

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet 12 April 2007
AUTHORS: Chief Executive / Policy, Performance & Partnerships
 and Planning & Sustainable Communities Corporate Managers

PLANNING SERVICE – 3-YEARLY CONSULTATION RESULTS

Purpose

- To report the results of the statutory 3-yearly Planning Service consultation survey.

Executive Summary

- The responses identify a lower level of customer satisfaction than in the two previous surveys in 2000 and 2003.

Your Experience with the Planning Service

Question Number	Question Detail	Strongly agree/Agree			Direction of Travel
		2000	2003	2006	
5a	I was given the advice and help I needed to submit my application correctly.	75 %	70 %	63 %	☹
5b	The Council kept me informed about the progress of my application.	53 %	49 %	40 %	☹
5c	The Council dealt promptly with my queries.	64 %	53 %	44 %	☹
5d	I understand the reasons for the decision made on my application (s).	84 %	73 %	70 %	☹
5e	I felt I was treated fairly and that my viewpoint was listened to.	67 %	59 %	51 %	☹

- The only question with a national best value number (**BV111**) is question 6, which is used for national comparative purposes.

Question Number	Question Detail	Strongly agree/Agree			Direction of Travel
		2000	2003	2006	
BV111	Setting aside whether any individual application was successful or not, how satisfied are you with the service provided by the Council in processing your applications?	73 % (4 th)	63 % (4 th)	56 % (?)	☹

- This authority was in the bottom quartile (i.e. 4th) in 2000 and 2003. The 2006 national comparative data will not be available for some months but as our performance has dropped from 63% to 56% it would be reasonable to assume that our quartile position will not have improved.

5. This question asks applicants to 'set aside whether any application had been successful'. The contractor was therefore asked to provide separate results for the successful and unsuccessful applicants and these are illustrated below.

Question Number 6	Question Detail	Strongly agree/Agree			Direction of Travel
		2000	2003	2006	
BV111	% satisfaction of <u>successful applicants</u>	78%	68%	60%	☹
BV111	% satisfaction of <u>unsuccessful applicants</u>	56%	32%	36%	☺

6. There are significantly different levels of satisfaction between the two groups. However the unsuccessful group indicated a slightly increased level of satisfaction in 2006 than in 2003, whilst the successful group were less satisfied than in 2003.

7. Action will be taken to set and achieve annual BV111 targets to improve our quartile position and move towards the top quartile as soon as possible.

ICT Systems (Figures in brackets are from the 2003 survey)

8. There were positive responses about the experience of using the Council's planning service related ICT systems.
9. There is clear evidence of increased interest in and use of the website. 91 % (86 %) of applicants had access to a computer and of these 74 % (34 %) used it to find information about applying for planning information. 69 % (22 %) reported they had downloaded a planning information form in the previous 12 months.
10. Website users levels of satisfaction have increased and there is clear support for further developing the accessibility of information through the website. One example of this enthusiasm involved applicants interest in 'Finding information about progress of the application' where 90 % (77%) expressed an interest.
11. Further developing web based access for planning applications is likely to improve customer satisfaction.

Comparison with other authorities (figures in brackets from 2003 survey)

12. 54% (49 %) of applicants had applied to at least one other Council in the previous 12 months. Those applicants (invariably agents) were asked the following questions:

Question Number 21	Question	2003	2006	Direction of Travel
21	How does South Cambs compare to other authorities in processing applications (not asked in 2000).			
21a	Much Better/Better than others	24%	19%	☹
21b	Worse/Much worse	13%	27%	☹

13. Satisfaction levels have therefore slipped in comparison with our neighbours.

Other Ideas/Comments

14. Applicants were also asked to 'suggest areas for improvement' and to indicate if they had 'anything to add'. There are many useful ideas and comments and the authority could look to use these to identify ways to improve the service.
15. One comment was "I would like to find out the response of this survey to find out if others are of same opinion as myself, please post on website". It would be good practice to publicise the results of such surveys but in the past we have tended to simply put a simplified summary in the South Cambs magazine. It would be appropriate to continue to use the South Cambs magazine in this way but it would also be appropriate to publish the full consultants report on the website, complete with a copy of our response i.e. the improvement plan.
16. Agents would like to be more involved in assisting the Council to improve its service. The use of an Agents Forum would facilitate this. It is recognised that increased staff involvement would also ensure that we maximise our capacity to improve.

Background

17. South Cambs DC had a statutory duty to conduct 3-yearly surveys among those who had submitted planning applications.
18. Government guidance prescribes postal surveys. The target population is 'all planning applicants or agents of applicants who have received a decision letter on their application between April 3rd 2006 and September 29th 2006.

