

PLANNING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

PREPARED FOR WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Version 1.2



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Management & Planning Solutions

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BACKGROUND

By all objective measurements, the planning service at Waverly would be ranked as “good”: It typically meets and substantially exceeds the nationally prescribed standard for determining 80% of planning applications within the statutory deadlines. It also meets the quality measure set out by the Department for Communities and Local Government, most recently in November 2016.

However, it is generally accepted that a good planning service does more than process planning applications to meet externally set standards. The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) has published a toolkit for councils to understand and improve their service proposition.

It identifies four types of planning service:-

- Designated failing services/or services in danger of designation
- Cash-strapped services
- “Cruising” services
- High-performing services

From our discussions, the planning service at Waverley sits somewhere between a cruising service and a high performing service. However, all service types can benefit from an improvement focus in different ways.

ISSUES

PAS advise that for ‘cruising services’, a focus on improvement helps to guard against complacency and can provide a stimulus ‘to shake things up’. For high performing services, it can help to keep staff engaged, to identify opportunities for beneficial change; and empowered, to effect change and improvement.

The Cratus report identified a number of concerns regarding the planning service which are shared by members:

- Workload pressure;
- Recruitment and retention difficulties;
- The quality and accuracy of committee reports;
- The quality of pre-planning advice;
- The need to ensure applicants understand the Council’s design standards;
- The need to consider external expert advice, including legal advice.

The *Way Forward* section of the Cratus report identifies a need for an improvement plan for the planning service in Paragraph 40.

OUR APPROACH

The PAS approach to service improvement advises a two-step process; the first addresses leadership and management whilst the second focuses on the development management process. The stages are comprised of a number of interchangeable elements and can be examined in different ways and combinations to suit individual needs.

Our understanding is that there has been no critical review of the service for some considerable period and that there has been little natural refreshing of ideas within the service as the leadership has been fairly static. Further, where leadership changes have occurred, these have generally been from within the existing officer corps.

Our approach has therefore been to work with the existing leadership in the service to develop an awareness of the need for improvement and change together with a capacity to deliver it. The focus has been on process management; customer and member engagement; and resource management – in planning terms this is primarily staff. The product of the review is this improvement plan that would encompass all areas of service delivery and specifically address the issues set out above. It is intended to be a starting point that focuses on key areas for change and would be integrated into current service planning arrangements so that it can be periodically reviewed and refreshed.

Part 1 of the review follows on from the Cratus review and involves a deeper scoping of the issues emerging from the Cratus report based on surveys of and discussions with users of the service;

Part 2 is an analysis of issues identified and the development of objectives for the service that would be used as the basis of the improvement plan;

Part 3 is the Service Improvement Plan.

The approach is guided by the PAS guidance and we have used the PAS questions as prompts, we have sought to align our review as closely as possible with existing Waverley approaches so that it can be most readily adopted into existing systems of review and scrutiny. It is nonetheless presented as a self-supporting document.

PART 1

Applicant Survey

Applicants make up the biggest single group of users of the service and therefore it was felt that the review to capture and examine their views and experiences of using the service. Our starting point was a telephone survey of applicants in the last quarter of last year.

We used a questionnaire devised by the service that was routinely used up to about 5 years ago before it was abandoned due to the low response rates. Waverly were not unique in this. Many authorities abandoned them for the same reason: the questions posed were good and potentially informative. Unfortunately, the post and paper-based methodology was a barrier to wide scale participation and only those who had a bad experience could be relied on to contribute their thoughts. Most people were just glad to have their planning decision and get on with their lives. The last thing they wanted to do was then fill in a questionnaire.

