

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

Coventry Council - Effective engagement with stakeholders

Summary  	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve efficiency of internal consultation – reducing time and excessive paper trails • Improve efficiency of external consultation in the longer term
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage face-to-face engagement and a focus on ‘so what’ issues • Automate reminders to consultees • Explore how system upgrades might improve internal and external consultation in the longer term
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Performance managing’ consultees helps all parties understand what causes delays • Reduced use of ‘extension of time’ agreements
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation has become a more focused process, quickly homing in on issues • Extension of time agreements should not be used as the default tool to manage delays due to consultation responses

Introduction

Coventry Council is consistently top of the planning statistics tables for the average speed at which they determine applications. However, one issue that was particularly problematic for the Council was the timeliness of responses from internal stakeholders and external statutory consultees. Responses were often slow coming back – sometimes outside the 21-day consultation window – and because the authority were reluctant to determine the application without a response from the most relevant consultees, this led to delays overall.

What they did

Complex applications and / or the development context require considerable dialogue with internal consultees. In Coventry, it’s important

to consult regularly with the highways and drainage teams. A lot of time is lost in processing written responses between council teams and the time involved in understanding those written responses. Therefore, face-to-face meetings are now encouraged as a means of talking through the consultation responses before the consultees send through their written outputs.

This makes the process more efficient and dramatically increases the speed at which applications can be processed. The case officer can understand if there are any ‘show-stoppers’ and then focus straight away on the relevant aspect(s) with the applicant whilst waiting for the written response to ‘follow on’.

This approach also saved time and effort; a relatively quick discussion takes less time and fewer iterations than sending emails back and forth. It also builds better relationships and understanding between officers.

Challenges remain around late responses from external consultees (for example the Environment Agency, Highways England and Historic England). Coventry is looking at new ways to address this issue through their engagement processes, such as sending automated reminder emails at key points during the consultation process to save case officers' time in monitoring the receipt of responses and having to write emails chasing advice or to make follow up telephone calls.

With the implementation of a new IT system, Coventry Council are aiming to monitor the response rates of consultees. This will allow them to share data with those consultees and look for ways to improve the timeliness of their advice. The Council are also looking at ways to provide access to their 'back office' information to consultees in order to speed up the response rates. For example, they are considering how an 'app' might allow external consultees partial access to their back-office system to pick from the Council's standard conditions suite.

When experiencing delays in consultation responses, local planning authorities may use formal extension of time agreements to extend the target determination timescale for that application. This means that as long as application is determined within the agreed timescale, it is not classified as running 'over time' in the performance statistics. At Coventry Council, the use of extension of time agreements is

carefully monitored, with a view to their use being discouraged. These agreements require an officer request and explanation, followed by sign off by managers. These agreements are generally used only in instances where officers are not able to get critical consultation responses back from external consultees.

Results and Learning

There is strong direction at management level that using extensions of time for other scenarios is unacceptable as applications will inevitably keep coming in and will build up. There is a case officer resource 'drag' associated with having more applications running concurrently. This approach has been fundamental in ensuring that the number of 'in hand' applications does not get out of control. This firm line has had measurable outcomes in terms of getting the majority of applications determined within target timescales, thus also ensuring the faster delivery of schemes.