

REPORT TO: DEVELOPMENT QUALITY COMMITTEE - 19 OCTOBER 2009

REPORT ON: DEVELOPMENT QUALITY SERVICE: CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS 2009

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF CITY DEVELOPMENT

REPORT NO: 490-2009

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 June 2009 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; and
 - c considers more appropriate mechanisms for gauging Customer Satisfaction, taking into account the relatively low level of response to the Questionnaires issued.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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

4 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Key strategic priorities of the Council as set out in the Council Plan 2007-2011 include being a leader in improving services in a sustainable way, involving local communities in improving local services and delivering efficient services. The Plan includes a commitment to "inform, consult and involve users of Council services about what the Council is doing and how it is performing."
- 4.2 The Departmental Service Plan for the same period reflects these themes and includes amongst the key strategic challenges the following:
- a the continued development of the Service Delivery, administration programmes, responses to public opinion and requests for service provision; and
 - b ensuring that the Departments full range of services and how they are delivered are subject to a process by continuous improvement.
- 4.3 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:

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

4.4 The comprehensive survey which is the subject of this report has been conducted in line with these commitments and has been used to inform progress or otherwise since a similar previous survey undertaken in 2006.

4.5 For the purposes of the survey the following stakeholder groups were identified and surveyed as indicated below:

		<u>Questionnaires Issued</u>	<u>Questionnaires Returned</u>	<u>% Response</u>
A	Applicants	100	9	9%
B	Agents	70	18	25.7%
C	Community Councils/ Neighbourhood Representative Structures	9	2	22.2%
D	Consultees	9	0	0%
E	Objectors	100	20	20%
F	Councillors	29	14	48.3%

4.6 The results and the comments attached by respondents in the categories of Applicants, Agents, Objectors and Councillors were sufficiently adequate for the identification of service improvements where necessary. Disappointingly only 2 responses were received from Community Councils/Neighbourhood Representative Structures and none from Consultees

4.7 In general, with the exception of the objectors category, the level of response was significantly down on the 2006 figures. This suggests that there is a need to consider alternative mechanisms of gauging Customer Satisfaction in the future. The Council is currently considering various options in this regard including touch screen devices in Reception Areas and feedback opportunities on the website.

4.8 A statistical summary of responses to each question posed to each group has been compiled (except for Consultees where there was a nil return) and copies have been deposited in the Members' Lounges and will be available in the Council's Website

4.9 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; and
- 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.

- 4.10 Appendix 1 to this report summarises for each stakeholder category their impressions of the Development Quality Service. Comments and points for action are included. It should not 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.
- 4.11 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.
- 4.12 In addition, each stakeholder group was asked to rank the factors they considered most important in ensuring an efficient and effective DQ service. The results were as follows (1 = most important and 5 = least important):

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

- 4.13 In general, negotiating better developments and our customer care initiatives were ranked by most respondents as having equal importance to the speed of determining applications. Whilst most appreciated the need to take cost effectiveness into account most ranked procedural accuracy of least significance.
- 4.14 This is similar to the findings of the 2006 survey and endorses the Council's approach of emphasising the quality of decision making and customer care, as opposed to focussing solely on the speed of decision making.

5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This Report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Anti-Poverty, Equality Impact Assessment and Risk Management.
- 5.2 There are no major issues although it is an aim of the City Development Department to ensure that the Development Quality service is available to and received by all

sectors of the Dundee community and facilitates 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. In this respect the Council's Equality Agenda is supported by the development quality service and by the outcome of the survey.

6 CONSULTATIONS

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

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 Questionnaires issued to stakeholders May/June 2009.
- 7.2 Statistical analysis of responses to questions.

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2 October 2009

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APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP (CORRESPONDING 2006 FIGURES IN BRACKETS)

Applicants

62% (78%) of respondents sought advice from Development Quality staff at the pre-application stage with 80% (67%) finding the advice given useful or very useful.

Comment/Action: noted. Supports the priority which the Council gives to negotiating better developments. The percentage seeking advice is down from the 2006 survey but those finding advice useful is up. Applicants who do not use agents may be unaware of the value of pre-application discussion (93% of agents find such discussions useful) and the Council's website should be developed to encourage applicants to use this facility.

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

Comment/Action: it will be interesting to note whether or not these standards are maintained with the electronic application forms available on the Scottish Governments website.

59% (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: although this improvement on the 2006 figures is welcomed, this requires further attention as the Council rolls out further e-planning services and other complementary publicity material.

67% (84%) of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the time taken to reach a decision on their application whilst 88% (84%) considered that value for money was gained given the value of fee payable.

Comment/Action: the drop in satisfaction with the time taken is noted but it should also be noted that as planning becomes more complex stakeholders should appreciate that it may take longer to decide applications in the future.

88% (95%) of respondents rated the helpfulness of staff as good or very good and 88% (95%) of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service overall.

Comment/Action: despite the slight drop it is considered that an overall high standard is being maintained.

Agents

88% (74%) respondents frequently or very frequently engage in pre-application discussions and 83% (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.

