Planning Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 17 August 2017

Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Building Standards Improvement Plan

Item number	7.1
Report number	
Executive/routine	Routine
Wards	All

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee about progress in the implementation of the Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and the Building Standards Improvement Plan on performance.

The Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy aims to implement the Council's Channel Shift policy, encouraging customers to self-serve online. It is recognised that this culture change can be difficult to implement and a 'one size fits all' does not always work. This report looks at progress so far and the potential for better customer engagement.

Following an inspection in February 2017, the Building Standards Division of the Scottish Government identified a number of recommended actions to bring the level of service in Edinburgh up to the standards expected for a verifier under the Buildings (Scotland) Act 2003. This report informs the Committee of the Improvement Plan being implemented to address the recommendations.

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Report

Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Building Standards Improvement Plan

Recommendations

1.1   It is recommended that the Committee:

    1.1.1   Notes progress with the Customer Engagement Strategy and other actions to improve customer engagement; and

    1.1.2   Notes the outcomes from the Scottish Government's Building Standards Division inspection report and the proposed Improvement Plan to address the recommended actions from this.

Background

2.1   The Planning Committee approved the Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Service Charter on 3 December 2015. The strategy and charter reflect the objectives of the Council's transformational change programme and channel shift agenda. These aim to support customers in the use of online services, and to refocus staff time on assisting with more complex applications and other statutory processes.

2.2   Changes to the service were introduced from December 2015 onwards. Since then changes were made to a number of customer-contact areas such as the planning and building standards helpdesk and online information. An update report to the Planning Committee on 8 December 2016 detailed these changes and a further report with a timetable for improvements was agreed on 2 March 2017.

2.3   The report in December 2016 acknowledged that behavioural change on the part of the customer is difficult to embed and that progress has been slow in moving them to online services. A number of planned improvements were seen as key to helping the customer to self serve including more accessible information and improved phone systems.

2.4   At the same time that the whole service was looking at engaging with customers, the Building Standards part of the service was undergoing a period of scrutiny due to the delay in granting building warrants. This under performance had arisen due to a number of factors, the main one being that as we slowly came out of recession and building warrant numbers increased, staff resources were not at the same level as pre-recession in 2008.

2.5   Building standards verifiers are appointed by Scottish Ministers in accordance with The Building (Scotland) Act 2003. Their role is to undertake independent checks to establish compliance with the building regulations. This principally involves assessing and approving building warrant applications, undertaking checks and inspections when building work is carried out, and accepting completion certificates (CC) once work has been satisfactorily completed. All 32 Scottish local authorities have been appointed as verifiers, each covering their own geographical area.

2.6   Due to concerns about performance in Edinburgh, the Scottish Government inspected the operation of the service against the Operating Framework for Building Standards Verifiers. The report of that visit was received on 7 April 2017 and made a number of recommendations.

Main report

Customer Engagement Strategy

3.1   The Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy sets out how, as a service, we will communicate and consult with the wide range of customers who access our services. The strategy sets out when we will give pre-application advice; how we will communicate in terms of face to face contact, telephone enquiries, email correspondence and social media; and how we will encourage our customers to self-serve online to find information in line with the Council's Channel Shift policy.

3.2   The implementation of the strategy has been ongoing since December 2015 but most of it has been work done within the service such as web page improvements and help desk changes. Further assistance is required from the Council's ICT provider to progress implementation of Knowledge Base, an online self-service question bank, and online forms.

3.3   The strategy is aimed at focusing staff resources on key planning and building standards activities such as dealing with applications and plan and project preparation. Whilst general enquiries are dealt with by the Customer Contact Centre, case officers remain the point of contact for applications and pre-application advice is still available for more complex and contentious proposals. A full pre-application service is provided for all major applications.

3.4   Further key changes and events have recently informed the future direction of the strategy. These are as follows:

- Moving general enquiries calls to the Council's Customer Contact Centre;
- Customer Forum; and
- Improved web pages.

Customer Contact Centre

3.5   In April 2017, calls to the Planning general enquiry line moved to the Council's Customer Contact Centre (CCC) and this was followed in May 2017 by calls to the Building Standards line. Customer Service advisers in the CCC have been specifically trained to deal with calls on a range of topics relating to the service and to encourage the customer to go online to find the information.