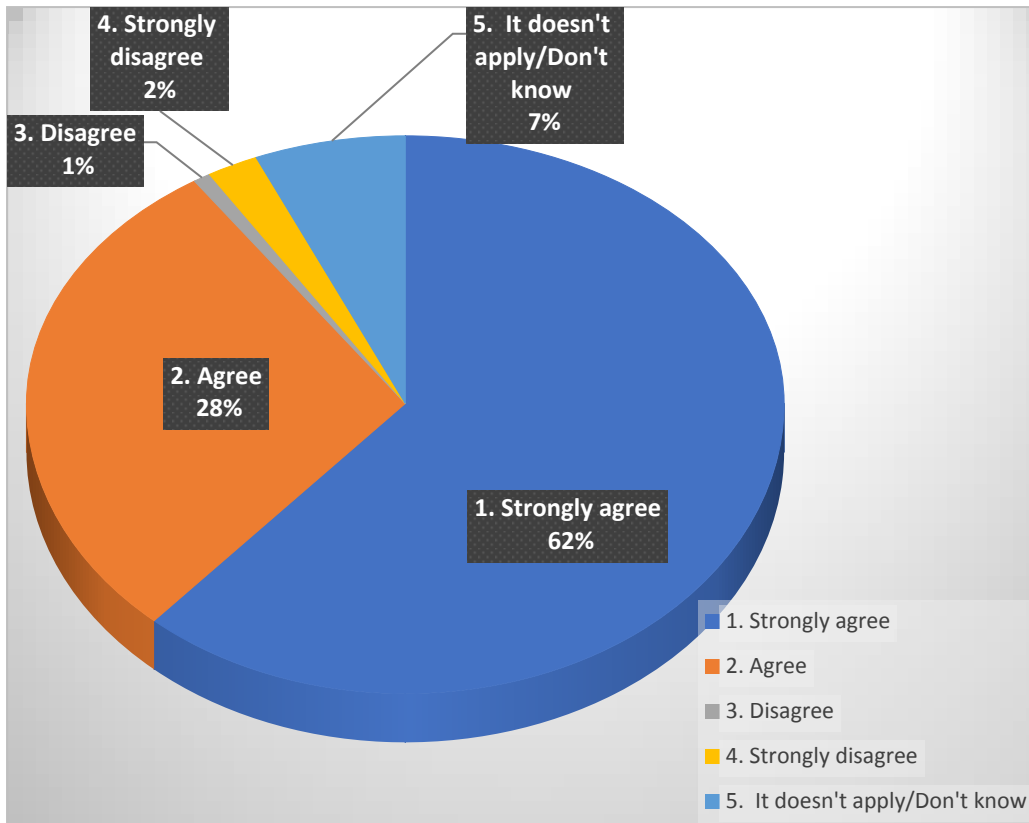
For our survey, we used an experienced telephone survey company to contact all applicants or agents who made applications during the last quarter of 2016 to take them through a series of 5 simple questions and to then invite them to make any comments, suggestions or other observations they wished to make on the service.

837 planning applications were identified, which, after allowing for multiple applications and agents, translated to 541 individual telephone calls. Just over half of these agreed to complete the survey and 98 had additional comments to make. Just 15 of the comments made were wholly negative.

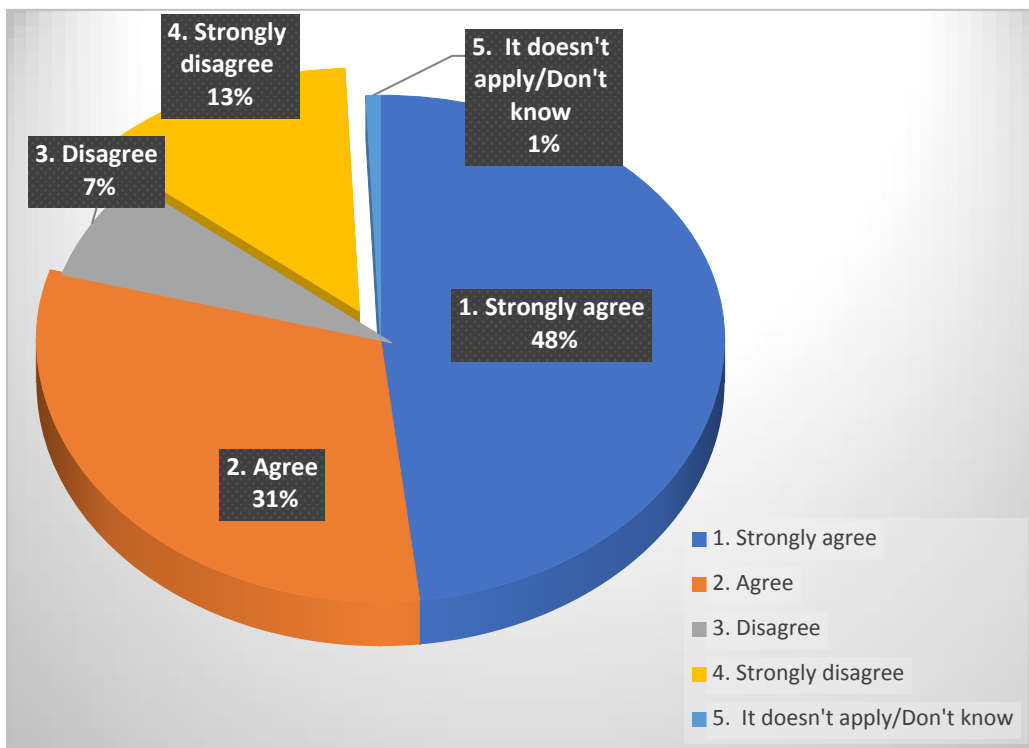
The breakdown of response to the 7 questions asked in the survey is set out in the pie charts which follow. In general terms, high levels of satisfaction were expressed in relation to all the questions asked. This was particularly notable in relation to speed of decision making, question 4 and provides validation for the services reputation and focus on meeting government targets in relation to speed of determination of applications.

