Note: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the PAS website.

Doncaster Council – Validation, Case Allocation and Key Accounts

Summary	
Wanted to…	- Address validation backlogs - Build better relationships with developers - Broaden case officers' experience
Action	- Case officers now receive file from day one, from validation through to determination - Validation team now support on more straightforward cases - Upgrading to better work-flow software to support the new way of working
Benefits	- Use of key account officers to ensure consistency of service to frequent applicants - Work flow software highlights critical time checkpoints - Efficiency savings equating to one full time officer's time - A more strategic approach to communication which is less dependent on individual officers
Learning / risks	Overcoming the limitations of the existing planning software involved investing in an upgrade to the Enterprise system

Introduction

Doncaster Council has done a lot of work to re-think the way their development management processes could and should work. They have been supported by PAS and inspired by the 'systems thinking' approach. Managers set about identifying unnecessary 'waste' in the application process and devised improvements. A key area identified for improvement was validation.

Previously, a planning support team was responsible for validation, consultation and allocation of cases to officers, who worked in defined geographic areas. The approach was 'check box', rather than a meaningful evaluation of whether the quality of information provided was sufficient to make a decision. This caused delays which had knock-on effects further along the process which frustrated both customers and officers. Validation activated the 21-day consultation period prior to the determining case officer seeing the application. Case officers, on looking at an application for the first time, would sometimes find that extra information was required from the developer to make the development acceptable. This new information would also have to be consulted on, triggering another 21-day window. As well as creating extra work, multiple consultation windows made determining a minor or householder application within the 8-week target period challenging.

What they did

The Council changed the process, limiting the technical support team's role to registering applications. Around 80 percent of applications are submitted online and so automatically integrate with back-office systems. Recently acquired work flow Enterprise software was used to allocate incoming applications not by geography but by the complexity of the case and the seniority of the case officer, mindful of existing caseloads.

Overcoming the limitations of the existing planning software systems was a challenge. The existing technology was not able to deliver so the service upgraded to the Enterprise system. By thinking creatively, despite coming at a financial cost, the technology improvements have helped to increase business efficiency and productivity leading efficiency savings arising from the changes.

The Enterprise work flow allocates tasks electronically to the relevant group of officers who are encouraged to be proactive and take applications within 24 hours. This also helps to ensure that cases are not allocated to case officers whilst on annual leave which was identified as a source of 'dead time' in determination.

Crucially, officers who have been involved in pre-application discussions on a development proposal are automatically allocated the resultant application to ensure continuity. A 'traffic light' indicator is built into the system, which flags if an application is a day (amber) or more (red) overdue being accepted by an officer, so that corrective action can be taken straight away. The system also automatically collects and reports key performance indicators.

Case officers now receive an application on the same day it arrives, and are familiar with the case and the applicant where there have already been pre-application discussions. This approach to validation ensures the information needed is correct from the outset. Officers get to use their professional judgement to validate applications more effectively along '*get what you need to make a decision*' principles. This early sight of schemes also means case officers start to write reports at an earlier stage of the process.
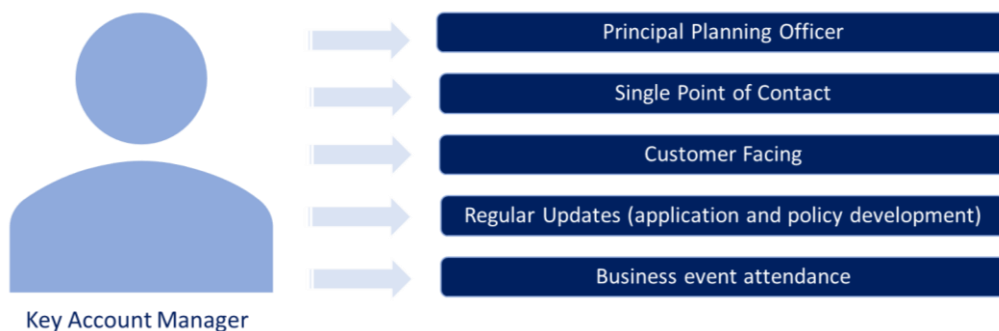
This new way of working required a change in culture. Doncaster Council encouraged early staff involvement in the change process. Involving staff in the design of the process led to greater engagement in, and acceptance of the changes.

When Government mooted the possibility of introducing competition for handling planning applications, the Council felt that they needed to adopt a more business-like approach. This was the key to keeping in the 'driving seat' on applications in their authority area and keeping the application a 'customer' of the service. The aim became continuous customer (applicant or agent) engagement, with representation from all teams involved from the Council.

The authority feels that its investment in technology improvements have helped to increase business efficiency and productivity leading to efficiency savings and supporting the broader 're-thinking' of their service approach. It has supported a reduction in the number of withdrawn applications, which in turn avoids the wasted time and cost of handling re-submitted applications and results in a faster service for customers. It has enabled

the technical support team to be more effective and add more value to the overall planning service. Overall, the efficiency savings are believed to equate to one full time officer's time. The success of the case allocation and back end system improvements was challenged as officers were no longer working to geographic areas and so agents submitting applications were no longer engaging with the same officers they were used to working with. This was felt to be affecting client relationships and negatively affecting the speed, quality and delivery improvements.

In response to this challenge, the service introduced the 'key account' scheme for developers and their agents who engage frequently with the service. Planning officers are allocated one customer account to manage and deal with all enquiries related to that customer. This approach is informed by engagement with developers and agents, local property forums and Doncaster Chamber, who are supportive of the approach.

Key Account Manager → Principal Planning Officer | Single Point of Contact | Customer Facing | Regular Updates (application and policy development) | Business event attendance

When the key account manager scheme was launched the council gave developers and agents the opportunity to opt into the scheme (meaning it was voluntary on their part) and to also highlight any preference for a particular officer to be their manager.

Results and Learning

Now up and running, all planning officers have an "account" to manage and aim to deal with their schemes on a 'cradle to grave' basis. One example of this working well is an expanding business who are regularly submitting applications for development on their site. They have been allocated a single point of contact – a principal planning officer who knows the customer and their site well. The relationship has been strengthened, and there are efficiencies in handling cases.

Importantly, managers are pleased that they have succeeded in "humanising" the process.

Although there is potential to improve this scheme further, it been shown to be effective for both officers and customers and avoiding perceptions of a 'faceless' systems and the risk of becoming buried in the management language of work flow at the expense of the 'day job'. The council has been proactive in sending planning officers out, to give them a face in the community, and in keeping systems continuously under review to ensure they work as desired.

At Doncaster, it is felt that continual assessment of its processes to improve and make the service as efficient and as effective as possible is

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of great importance. Equally, Doncaster is committed to shape what they do with their customer's in mind - listening to customer's views and learning from best practice to deliver a value for money service.

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