3.6   If the customer wants to speak to a planner or surveyor, they can request a call back. However, to date, there has been little requirement for this service as the customer services adviser is usually able to assist the customer or direct them where to find the information. Although it is early days, there are some signs in terms of webpage views that there has been a slight increase in views for both the Planning and Building Standards pre-application advice pages. The table below indicates the number of views for the most popular web pages.

Month July 2016 to June 2017	General Planning and Building Standards Information	Apply for Planning Permission	Planning pre-application advice	Planning Guidelines	Building Warrants incl. Plan Store	Building warrants pre-application advice (New page)
July	6684	1162	410	1159	4807	0
August	14693	1249	433	1315	5957	0
September	8922	1265	451	1216	5236	0
October	7905	1190	406	1157	4681	116
November	7853	1215	401	1287	4655	770
December	5762	917	331	761	3366	531
January	7791	1190	421	888	4638	765
February	7648	1160	487	919	4392	677
March	8358	1340	491	1039	4952	771
April	6872	998	408	841	4109	720
May	16959	1485	562	1008	5645	913
June	7425	1074	469	871	4185	831
Total	107374	14298	5289	12510	56900	6094

3.7   In terms of the number of calls to the Planning and Building Standards Service, the table below sets out call volumes between July 2016 and June 2017:

Jul	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun	Total
4189	4550	4790	3598	3400	2500	2618	3062	3690	3059	3703	3437	42596

3.8   The table shows that the number of calls has reduced from summer 2016 but is still at a very high level for a small service area. These figures illustrate the challenge that faces the service in meeting customer demand. In terms of the types of calls, there is a difference between Planning and Building Standards. The planning calls are generally from individuals seeking general advice on permissions needed whilst the Building Standards calls are generally requesting updates on building warrant applications. The service has implemented training and changes to help ensure customers are better kept up-to-date. This will improve customer relations and reduce complaints.

3.9   The Customer Engagement Strategy focuses on 'Channel Shift' and helping the customer move onto self-serving online but such behavioural change is slow and officers are still being contacted even where information is fully available online. By working with customers and improving communication channels, it is expected that over time this may change. It should be noted that full assistance will always be given to those without access to the internet or those who have a requirement for special help such as people with disabilities.

3.10   The move to the CCC has freed up support staff time to allow more efficient processing of applications and it also means that the customer always gets an answer when they do phone – previously this was not always the case. More work will be done with the advisers to improve the level of service although currently this is of a very high standard.

Customer Forum

3.11   On 20 June 2017, a customer forum was held which brought together agents, community councillors, statutory consultees, planners and surveyors to discuss what improvements could be made to the services provided by Planning and Building Standards. It was attended by almost 60 customer representatives. The feedback has been very positive. Customers genuinely appreciated the opportunity to have an open discussion about what they would like from our services.

3.12   A number of themes have emerged from the forum:

- Communication - The need to be better at responding to emails and phone calls promptly, better ways of updating applicants on application progress, improved working with community councils, better information from the CCC;

- Customer - More consistent approach required, better help and guidance on community engagement, help desk improvements;

- Resources - Use discretionary charging for some services, increase use of self certification, more staff to handle workload, staff training, improve staff morale, faster enforcement, better guidance;

- Technology - Better updates on application progress, show representations on portal; and

- Processes - Improve timescales, review reports and conditions with applicant, code of practice for staff, align development consents, better consistency, better joined up working.

3.13 An action plan is being formulated to take the realistic suggestions forward but the following 'quick wins' are proposed:

- Changes to the acknowledgement system for building warrants so that the customer has the name of the surveyor dealing with their case from the early in the process. This happens for planning applications but it is not until the agent gets a 'first report' telling them whether their building warrant meets the building regulations that they get details of the surveyor dealing with the case;

- Preparation of 'how to videos' to show the customer how they can do various activities online such as searching for guidance or checking whether they need planning permission and how to comment on planning applications;

- Increased use of support staff to assist team managers with technical tasks within the team and so free up time for better customer engagement;

- Additional training for staff whose customer care skills are below the required Council standard;

- Better use of help desk planners and surveyors to respond quicker to general enquiries; and

- A review of communication channels including out-of-office messages and auto–responses to help manage customer expectations about how quickly the service is able to respond. For most customers who contact us, the 10-working day standard Council response time is longer than they would expect and phonecalls following emails is frequently the norm. This puts added pressure on the service.