However, the responses to question 2 indicate some dissatisfaction with communication through the application process and the responses to question 6 suggested that this was getting worse.

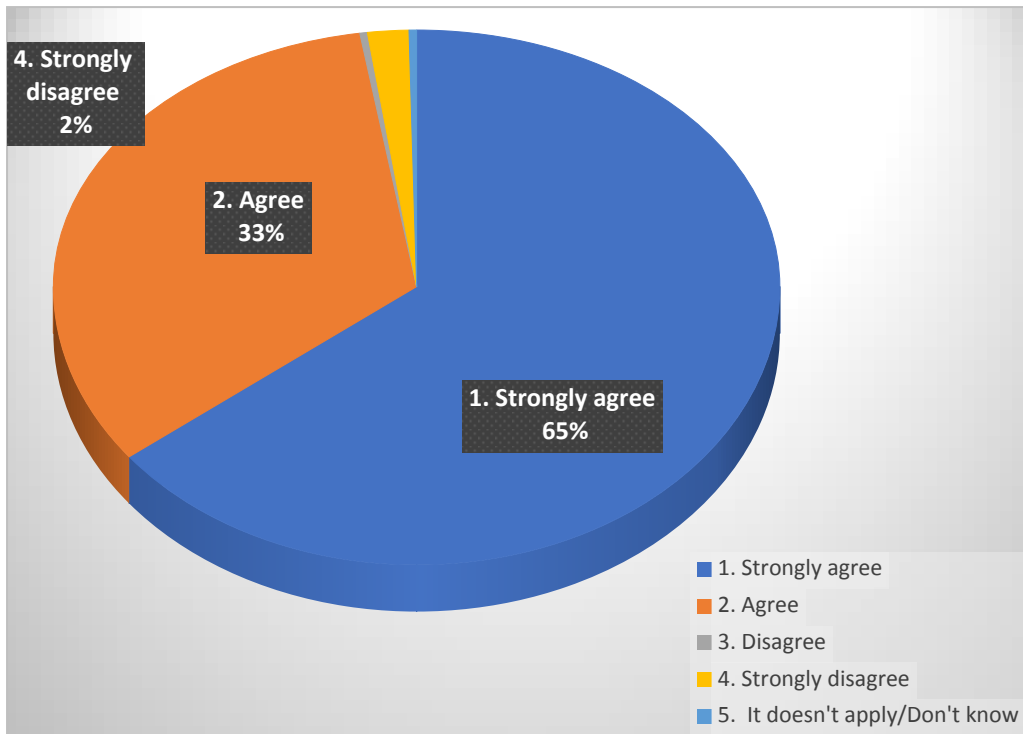
The responses to question showed that almost 16% of customers surveyed were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the service provided by the council in processing their application. This is on the cusp of significance, indicating a need for change.



