



Steps to success: Blaby's employee-led recovery



October 2014

Introduction

In October 2014 Blaby District Council's Planning Service were officially de-designated by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). This is a remarkable turnaround. The service delivered an average of 64% of major applications, across the two-year assessment period within statutory timescales, compared with just 19% 12 months previously.

So, how did they do it?

Designation

Blaby were the only local authority to deliver fewer than the benchmark of 30% of major applications within stipulated timescales between July 2011 and June 2013, and therefore were designated. As a result of being in designation, applicants for major applications could choose to bypass the council and submit a planning application directly to PINs (the planning inspectorate). As it happens, only one applicant chose to do this and the Inspector refused planning permission for the proposed development.

To be de-designated, Blaby had to submit an improvement plan to DCLG for approval and be found to have made progress with their plan. And they had to be performing at higher than the threshold over the 2012-2014 designation period - now increased from 30% to 40%. Their plan has been accepted and they're performing much higher than the threshold.

What was going wrong?

As you would expect, there wasn't a single reason for the previous performance below the threshold. Blaby prides itself on putting the customer at the heart of everything they do and working closely with developers; but their planning system was laden with waste and lots of time was taken up feeding the system, rather than getting on with productive work. Their process had an incredible 279 steps from receipt to decision-ready, and coupled with the fact they didn't use extensions of time or Planning Performance Agreements, it meant it was very difficult to get acceptable schemes through in 13 or 16 weeks.

The council were sorry to be placed in designation, but saw it as staging post to introduce positive change.

The beginning of the turnaround

To aid with the turnaround, a new management team was put in place. Rob Back had joined shortly before designation as the Planning and Economic Development Group Manager and James Carpenter joined as the Development Services Manager. Blaby worked with PAS on the improvement plan and implementing some of the measures.

James says: "It was a challenge to turn it around. We wanted to redesign our approach with the customer in mind (given Blaby's customer-centric approach) - but firstly needed to decide: who is the customer?"

The Chief Exec of the council and other leaders were consulted. It was decided that the customer was the person paying for the application. This was somewhat seen as a brave decision as many councils would see the public as always being the customer.

The management were determined to deliver the right outcomes for stakeholders, rather than artificially speeding up determination timescales. It was decided that important improvement aspects would include:

- To continue to be absolutely focussed on the customer
- To recognise that the customer wants permission and ASAP
- To look to enable the right development in the right place (i.e. **not** refuse unless they really had to)
- To grant 'shovel ready' permissions, with no pre-commencement conditions
- To emphasise the importance of pre-application.

To help with de-designation, Blaby District Council allocated £150,000 on a spend-to-save basis to be used for implementing improvements. Some of this was spent on employing more staff on a temporary basis to free up existing staff to work on delivering the necessary improvements.

The new process

As Rob puts it: "We wanted a system to produce quality at pace." Earlier attempts at process improvement under previous management included bringing in consultants. However Rob felt this approach imposed things upon planning staff without their buy-in and hadn't worked as a result.

The new chosen approach is based on 'Systems Thinking' principles, which have been used at other councils. Rob was confident this method would give Blaby the impetus and freedom to drive an improved service. He describes it as: "A methodology for looking at an entire process and redesigning from the perspective of the customer. It breaks down aspects of a process and allows them to be

Employee profile: Jill Sampson



Jill originally joined Blaby Council as a Planning Receptionist. Due to her interest in the industry, she progressed to become a Planning Technician. Under the old system, Jill was just validating applications - however, since moving on to the new system, she's taken on a great deal more responsibility and is flourishing.

Like others working the new way, Jill picks up the next application or pre-app from the pile. Despite having no formal planning qualifications, with support from her Team Leader and colleagues, she's now even tackling major applications; including going before planning committees and instructing S106 legal agreements.

Jill says: "Being involved in redesigning the process has given me a far greater understanding of what we actually need to do, rather than just doing what we have always done.

"It's great to work somewhere where staff are given a stake in designing the processes we use, and are so empowered to take ownership of both their work and their personal and professional development."

Jill has now been supported by Blaby to enrol back at University, and will be studying for a MA in Environmental and Spatial Planning on day release as she seeks to progress her career as a Planner.

examined on the basis of evidence rather than assumption.”