Considerations

19. **BV111** (para: 3 refers) is one of the PIs in the Audit Commission's 'basket of PIs', which is used to identify the authorities 'direction of travel'. The December 2005 'Direction of Travel' report identified that for this PI the authority was in the 'worst quartile' and that we are 'not improving'.
20. Paragraph 1 of the CGI report states that "Service performance as measured by annual performance indicators (PIs) deteriorated". It will therefore be particularly important to demonstrate that the authority recognises this trend in the performance of any PI that is in the basket of PIs. To do this we need to take appropriate actions to demonstrate that this trend will be reversed (para: 7 refers).
21. Cabinet has already made three decisions (Cabinet 8th March 2007), which directly affect our response to the findings in these 3-yearly surveys. Cabinet decided that:
 - a. Portfolio Holders should use their PFH meetings to monitor implementation of the improvement measures in the various service plans.
 - b. Portfolio Holders should work with service planning managers to ensure that appropriate plans be set and successfully implemented for 2007/08.
 - c. Cabinet requested that the Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitor progress, at least annually, to ensure that the three-targets be achieved.

Options

22. The Planning & Sustainable Communities Service will include 'Customer Satisfaction Improvement Plans', in the 07/08 and 08/09 Service Plans. The improvement plans will include actions, which will be designed to significantly improve customer satisfaction in time for the 2009 survey. Actions will include:
- i. Annual targets will be set for BV111, to improve the quartile position and move towards the top quartile as soon as possible (para: 7 refers).
 - ii. The planning service ICT web based access arrangements will be further improved (para: 11 refers).
 - iii. Measures to respond positively to the 'suggested areas for improvement' (para: 14 refers).
 - iv. The full consultants report will be put on the website, complete with a copy of the improvement plan (para: 15 refers).
 - v. An Agents Forum will be set up early in 2007/08. (Para 16 refers).
 - vi. Regular planning service staff customer satisfaction improvement workshops will be set up. (Para 16 refers).
 - vii. More regular consultation surveys to provide annual evidence of improved customer satisfaction to the Scrutiny & Overview Committee (para: 21c refers). These surveys will go wider than just seeking the views of applicants as they will also look to seek the views of the wider resident customer base.
23. The Portfolio Holder has also indicated that:
- i. Staff retention should be a priority and succession planning is essential.
 - ii. It would be useful to ascertain Parish Councils' satisfaction levels.
 - iii. A letter explaining the parameters within which applications had to be considered should accompany decision Notices, as this would help indicate the level of service provided.
24. SMT viewed with some concern the deterioration in customer satisfaction, however they are satisfied that actions to deal with all the issues will be contained in the Planning Services Service Plans for 2007/08 and 2008/09.

Implications

25. Failure to develop and effectively monitor a clear focussed improvement plan, which results in an improved level of customer satisfaction, will result in the Council's direction of travel being adversely affected.

26.

Financial	Introducing more regular (i.e. at least annual) consultation exercises could involve additional staff resource and funding. However effective use of an ICT solution and Agents Forum would mitigate against this.
Legal	
Staffing	Retention issues could involve additional costs

Risk Management	Increasing customer satisfaction levels will reduce the risk of failing to demonstrate an awareness of effective performance management (CGI). Failure to improve customer satisfaction is likely to result in adverse publicity.
Equal Opportunities	Addressing inequalities will ensure the authority continues to operate in an accordance with its statutory obligations.

Consultations

27. The findings have been presented to Planning Managers and copies of the full report were sent to the PFH and the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Planning Committee.
28. Staff workshops have already taken place to assist in the development of the improvement plan.

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

29.	Affordable Homes	
	Customer Service	Low customer satisfaction has a direct impact on our customer relationship and also an adverse impact on staff morale.
	Northstowe and other growth areas	
	Quality, Accessible Services	Higher levels of customer satisfaction will be achieved through the provision of high quality and accessible services.
	Village Life	
	Sustainability	
	Partnership	Many applicants are professional agents who are key partners in the development of a well-planned community.

Conclusions/Summary

30. The results of the Planning Service 3-yearly survey are not good and actions need to be taken to improve the corresponding results in 2009.
31. Proactive actions need to be taken, which are effectively monitored, to provide evidence that customer satisfaction is increasing annually.

Recommendations

32. Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the disappointing findings from this survey.
 - (b) Require the PFH to ensure that the implementation of the actions in the improvement plan (para; 22 refers) are monitored regularly at PFH meetings (para; 21a and 21b refer).

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: BVPI 3-Yearly Planning Survey 2007

Contact Officer: Ian Salter – Performance Improvement Officer
Telephone: (01954) 713018