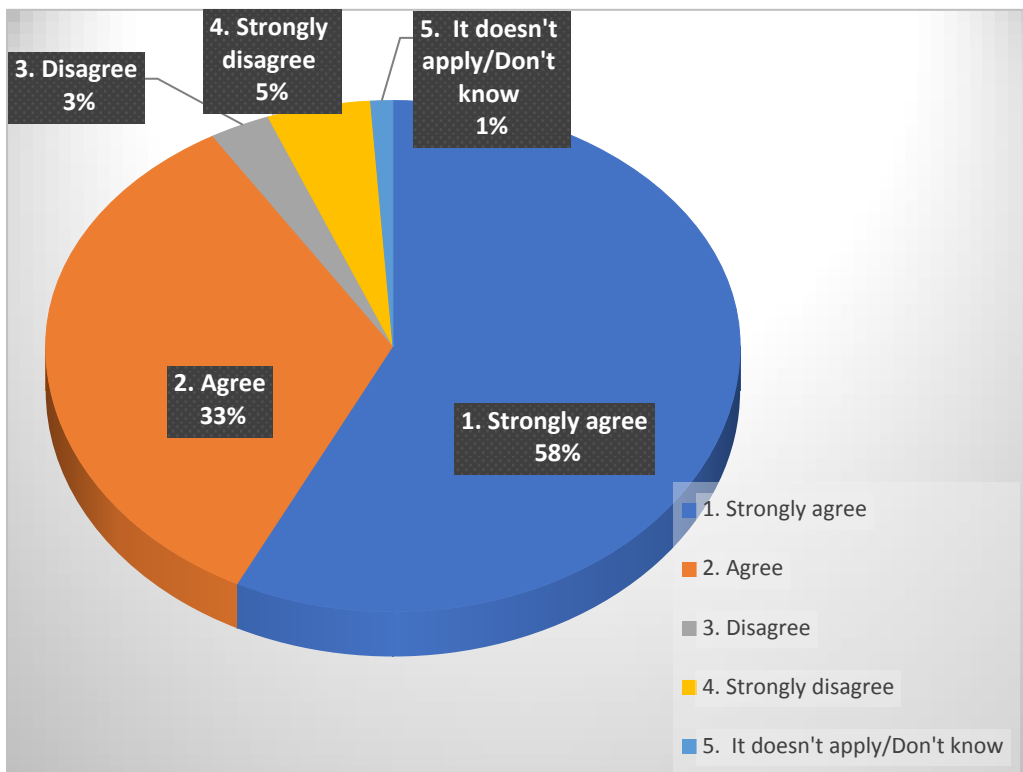
Q1. I was given the help I needed to submit my application



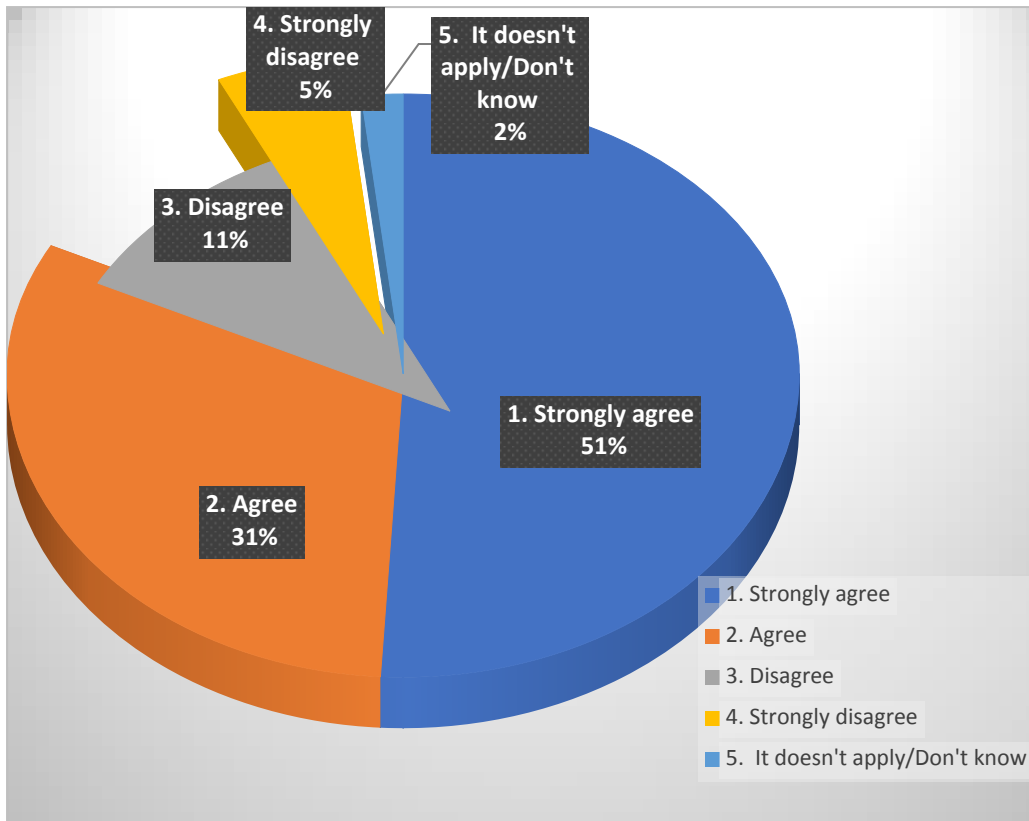
Q2. The council kept me advised of the progress of my application