He goes on to say: “You have to get right into the detail of the thing.” Much of what the approach entails is common sense, however, Rob points out that: “It's a painfully slow process.”

It's a gradual process moving to the new system as staff have been working the new way and the old way concurrently. It was felt that Blaby couldn't go all-in with the new system as it takes time to perfect and to train staff on it; they also wanted to ensure they got de-designated. Those working the new way are constantly tweaking as they go; when an issue arises they work together to find the appropriate solution. Those working the old way are not allowed to alter the process, even though many aspects have been found to be time-consuming/redundant. It's rather like A/B testing - the old system is required for comparison data, to prove that the new way is better.

It's a different challenge when rolling a new person onto the new system, as some are Planners, some Technicians and both are more proficient at some things than others. A new person will be shadowed by the Team Leader to begin with and starts afresh - their current caseload is taken over by an officer, continuing with old system. Officers on the new system are working in a project management way - and are receiving formal project management training.

Blaby are now in a position to roll two people at once onto the new system, but until they feel they've got it as right as can be, will continue running both old and new systems.



A rooftop view of Blaby

The new approach is staff-led and bottom-up. Planners and Technicians enjoy the full support of management and have freedom to design the new way of working. Breaking down each aspect meant it was easier to identify waste. It was obviously taking too long to do each of the 279 steps

and so the team pondered what the effect of **not** doing each of them would be. Under the new approach, it could no longer be 'because we've always done it'.

The following are a few of the steps cut out of the application process:

- No longer sending a full set of stamped approved plans to each applicant (whether they asked for them or not)
- No longer using the Leicestershire-wide validation checklist
- No longer having an extra copy of the application file in Reception (just in case an interested party popped in)
- Moving towards a fully electronic mode of consultation with stakeholders.

The end result is that 279 steps have been reduced to just 19!

A major change is that whoever has capacity will take the next application and work it from start to completion (including validating it, the site visit, writing the report, going to committee etc.). Previously, officers could be juggling 50 applications, and these would pass through many hands and wait in several in-trays along the way.

There's now a greater focus upon personal responsibility/ownership. It hardly sounds radical, but applicants are given the phone number for the officer responsible for their application, which cuts out a lot of to-ing and fro-ing - and occasional frustration for the caller.

With fewer steps in place and staff more empowered to get on with the work, managers can now focus upon performance management. A more 'hands off' management style has been introduced. James doesn't read all the reports and officers are encouraged to support/learn from each other. As James says: "It's about giving officers the confidence to go out there and deliver growth."

Other elements of the improvement plan include:

Agent feedback: Mike Hughes



Mike Hughes of Walsingham Planning was the agent for a recent two storey extension to a Premier Inn and was delighted with the planning application process. He said it was: "... a superb way to handle the application," and went on to call it: "... the best experience yet." In Mike's opinion: "Many a Local Authority could take a lesson from Blaby."

Councillor view: Tony Greenwood

Cllr Tony Greenwood MBE, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Economic Development and Housing Strategy at Blaby, said: "When we were put in special measures we were at pains to stress that we prefer to work proactively with developers to ensure a high quality development rather than focus purely on an arbitrary government timescale.

"The council has stuck to its principals and continues to prioritise customer service and good development over speed. It's now even clearer our approach is right; during the year of designation only one developer from approximately 50 major planning applications has chosen to apply directly to the Inspectorate rather than work with the council.

"An approved urban extension of 4,250 homes and our excellent customer relationships reinforce that Blaby is an excellent planning authority."

- Earlier instruction of S106 agreements
- Streamlining the planning committee from 17 to 11 members and giving extensive training
- Having embedded principles without going through PPA
- Using extensions of time in conjunction with customers to ensure effective delivery of the project
- Scrapping pre-application charges (but they may introduce them for major applications in the future)
- More formalised consultation with developers.

More information about these can be found in the [Development Management Improvement Plan](#) document.

Continuing to improve

The hard work will continue. As described, the new and old systems will continue to run concurrently until management are happy that everyone can be moved over. And, even then, officers will be encouraged to continually look for ways to make the process more efficient and to seek ways to cut costs.

