touch of a button.

"ValueAdding.com were invaluable to us in preparing for implementation and setting up the work streams. It would have been difficult to set it up internally as often you can't see the wood from the trees. ValueAdding helped us to break it down and then pull it all together. They were able to bring valuable experience in terms of what other councils are doing and this external perspective enabled staff and managers to prioritise the implementation project and focus on the task in hand".

Deryck Ellis, Project Manager, East Riding of Yorkshire Council

The Development Manager has recognised the hard work and dedication of all of the Hambleton planning staff as they work together to improve the service by setting up Gold Star Awards in recognition of their achievements.

London Borough of Lewisham

Process redesign in Lewisham highlighted the necessity of a fit for purpose structure to deliver the proposed changes with technical, administrative and professional staff all needing to do things differently. A new structure is actively being designed to enable the 'to be' process to be delivered.

Workflow is currently being implemented and lies at the heart of many of Lewisham's requirements; namely, to automate the processing of planning applications to decrease process time. This will enable officers to prioritise and manage caseloads more effectively by using the traffic light work tray to highlight outstanding tasks and help to embed a proactive approach to case management.

The GIS navigation tool has been implemented and consultation is now targeted to the right areas at the right times. This ensures that there is no unnecessary consultation or duplication and saves significant time for officers as applications can be processed as quickly as possible rather than sitting in manual in trays for long periods of time.

Work is ongoing to update the content of the Lewisham planning website and to promote submission of electronic applications in order to open up the access channels offered to customers and increase the number of valid and right first time applications.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Implementation has just begun in East Riding, with the immediate focus being on IT solutions to introduce electronic working and enable the use of electronic case files. A connector has been purchased to link the web with the back office system in order to attain

and process consultation responses electronically. This will enable the council to automatically capture and handle over 70% of the e mails it currently processes manually. Paper based responses will also be captured electronically through more effective use of scanning. The imminent delivery of tablet PCs will enable officers to access files on site, eliminating the need for paper case files and allowing for true mobile working.

Work is currently underway to engage with customers and stakeholders throughout the implementation project. For example, agent forums were used to communicate the overall vision and concepts for change to a large audience and smaller forums are now being set up to discuss specific improvement areas such as the creation of an accredited agents scheme.

Leeds City Council

An early achievement for Leeds was the introduction of end to end scanning for all new applications, with associated documents displayed on the council's website for public viewing through the public access system. The process for dealing with invalid applica-

tions is now much stricter and applications are returned if the missing information is not received within 21 days. This has reduced the level of non-value added time spent chasing applicants/agents. E-consultations are being increasingly rolled out to key groups and the use of automatic email responses has been introduced for the acknowledgement of applications and appeals.

Panel meetings have been improved, with more consistency and better quality reports. This has led to fewer overturns and applications being deferred. The use of a remote mouse has also reduced the need for admin support at meetings. Stronger case management has been introduced, with clear targets set at key stages of the process, including the time taken to visit the site and issue decision notices. Emphasis has also been placed on training and staff development in order to establish the key competencies required to deliver transformational planning. This is to become part of the overall HR appraisal system and includes personal effectiveness, customer relationships, communication, IT and managing change.



For more information on these and other process improvement and implementation programmes please contact Lynsey Ward

At ValueAdding.com we help clients to respond to customer requirements by improving their processes and costs through the skills of their people

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Led by Richard Coombes

Change Management

Led by Nigel Parsons

Rough-cut ABC and service delivery costing

Led by Roger Cooper

Programme & Project Management

Led by Lynsey Ward

CAA

Led by Oliver Morley

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