Q3. I understood the reasons for the decision on my application



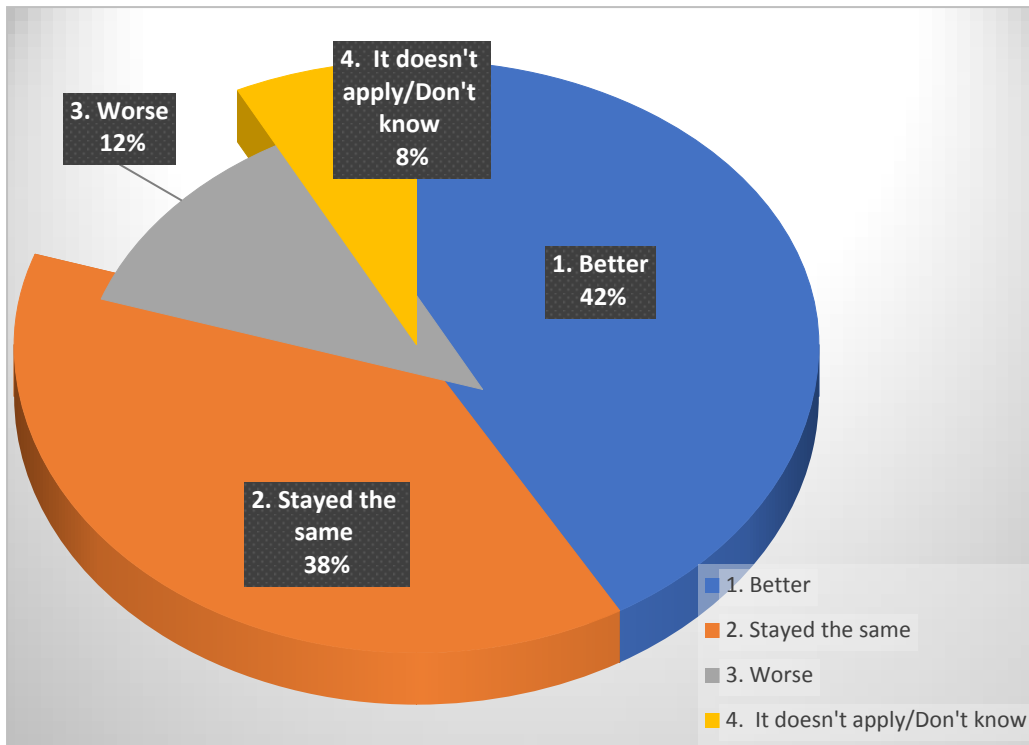
Q4. I was satisfied with the time in which the decision was given