3.14 In the longer term, more work is needed on a number issues including better use of technology to keep the customer informed, greater consistency of decision-making and improved community engagement

Webpage Improvements

3.15 Work has been ongoing to improve webpage content but this has to be done in accordance with Council web standards. A series of quick guides is now available on the planning pages and these are aimed at those customers who just want to know if they need consent for very straightforward works. Guides are available on windows, driveways, change of use, adverts and sheds.

Building Standards Improvement Plan

3.16 The building warrant process is made up of three main stages:

- Granting the building warrant - this involves checking the drawings submitted to verify they comply with the building regulations, issuing a 'first report' with any requested changes, awaiting the revised plans, checking them and issuing the warrant;

- Reasonable Inquiry – this involves carrying out site inspections and other checks to reasonably inquire that the work has been carried out in accordance with the warrant drawings. The number of inspections will depend on the scale of the development but ultimately it is up to the applicant to ensure compliance; and

- Completion – this involves a final inspection and the acceptance of a completion certificate that has been submitted to the Council.

3.17 There are various performance targets at these stages of the process and statistics are provided to the Scottish Government on a quarterly basis. It was on the basis of the poor performance identified in these statistics that the Minister of Local Government and Housing wrote to the Chief Executive in December 2016 regarding concerns about the performance of the building standards service in Edinburgh.

3.18 Verifiers are expected to operate under the Building Standards Verification Performance Framework which covers three perspectives – Professional Expertise and Technical Processes, Quality Customer Experience and Operational and Financial Efficiency. There are three cross cutting themes of Public Interest, Continuous Improvement and Partnership Working. The framework is supported by a range of key performance outcomes (KPOs).

3.19 The 'Operating Framework for Building Standards Verifiers' (OF) came into force on 1 April 2017 and it was against this document that the building standards service in Edinburgh was inspected. The documented operating processes of each verifier must address the following key functions:

- Integrity and Operational Resilience;

- Administration of Building Warrant Applications and Completion Certificate Submissions; and

- Maintain records to facilitate effective Business Operation and periodic audit by the Scottish Government.

3.20 The inspection report acknowledged that a corporate freeze on staff recruitment coincided with an increase in the number of building warrant (BW) applications following the economic downturn. This had a serious impact on building standards delivery. Other factors include the introduction of eBuilding Standards (eBS) and investment in associated IT hardware and software which has impacted on service delivery. As a result, not only was performance poor but customer satisfaction was

below the national average and record keeping and procedural guidance was not of the required standards.

3.21 Appendix 1 details the recommended actions of the Building Standards Division of the Scottish Government. In response, an Improvement Plan is being implemented. This contains the following key improvements:

- Recruitment - Seven new surveying staff are now in post and further recruitment is underway to fill a further four posts. The possibility of technical posts and more support staff is also being investigated.

- Customer - The Customer Forum was used as a vehicle to meet customers and hear their views on how the service could be improved. As detailed above, some of these actions are now being taken forward. In addition, a customer survey was issued in July 2017 to get detailed feedback on the Building Standards service and Customer Contact sessions have been held with all surveyors to discuss good customer care and the importance of engaging with customers. It is intended to implement further initiatives such as post decision feedback surveys and smaller customer forums;

- Processes - The service is working with the Council's Strategy and Insight team to improve the building warrant processes to make them more effective. This will be challenging as this is a statutory process and set procedures have to be followed but areas for improvement will be identified as part of this process. Work has already been done on a new methodology for submitting building warrants to ensure greater consistency and surveyors have been working with the Edinburgh Chartered Architects Network to train agents in this way of working.

- Performance - In addition to recruitment, building warrant applications have also been processed by two other verifying authorities in Scotland – Aberdeen City and Argyll and Bute Councils. This mutual agreement has assisted with Edinburgh's workload whilst allowing those authorities to retain staff. Overtime has also been used to clear backlogs. As a result performance in issuing 'first reports' on warrant applications has already improved as shown in the table below. Performance in the first quarter of 2017/18 was the highest of the last five quarters though still short of the national target of 95%.

2016/17				2017/18
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
55.9%	35.5%	14.3%	43.02%	67.4%

3.22   Work is still needed on overall timescales to grant warrants but as this period also includes the time it takes applicants to return revised plans, this can be subject to fluctuation. With the improvements to 'first reports' timescales, it is expected that there will be a reduction in phone calls from agents seeking updates on warrants and this will also help performance to improve.

