

# How Wolverhampton City's planners gained respect from local business

*"The perception and reality is the planning process has undoubtedly improved and that is very welcome. We are beginning to get the message out to our clients that Wolverhampton is a good place to do business"*

*- Christopher Bywater (Managing Director, First City Property Consultants, Wolverhampton)*

Too often planning development control is seen as a blockage, causing delays and hurting the economy. At worst, it is viewed as complex, slow, arbitrary, and inconsistent. Wolverhampton was a typical example. The statistics and government returns showed no cause for alarm, but elected members and senior members of staff were taking so many complaints about poor service that by the end of 2010 the organisation decided to go beyond incremental improvement. What follows is the story of how Wolverhampton planners used the Vanguard Method to transform the way the system worked and win the respect of local business as an enabler of development rather than an obstacle.

The starting point was finding out exactly what was going on in the system – “go find out” or “Check” in Vanguard terms. Obvious, unsexy and unspectacular as this sounds, it's hard to overestimate how unusual it is.

Most change programmes start from the destination – an initiative, a new IT programme or a central government instruction. You then get some data that re-enforces your current assumptions: “Look how many calls we get. We obviously need a call centre”, or “If we had more admin to do this, the professionals could spend their time on other stuff”. This is the traditional approach. It offers little challenge, and if it goes wrong failure can be easily rationalised away – this is best practice, everyone else is in the same boat. Check starts from the other end, challenging current assumptions about the design and management of work by looking at what is really happening. Usually these assumptions are unconscious. Sometimes we rationalise them as “that's human nature” or “normal”. But how do we know? What does the data say? Almost always, the honest answer is there isn't any. But that's hard to admit, since if you do you're on your own; everyone else goes with the herd. So setting out to do something different may look like common sense and obvious after the event – but the decision of Wolverhampton City Council Planning Service was also (and this shouldn't be underestimated) in the first instance brave.

When the redesign team started digging, it found that of all the interactions planners had with the public, 55% were the result of a failing in the system – something had not happened or not happened correctly, or an applicant had been left confused by what the system did. The next question was how well the department achieved its purpose, defined as enabling good development (in the public interest). It found that for household and minor applications it took on average 134 days to get a final decision, with up to 359 days not unusual. This reflected the real customer experience – the end-to-end time from instigation of the process to green light for development. It was much longer than the official figure, based on time taken from ‘logged’ to ‘withdrawn/decision with conditions/decision’, measured from the system's rather than the customer's point of view.

What team members found as they began to understand the mechanics of the process stunned them. Looked at as a whole and end-to-end, the process was not only vastly overblown; very little of it was actually related to enabling good development. A great deal

on the other hand was related to feeding the IT system and handing the work off to someone else. The most noticeable waste that jumped out of the investigation was the number of checks that took place throughout the process – 12 to 14 in a typical application, with 100% final inspection by a team leader.

Because planners knew their work would be inspected, there was no incentive to get it right first time. So the initial work was error-prone. Not only did this waste time and effort, in practice it meant that the role of the section leaders – capable, experienced and highly skilled individuals – was no more than proofreading. Another fact that surfaced at this point was that officers typically had a caseload of up to 60 open cases at any one time.

Managers' traditional response to these issues is to try to make people work harder. They institute more stringent checks and feedback processes, tighten controls on logging dates or launch a team effort to process the applications faster. The manager might have one-to-ones with "slackers", suggesting raising caseloads to 70 or 80, exhorting them to emulate high flyers or setting local performance targets with prizes.

The problem with these solutions is they are based on a flawed understanding of the current approach. Mistakenly, they think they have a people problem rather than a system problem.

So let's for a moment consider a different path. Let's think about what might be causing a group of well meaning, conscientious, natural problem-solvers to provide a poor service. Let's assume that the leadership role is not one of action, of problem solving and superhuman effort. Let's instead think of the role in much simpler terms, as one of understanding what is getting in the way of gifted people doing their job. This was the path that Wolverhampton took. Instead of taking immediate action on the initial findings they kept digging. They asked, "What are the underlying assumptions that drive us to create a system that looks like this?" They avoided the trap of rationalising and explaining their problems from their current perspective. In doing so, they made some interesting discoveries.

*"Put good people into a bad system and the system will win every time."*  
Myron Tribus

### **The system blocked good work**

When the team explored why the work took so long, one key design factor kept coming up. In the name of efficiency, the work was rigorously functionalised. This not only disrupted the flow; at every stage there were checks and handovers. There was heavy use of IT, mostly to gather data on who had done what with the application so far. All this led to frequent rework once the application got to the professional planner charged with assessment. The department seemed busy, but that is not the same as getting it done.

*"...why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?" you inquire. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster."*

In fact, another discovery was a strong tendency to wait for the customer to contact the department to trigger the next activity – in effect; the user had become the service expeditor. For an organisation

*"I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically. "I'm too busy sawing!"*  
Stephen R. Covey

that proudly claimed to be 'customer-focused', this was a sobering realisation. As was the acknowledgement of the professionals – another recurring theme – that refusing an application that, with amendments, could have been allowed was often chosen as the easier option that helped them meet their targets. This is a classic illustration of the truth that targets have nothing to do with customers.