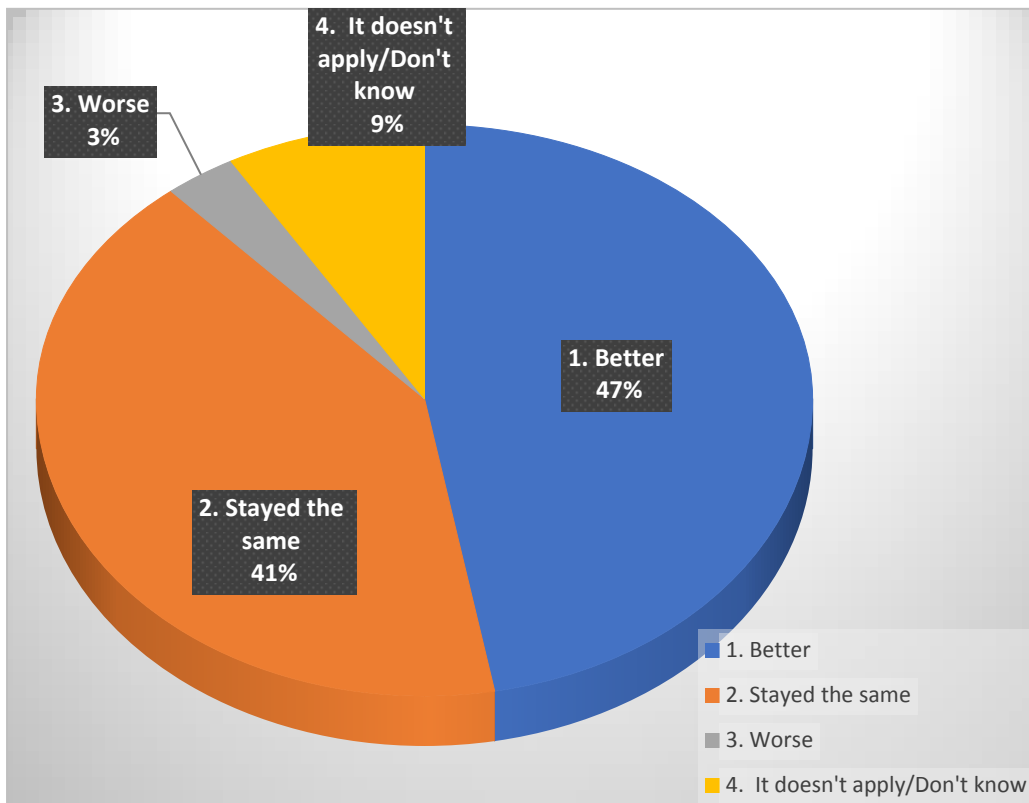
Q5. Setting aside the decision, I was satisfied with the service provided by the council in processing my application.

In the next two questions customers were asked whether they felt that things had improved or got worse over the last two years.

Question 6 was concerned with information and advice about the progress of their application. As might be expected, there was a significant proportion of customers who were first time applicants and were unable to respond to these questions.



Q6. The information and advice provided about the progress my application



Q7. The clarity of the reasons for the decision given

Customers made many unsolicited positive comments when given the opportunity, such as:

- Very helpful
- happy with everything
- very happy with Waverley
- very happy with the planning officer and only took 8 weeks
- known to be a tough council but found Waverley very easy to deal with...
- "... been dealing with Waverley for over 50 years. Definitely the best we deal with comparing to other councils - Waverley do a very good job."

However, customers also raised a number of concerns; some identifying particular issues in the service whilst others were based on their personal, sometimes bad, experiences of using the service. Communication was a recurring issue:

- no progress updates
- be nice if better communication, on the bottom it reads that they consult with you, but this is not the case unless you chase them ...
- had to chase and call a few times but thought that was to be expected at Waverley
- No proper feedback and a lot of delays, no proper comments from the officer. Applicants are prepared to be flexible on decision date
- Dissatisfied with how this went - don't keep you informed regularly. Frustrating having to chase and badger case officer for feedback

Staffing was another recurring issue:

- getting harder as most of officers are new and takes time for them to understand the site history.
- a lot of short term staff hard to get communication and build relationship there which helps.
- Too many junior staff who are unable to deal with issues
- Definitely not enough staff
- Officer advice very vague - when you call them you cannot get a clear answer: told to do 4 different things, only one of which was right. Missed the deadline, not satisfied - upset that it is left until the very last date.
- Appreciate planning officers under pressure, but it is frustrating when and they ask for additional information late in the process. Ask questions a little sooner, if possible, as it helps the process overall

Customers also made suggestions for improvement including:

- Elements on the Planning website should be made clearer. Please have more planning history on the website
- Delays on time scale caused by joint committee cycle. Understands this is outside of the control of planning dept. but timelines for committee dates, deadlines and decisions, average 3.7 months which is a massive problem and very much an issue that would be good to be reviewed.
- Renewal process should have been easier - ridiculous that the renewal process is the same as the application process: Can't the original be adjusted rather than create a new application? - very frustrated - waste of time and money

Parish & Town Councils

A simple 5 question survey with an invitation for further comments was prepared and telephone calls made to the 21 parish and town councils listed on the website. Unfortunately, we were only able to get responses from 4 of them. A follow-up mail-out by email resulted in the return of a further 3 responses. Only 3 of the responses addressed each question fully so the results were considered to be unusable.