Conclusion

3.23   The Planning and Building Standards Service has faced a number of challenges over the past two years in terms of meeting customer expectations. As a frontline service which relies on officer expertise, the efficient working of the service depends on having a balance between sufficient staff resource, high functioning working practices and managing customer expectation whilst still improving performance. The Customer Engagement Strategy and the Building Standards Improvement Plan are designed to get this balance right but will take time to deliver.

Measures of success

4.1   Our customers understand the Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Building Standards Improvement Plan and work with the service to deliver the actions and improve the service.

Financial impact

5.1   The additional recruitment of Building Standards surveyors will have a financial impact. However, this can be accommodated due to a recent fee increase.

Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

6.1   There are no perceived risks associated with this report. The report has no impact on any policies of the Council.

Equalities impact

7.1   The Equalities and Rights Impact Assessment indicates the following:

- The proposals will enhance participation, influence and voice as they promote better online services available to all whilst still allowing scope for direct contact where still required;

- There are no infringements of Rights under these proposals;

- There are no identified positive or negative impacts on the duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation;

- The proposals promote the duty to advance equality of opportunity as they promote better and more accessible information systems which would benefit all whilst till ensuring any groups who need bespoke advice still have access to this service;

- The proposal to ask customers to self serve online may affect some groups such as those with disabilities and those of a different race. However, the

strategy states that a direct service will still be provided for those who need it; and

- The proposals promote the duty to foster good relations as they make clear the service standards that can be expected and so promote understanding.

Sustainability impact

8.1 The impact of this report in relation to the three elements of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 Public Bodies Duties has been considered, and the outcome is summarised below:

- The proposals in this report will have no impact on carbon emissions because the report deals with customer engagement and service improvements;

- The proposals in this report will have no effect on the city's resilience to climate change impacts because the report deals with customer engagement and service improvements;

- The proposals in this report will help achieve a sustainable Edinburgh because they promote they promote equality of opportunity by making services more easy to understand and accessible;

- The proposals in this report will help achieve a sustainable Edinburgh because they will assist the economic well being of the City by concentrating our resources where they will facilitate development.

Consultation and engagement

9.1 A Customer Forum was held on 20 June 2017 to get feedback on the service. In addition, various training events have been held with agents on the new methodology for submitting building warrants and a customer survey on the Building Standards process was issued in July 2017.

Background reading/external references

10.1 Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy and Service Charter
http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/49102/item_71_planning_and_building_standards_customer_engagement_strategy_and_service_charter

10.2 Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy – progress report and next steps, report to Planning Committee 8 December 2016

http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/52715/item_81_-_planning_and_building_standards_customer_engagement_strategy_%E2%80%93_progress_report_and_next_steps

10.3 Planning and Building Standards Customer Engagement Strategy – time table for improvements

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Links

Coalition Pledges	
Council Priorities **Single Outcome Agreement**	SO1 Edinburgh's economy delivers increased investment, jobs and opportunities for all
Appendices	Appendix 1 – Building Standards Division Recommended actions

4   Recommended actions

	Grading	Observation	Risk	Recommendation	Response
1	**FUNDAMENTAL**	No documented quality assurance process for BW, CC and CCNP.	No assurance on the BW, CC or CCNP process to evidence that required standards are being met.	Review and implement processes to meet future OF requirement.	
2	**FUNDAMENTAL**	No documented process in place to meet legislative requirement for deemed decisions.	Contravention of legislation, Building (Scotland) Act 2003. Failure to adhere to legislative requirements renders warrants invalid.	Review and implement processes to meet legislative requirements.	
3	**FUNDAMENTAL**	Issue of first reports not meeting 20 day target.	KPO 3 requirement not being achieved. Meeting KPO targets, is a requirement of the verifier appointment.	Review and implement processes to meet legislative requirements.	
4	**SIGNIFICANT**	Lack of customer engagement to monitor service delivery.	Customer expectations are not met and risk of reputational damage.	Implement proposed action set out within draft Service Improvement Action Plan. Prioritisation of application types to be considered.	4
5	**IMPROVEMENT**	Quarterly submission of CIP not being delivered timeously.	Performance Framework requirements are not being met.	Submission of required data in line with KPO 9.	
6	**IMPROVEMENT**	Information published on the website, is out of date.. Customer charter noted as a specific example.	Published guidance does not reflect current legislation requirements or PFO requirements.	Review published data for currency, accessibility and accuracy. Version control for all documents should be in place.	