83% (98%) of respondents found it easy to contact the appropriate officer whilst 100% (98%) 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.

72% (88%) of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the time taken to reach decisions on their applications.

Comment/Action: the drop in satisfaction with the time taken is noted although the overall level remains high.

75% (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: an encouraging increase, particularly since over 83% were aware of the website information. This may be a reflection of the seminars held with agents in 2009 in connection with the new planning legislation.

100% were aware of and downloaded application forms and guidance notes from the Council's website.

Comment/Action: this is very encouraging and indicates that the roll out of the Council's e-planning strategy has been successful.

78% (57%) of respondents are likely to submit planning applications including drawings and fees online now that this facility is available.

Comment/Action: this significant increase is encouraging.

100% (88%) of respondents considered that the Council acted fairly in dealing with their submitted applications.

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction.

100% (92%) of respondents considered the attitude and helpfulness of staff to be good or very good. 88% (95%) considered that their clients had received "value for money" from the service.

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

Objectors

73% (72%) of respondents found the neighbour notification information supplied by the applicant satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Comment/Action: noted. The survey was carried out under the previous legislation. The Council now notifies neighbours.

70% (57%) of respondents did not make arrangements to view the application placed at Tayside House prior to making their comments. 40% of respondents when asked stated that they had viewed the plans on the Council's website.

Comment/Action: increasingly, applicants are viewing plans on the Council's website, making access to planning applications available to a much wider audience who may previously have had difficulty calling in to Tayside House.

72% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the information available on-line.

Comment/Action: hopefully, this figure will improve with increased usage of and familiarity with viewing plans on-line. Since the date of the survey the content and presentation of on-line information has been revised.

95% (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 with satisfaction.

70% of all respondents felt that the Council dealt adequately and fairly with their objections and representations.

Comment/Action: this is a satisfactory figure taking into account the fact that a significant proportion of applications objected to will have been approved by the Council.

Whilst all respondents apart from 2 confirmed they had received a copy of the final decision notice from the Council, 20% (43%) considered that this was inadequate in informing them of the decision and the reasons for it.

Comment/Action: noted. The improvement on the 2006 figures relates to the fact that the letter now provides better information.

Community Councils/Neighbourhood Representative Structures and Other Consultees

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

Comment/Action: Community Councils and Neighbourhood Representative Structures play a significant role in the consideration of planning applications and can provide feedback on the Development Quality service through the Development Quality Forum. The Scottish Government is encouraging consultees to engage to a greater extent in the planning process. The "Planning Service Improvement Plan" submitted to Scottish Ministers in March 2009 contains proposals in respect of improving stakeholder engagement. Actions to achieve this objective are in hand.

Councillors

100% (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.

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction.

93% (77%) of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the current scheme of Delegation whilst 100% (31%) were satisfied with the current arrangements for the hearing of deputations.

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction. Although the new scheme of delegation had only been in place for a few months prior to this survey the level of satisfaction is very high. The arrangements for deputations have also been changed since the previous survey.

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

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction.

85% of respondents did not agree that the Development Quality Committee should be comprised of fewer Councillors, only 36% would support a proposal for the Committee to be held during the day and 93% would support the use of electronic visual aids at Committee.

Comment/Action: most members are satisfied with the composition and timing of the Development Quality Committee, but there is significant support for the use of visual aids. This matter needs to be taken forward as part of the Departments commitment to e-planning.

57% (58%) of respondents considered that the planning enforcement service had improved or significantly improved over the past 3 years whilst a further 43% (30%) considered that there had been no change. No respondents thought that it had declined.

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction.

79% (58%) of respondents considered that the overall standard of service provided by the department had improved or significantly improved over the past 3 years. No respondents thought that it had declined.

Comment/Action: noted with satisfaction.

APPENDIX 2: SPECIFIC COMMENTS MADE BY RESPONDENTS

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
Applicants No of free text comments received: 4 (from 9 returns)	"The website and flowcharts for planning permission are excellent."	Comment noted with appreciation.
	"I was very pleased because the application went through very quickly."	Comment noted with appreciation.
	"A written explanation of the decision would make the process more transparent and accountable."	Under the new planning legislation there is a requirement to provide reasons for the decision made. All those making representations on planning applications will be informed of the reasons for the decision.
	"There were no site inspections during the building process".	This perhaps relates more to building standards matters than planning matters.
Agents No of free text comments received: 6 (from 18 returns)	"Reports/surveys would be better provided by conditions than up front."	Government advice suggests front loading of the planning process so that these matters can be considered in assessing the planning proposals.
	"Better management of internal and external consultees would lead to better timescales for decision making."	It is hoped that Scottish Government encouragement of statutory consultees to engage more fully in the planning process will assist.
	"Rigorous enforcement and a fair and consistent planning procedure is essential."	The Council takes its enforcement responsibility seriously and agrees with these comments.
	"The Council should recognise that design preference is largely subjective."	The issue of design quality is a material planning consideration and whilst there may be differing interpretations as to what constitutes good design, it is not accepted that this is a subjective matter.
	"The service is already first class: we have a good working relationship."	Comment noted with appreciation.
	"Dundee City Council has the most supportive, helpful and efficient service of any local authority we deal with."	Comment noted with appreciation.