Fortunately, a group of six western parishes had already made contact with Peter and Elizabeth for an opportunity to discuss their concerns and issues with the service.

A focus group session was held with representatives of the six western parishes following on from their meeting with Peter and Elizabeth.

As regular contributors to the system, they are keen to learn how best to work within the system, to focus on key planning issues, to make best use of their time and officers' time and to learn from mistakes and best practice. However, they raised a number of concerns with the current arrangements:

- not taken seriously by WBC
- Lack of consistency whereby similar applications are considered differently with different outcomes....
- Enforcement concerns including number of established use approvals due to not being pro-active
- Belief that process is one way – Parish Council comment/inform but no feedback from WBC.
- The time spent on representing the views of local people is not appreciated by the service
- Length of Committee reports/Understanding of Members when considering applications at Committee level

They also raised concerns regarding staff turnover which they felt made the service less effective than it could be.

However, they also made a number of suggestions for improvements to the system:

- service needs to be more pro-active in involving local communities
- If co-operative dialogue was in place, time would be saved by sharing local knowledge
- Incremental investment in improving discussions would improve service quality
- More flexibility in allocation of time for speakers at committee for larger cases would be helpful
- Training and feedback on how to prepare valid and useful comments

Members

4 members took up an open invitation to meet with me to discuss issues and concerns regarding the service and how it works.

A further workshop session was held with the Leader of the council, the area and joint planning committee chairs and other members with planning related responsibilities. Senior staff from across the planning service were also in attendance at the meeting.

Amongst the issues and concerns raised was the following:

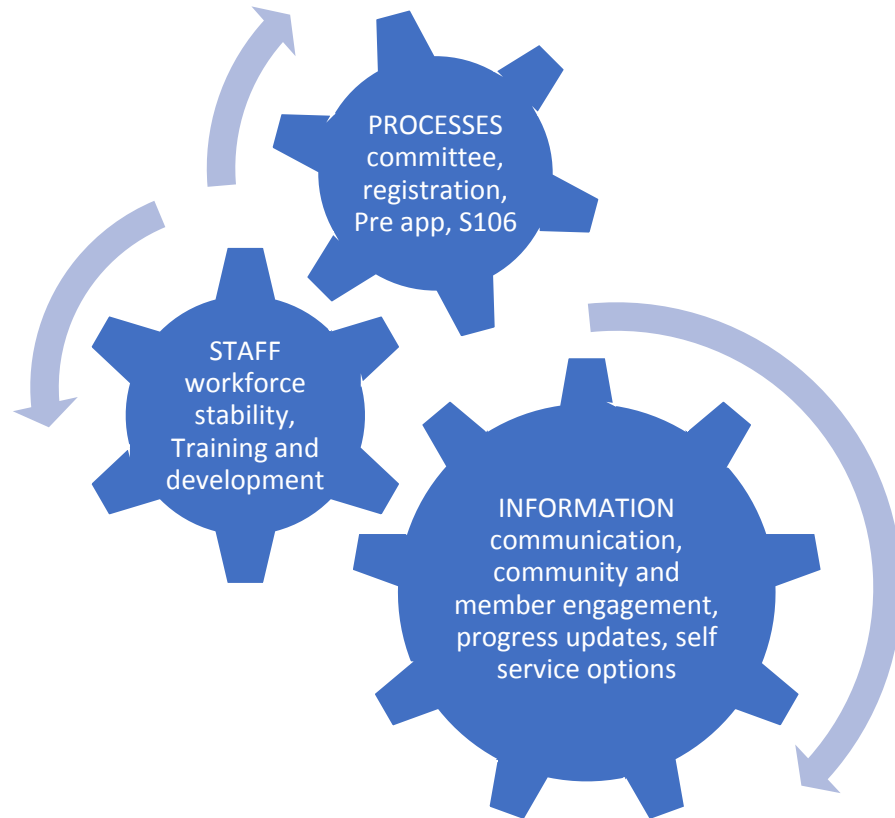
- Staff turnover, use of contractors
- Induction and training of new and inexperienced staff
- Involvement in Pre-app and Section 106 processes
- Perception that individuals are treated more harshly than larger developments (do not have expertise to challenge)
- Not aware of geographic team-based working
- Quality and length of reports

