Key Principles for maintaining performance

A brief guide for practitioners, councillors and senior officers

Principles for Maintaining Performance

Introduction

Two broad themes have emerged from our work supporting 'at risk' development management services. One is how, in times of resource pressure, general management principles get neglected and the other is about the challenge of motivating an under-pressure (and often criticised) planning team to turn things around.

We've used these themes to create a set of 'principles for maintaining performance'. They are reminders of common-sense ways of working, organising and communicating that can help make sure that things don't slip, and if they start to, that you are in position to address things and recover quickly. None of it is rocket science or new, but just some of the things that we've noticed that people that seem to make this work *do*.

1. General Principles

Poor performance doesn't always announce its arrival

As resources shrink and workloads increase, some basic good management and working practices can get neglected, poor performance 'creeps up', and by the time anyone notices, it has taken hold.

Planning is tough

The basics often get neglected not because people are stupid and lazy, it's that planning is a really tough place to work in, manage and change. Change often involves addressing structural/cultural accepted 'learned behaviours' that suggests that having massive open caseloads and working to strict deadlines is ok. There also seems to be a built-in assumption that DM planners can just keep taking on more work without help and guidance. It is the same for policy teams working in a constantly changing policy environment.

Getting the basics right

It isn't easy but one of the most basic things to get right and have the greatest effect is to make the best use of the people in the office and help them to understand what's required and how to function like a team.

2. <u>Know what you're here for</u>

Organise around delivering the plan

Make sure everyone is clear about the context and objectives for the work they are doing – that the key elements of the local plan are understood e.g. delivering x no. houses, transport requirements, infrastructure, economy, growth etc. Being clear about this helps people understand the context for the decisions they face day to day, and how to organise themselves to achieve the best results.

Purpose

Be clear about expectations on encouraging good development, making quick decisions, and being efficient. Without purpose and direction, people naturally carry out tasks however they want to. Delay is built into the planning process by applicants who haven't got it quite right, neighbours that don't understand things and the consultation period. Being clear allows you to make sure that the planning service doesn't add to these delays - people pulling in the same direction saves time, creates consistency and will help you to harness and direct your team's creativity towards achieving the best service for the customer rather than making their own lives easier.

Understand your business / keep an eye on your horizon

It is as important to be able to spot trouble as it is to spot opportunities to improve. Make sure you understand work volumes/variety; how well work flows through the process; cost and income levels; and available resources. This will help you stay in control of what's happening, and be in a better position to move resources around to deal with pressures as they arise and/or to fit the profile of the work.

3. <u>Know how you're doing</u>

Understand your performance, and make it visible to all

Good, regular performance data allows you to spot trouble early and make good decisions before issues take a real foothold. Decide what's important to measure; as well as national indicator targets (e.g. 8/13 week processing times, appeals), decide what other measures will help you keep things on track e.g. approvals/refusals, validation times, delegation rates, customer feedback. Put performance charts on walls. It is good for the team to know how they are doing, what measures are important and to create debate and questions.

National Planning Statistical Returns (PS1/2 returns)

Make sure someone in your team understands how to extract performance data from your management systems and the requirements of the PS1/2 returns process. Some councils submit data that is sloppily put together and/or contains errors. For some councils this has meant incorrect performance figures that has put them close to or within the designation

thresholds. Mistakes can be embarrassing and take time to sort out so it is best to get it right first time.

Stay on the front-foot

PAS has made a '[designation crystal ball](#)' an early warning toolkit that allows councils to make a forecast of what their performance will be when designation for non-majors is announced. Not a guarantee (it looks back to the last quarter and as we've mentioned, performance can slip quickly), but a useful addition to your overall performance management system(s).

3. Motivate, Empower, Inspire & Appreciate

Make the work visible

Make sure everyone is aware of the big and important applications that are being worked on. Simple whiteboards charting where each application is in the process and what the next job is are useful. Application processing is often fragmented and carried out by people doing 'their bit', so it is easy to forget the link between how one job contributes to the rest of the process. Help everyone 'keep their eye on the ball' because when you are stretched and busy or focused on one element of the work, it is easy to become blind to the bigger thing that you are making/contributing to.

Healthy accountability

Councils often bury what they are trying to achieve inside a business plan and staff appraisals reviewed once or twice a year. You can't ignore the corporate appraisal system, but find a more regular and productive way of getting your staff together to talk about the work. Some places get the team together at the beginning of each week for half an hour where each planner updates the rest of the team about their caseload – what stage applications are at, any issues/hold ups, and their capacity to take on new work. It is a great way of pulling in help and keeping a sense of momentum.

Empower your staff

Show your team that *'people really are our most important asset'* by respecting their experience, skills and creativity. The best people to tell you what is wrong and how to improve things are usually the people doing the work. There is nothing wrong with 'the management' giving advice, direction or trying something out from elsewhere, but why not make your own people the first port of call when it comes to change. Staff need to know that they can challenge the status quo and that their ideas will be listened to – it can make the difference between resistance and buy-in when changes need to be made.

Help people know what is right, and to get it right first time

People like to know what they should be doing, and when they are doing a good job. If people are getting things wrong, or asking a lot of questions, it is likely that they aren't clear on something. Mistakes and inconsistency is usually linked to areas of work that are open to wide interpretation e.g. validation requirements, policy interpretation, or workload priorities. People work better when there is certainty and they feel in control. To be able to do that they need to know what the right answer is.

Delegate to an appropriate level, and 'permit' mistakes

Many services respond to problems (often things that happened in the past) by introducing checks, which create hand-offs, which cause delay and often more errors (as responsibility is diluted – 'the next person will pick that up'). This often goes hand in hand with a measure of fear or a blame culture, which can lead to more errors, and stifle creativity.

Good staff want to feel that they are trusted and want to develop their skills and experience in an environment where someone 'has their back' if they make a mistake. Look for opportunities in the work to give people more responsibility and take a more 'managed risk' approach – are all of the checks and 'sign offs' absolutely necessary (for absolutely everything), does the manager have to read every report, and what is the worst thing that could happen? Make sure that your team knows that the buck stops with you.