The signs are good that the improvement will continue. The service is running at 87.5% of major applications completed in time over the last calendar year and 41 minor applications have been approved in the new system at an average of 24.68 days. Two major applications in the new system were dealt with within 31 and 37 days respectively.

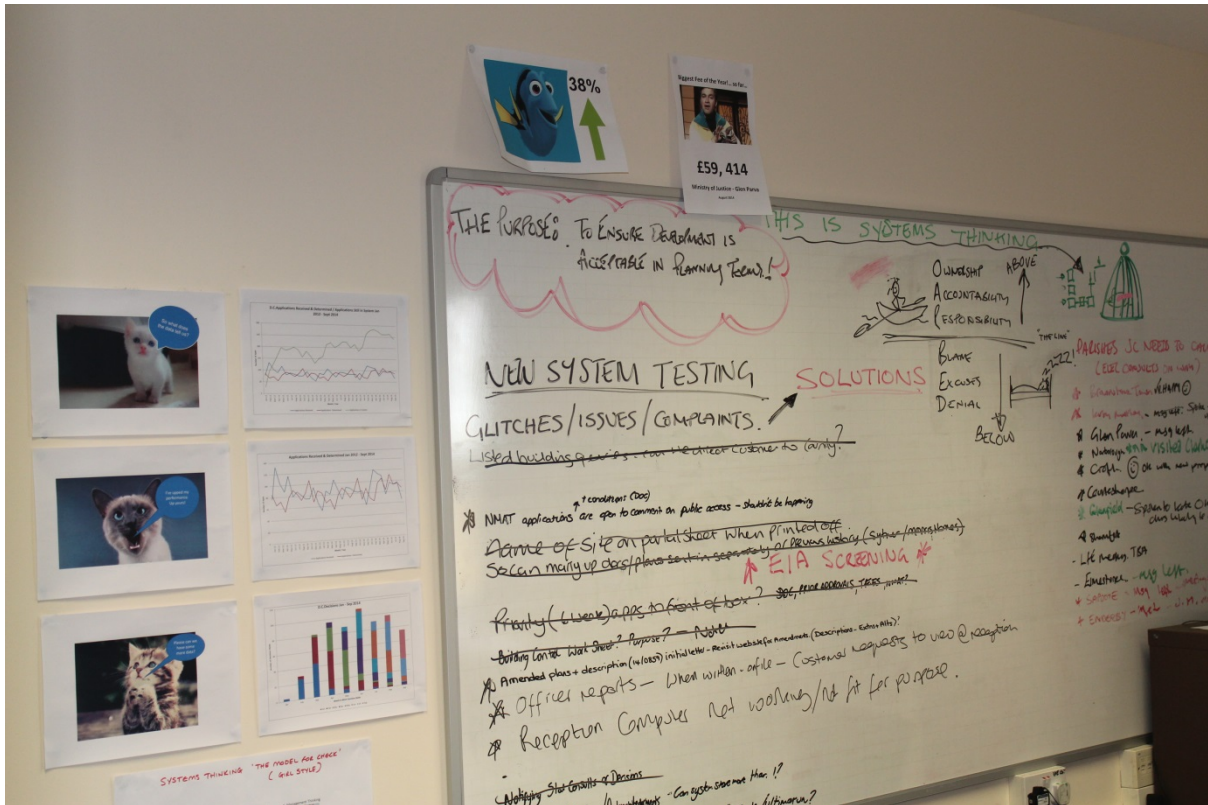
Summary

It's a cliché, but the designation process has set Blaby on a huge learning curve. Both Rob and James believe the service wouldn't be as good as it currently is without going into designation. The extra funding and extra staff has helped, but the key thing in getting de-designated has been the determination of the officers and management in improving the service. They've approved 3,500 new homes in the last year and have got a five-year land supply - which many local authorities haven't.

The council is confident that improvements in service delivery will continue.

More information

For more information, please contact james.carpenter@blaby.gov.uk. He'll be delighted to assist you and is very proud of what Blaby has achieved.



Blaby's Glitch Board: helping with continuous improvement.

Date of case study: October 2014

PAS can help you with improving your service. Please get in touch for a chat via: pas@local.gov.uk about this or any other PAS support.

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