PART 2

Bringing these exercises together and looking at the feedback in-the-round, 3 recurring themes can be picked out

- Communications – keeping applicants informed, telling people about the service, intelligence sharing with members and parishes

- Processes – flexing processes to respond to volume and complexity. Committee procedures and reports
- Staff – selection, recruitment and training



It is proposed to use these themes as the basis for identifying the objectives and activities for the action plan.

The following more detailed responses to issues raised in Stage 1, the survey phase of this project, were identified following a workshop and review of the survey responses with staff. The output from the workshop was further refined and re-worked as issues, options and responsibilities following discussions with managers:

Issue	Options	Lead
Member Call-ins	Rules to discourage late call-ins	Service
	Better engagement with members	Training
Committees	Fewer committees	Service/others
	Fuller agendas	Service
	Clear cycle of committees	Service/others
	Improve consistency of outcomes	
Registration	IT system specification to integrate processes and reduce duplication	Service
	Electronic consultations for Parishes	Service
	Improve general quality of applications	Service

Pre-apps	Reduced length of response	Service
	Focus on standard points/Key questions	Service
S106	Publish negotiations on website	Service
	Publish negotiations to consultees	Service
Improve consistency of reports	Simplified householder report	Service
	Shorter committee report	Service
	Project/ timeline approach	Service
Communications	Self-service opportunities maximised through website	Service/others
	Simplified access to information systems for staff	Service/others
	Integration of processes and IT to populate website with progress information	Service/others
STAFF		
Training	Open, proactive, pre-emptive service	
	Customer care	
	Working with members	
	Team working	
	Management development	

As the service performs well in relation to existing local and national performance standards, a major overhaul of processes is not considered necessary at this point. However, in the process of implementation of the plan, a focus on the performance metrics must be maintained also: Once lost, it would be incredibly difficult to recover the consistently high-performance standards for which Waverley is noted. Notwithstanding the above, the service is committed to the implementation of a replacement IT-based planning applications management system by the end of Q4 2017/18 which will warrant the review of a number of these systems in any case. This will be a significant area of activity in and of itself and would need to be factored into any improvement plan covering the same period.

It is considered that, successfully implemented, the actions proposed in relation to Communications, Processes and Staff will contribute to:

- Better informed and engaged members, users and partners
- Consistently high standards across all service output areas
- A stable, trained and professional workforce

It is suggested that these are made the objectives of the plan and are used as part of the evaluation framework.

PART 3

Details of the action plan are presented in [Appendix 1](#). It is presented in the same format as that used for the Service Plan so that it is easily recognised as a component of the departmental service plan. It is also intended to be subject to the same monitoring and reporting regime as the overarching service plan so that it can be properly integrated into the normal management routines of the service.

Suggestions have been made for activity leads for each component of the plan. These are, in the main, managers from within the service. We are aware that the service has made a bid for increased resources to support day-to-day activities. However, we estimate that the plan would require the whole-time commitment of two FTEs for successful implementation within the identified plan timescale.

The original aim was to establish a small service improvement team drawn from across the service to help develop and implement the Service Improvement Plan. In the process, an appetite for challenge and improvement will be created by engagement with individuals and groups within the service so that there is ownership of the Improvement Plan and it can become self-sustaining. However, given the breadth of the plan, size of the team and the continuous committee cycle within which it has to operate, it is most likely that approach would risk impacting adversely on team effectiveness in day to day

A resourcing plan has therefore been devised with managers whereby some of their professional responsibilities would be devolved to the team leader level and below, subject to suitable supervisory arrangements, to release the necessary capacity at management level. Capacity at team leader level and below would be bolstered by two additional FTEs that would be retained for the duration of the plan, to ensure that the service does not become stretched and the currently high standards of quantitative performance can be maintained and enhanced qualitatively, to drive up customer satisfaction rates.

The plan runs up to the end of Q4 2017/18 although it includes a number of items that are intended to be on-going and will run beyond this date. A review is suggested at the end of the plan period to consider options for the re-fresh or mainstreaming of the plan.



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