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
<p>Objectors</p> <p>No of free text comments received: 10 (from 20 returns)</p>	<p>"On-line viewing is too slow for me."</p> <p>"Non planning issues are intruding."</p> <p>"Readily available expertise on design and conservation is required".</p> <p>"I find that your website excellent."</p> <p>"Traffic issues were not adequately considered".</p> <p>"The reasons for accepting the application were not adequately explained."</p> <p>"The website is very easy to use and very informative."</p> <p>"The website is difficult to access."</p> <p>"Having made an objection on various reasonable grounds our objection should have been listened to impartially, especially since our neighbours, with advice from somebody in planning, had built significantly outwith what they were allowed to. No reason has been given for the decision."</p>	<p>Most respondents find the on-line availability of plans a significant improvement. Those without access to broadband may encounter difficulties.</p> <p>The Council is not aware of any significantly changed trends in this direction.</p> <p>The Council has in house expertise in these areas.</p> <p>Comment noted with appreciation.</p> <p>These comments relate to a specific location. The requirement to provide reasons for decisions may resolve some concerns.</p> <p>Comment noted with appreciation.</p> <p>Contrasts with previous views with regard to the website. Issues with regard to the website may relate more to peoples familiarity with using computers.</p> <p>It is not unusual for objectors to think that there objections were not considered simply because the decision of the Council is not to agree with them. Reasons being provided for the decision may help the situation although they are unlikely to satisfy those who strongly objected to a development.</p>
	<p>"I am not skilled on a computer but I found the Council's website difficult to use. Even with a reference code and all the information I could not find the plans on-line".</p>	<p>As previously discussed, familiarity with computers may affect how people consider and view plans on-line. Members of the public are still welcome to visit Tayside House to view copies of plans or to contact the case officer for advice on how to access plans.</p>

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
Objectors (continued)	<p>"There should be more training for Councillors on planning."</p> <p>"There should be more attention paid by officers to the Local Plan and conservation areas."</p> <p>"Less emphasis should be put on economic gain and more on long term environmental factors."</p>	<p>There are current arrangements for training Councillors on planning issues and members on the Local Review Bodies will have had intensive training on their responsibilities.</p> <p>All the decisions of the Council are made in accordance with the Development Plan unless there are material considerations indicating otherwise.</p> <p>The economic development of the city is a material consideration and must be taken into account along with the protection of the environment.</p>
<p>Community Councils and other Neighbourhood Representative Structures</p> <p>No of free text comments received: 2 (from 2 returns)</p>	<p>"The timescales for comment are not a problem as the department has, on occasion, allowed for some latitude."</p> <p>"We have good links and a high standard of co-operation even though we have not always agreed with the decision."</p>	<p>The Council has a Forestry Officer and an Enforcement Team at its disposal to ensure that planning conditions with regard to the protection of trees are adhered to.</p> <p>Community Councils have 21 days from the date of an application appearing on the Weekly List to make comments. Although the Department tries to be flexible, the requirement to determine applications within a reasonable timescale must also be taken into account.</p> <p>Noted with satisfaction.</p>
<p>Councillors</p> <p>No of free text comments received: (from 14 returns)</p>	<p>Those Councillors who thought that the Development Quality Committee should not be comprised of fewer Councillors stated that the current arrangements allowed all Councillors to represent all their constituents.</p>	<p>The majority of Councillors clearly prefer the current arrangements.</p>

Stakeholder	Comment	Response
Councillors (continued)	Those who felt that there should be fewer Councillors made reference to recent planning reform, felt that this would allow for separation of Local Review Body duties and would be less daunting for deputations from members of the public.	The majority of Councillors clearly prefer the current arrangements.
	Those Councillors favouring daytime meetings suggested that this might suit members of the public, would avoid late evenings whilst those preferring the status quo referred to Councillors and members of the public who worked.	The majority of Councillors clearly prefer the current arrangements.
	"The maps and plans showing sites could be better."	This refers to the committee reports and the space available within committee reports for these maps is restricted. This matter will be looked at to see if clearer maps can be provided.
	"The responsible Planning Department staff are too slow to reply to Councillor enquiries. If the responses were quicker this would help the development quality section of the department."	The importance of a quick response to Councillor enquiries is recognised.
	"We should return to the previous scheme of delegation for all applications attracting objections."	This view is not shared by the vast majority of Councillors. The Director will continue to refer applications to Committee where he considers that this would be appropriate.
	"Agenda items should be in text only with any pictures and drawings on separate sheets"	This would permit larger and clearer maps to be provided but would result in bulkier agenda items. The vast majority of members find the committee reports satisfactory although further investigations into this matter would be useful.
	"Staff have always been helpful and approachable. No further suggestions for improvement at present."	Comment noted with appreciation.