### **Underlying, unspoken, de facto operating principles**

Once again the team had reached a fork in the road. From what they had learned so far, they could see plenty of quick fixes and simple solutions... none of which would have permanently altered the system. Instead the key was to understand the underlying *de facto* operating principles of the system which, though never articulated or strategically agreed, still define how the organisation operates. In Wolverhampton these principles were summarised by the team and its leaders as:

- ⌘ If we do not hit the government target there will be trouble
  - ⌘ Check the work, you cannot trust the staff (this includes checking the checks that others have carried out)
  - ⌘ I'm paid too much to do that part of the job!
  - ⌘ A busy desk (caseload) is a good thing
  - ⌘ Use a checklist to decide, not your experience or initiative
  - ⌘ Focus on the targets, not the users of the service
- "In organisations we should be encouraging people to the view; that they are there to serve the customer."*  
*John Seddon*

This is a challenging list because it requires some mea culpa and critical reflection from the managers who created it. In fact in most organisations, and for most individuals, it is too challenging to make public and discussable. Yet by the very act of admitting that this is the normal culture of the organisation, those brave enough to do so have at that moment taken the first step towards changing it. Without unlearning current behaviours it is impossible to learn new ones. By publicly acknowledging what was wrong with the current system of work the organisation puts itself in a position to create something new.

*"The inability to uncover errors and other unpleasant truths arises from faulty organizational learning"*  
*Chris Argyris*

### **What they decided to do about it**

Tampering with the current approach can only ever result in doing things better, whereas the organisation had committed to doing better things (there is a huge difference). That means starting with a blank sheet of paper – stating clearly the

purpose of the new system and designing a workflow that would achieve that, on paper, with zero waste activity. To enable this, leaders and people who do the work take a real assignment and look at it as if it is the first time it has been seen. By taking things back to the core actions required to achieve purpose, stripping out everything else, a small team can learn just how close to 'perfect' the new system can flow, and what is required to make that happen.

In practice, this involved the team taking demands one by one and fulfilling them as cleanly and with as little waste activity as possible. Once each case was completed they rigorously

*At first, people refuse to believe that a strange, new thing can be done, and then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done, then it is done, and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.*  
*Francis Hodgson Burnett*

analysed the experiment to understand how it worked and what was required to make the next flow even more smoothly. By experimenting with real work in this way, in a safe experimental environment, the organisation can learn empirically what is required to achieve purpose cleanly. This learning can then be translated into a robust system redesign.

When the new design is stable, work volumes can be slowly ramped up, adding capacity to the team as required until it can handle all the current demand. Challenging, incredibly hard work but ultimately very simple for those who have unlearned current thinking about the design and management of work.

### **The impact of what they did**

Many case studies are produced with enthusiasm and great promise but without the results to match. In this instance the measures back up the claims. Customer service, efficiency (and cost of service) and morale have all substantially improved. From the local population who have to live with the development and potentially benefit from the investment, the businesses looking to invest in the area:

*“...improvement without measurement is like hunting ducks at midnight without a moon - lots of squawking and shooting with only random results and a high probability of damage”*

*Prof. Mohamed Zairi*

*“The overall speed of reaching a decision was outstanding; particularly impressive in terms of the speed of getting the planning application to Committee. This has enabled us to hit our targets for the delivery of JLR.”*

*- (Keith Webster – Principal Consultant, ANCER SPA, agent for landowners on i54) Regarding Jaguar Land Rover on i54.*

*Our recent experience of the planning department at Wolverhampton was very positive. Compared to other authorities we are dealing with in the Midlands at the moment we find that Wolverhampton's planning department are business-friendly, proactive and efficient in dealing with applications. I think that the current attitude towards assisting businesses and employment opportunities will help to encourage more investment in the area at a time when companies are being very choosy about which areas they invest in. If we hit resistance from local authorities with regard to planning matters it definitely turns us off from investing and therefore we do need the support to get planning permissions through.*

*- (Darren Turk – Land Director, Redrow Homes)*

From the staff perspective:

*“We are significantly less stressed and morale is the best it's been for a very long time. Planners are re-remembering the art of serving the customer and have been doing some really great work. EVERYONE is focussing on the needs of the customer (and not having to hit arbitrary targets), consistently improving how we deal with demand and reducing failure demand/waste. Good times.”*

*- Andy Johnson, Planning Officer*

End-to-end application processing times have fallen from 134 days to 45 days while operating costs have remained stable. There is no trade-off between quality and cost, improvements in the first automatically improving the second. Capital investment is nearly nil. No extra IT is involved, and nothing has been outsourced. This is not a one-off improvement programme that will fade once the fuss has died down, nor is it a single step change of improvement. The new way of working is a move to a dynamically better system that continues to look for ways to improve.

Wolverhampton shows that the planning system is not a hindrance to growth and

development in the public interest, as many assert; nor does it need expensive reform. What it does need is an understanding of real demand and a redesigning of the work to meet it. The difference between the old and new way of working? All they had to change was their thinking.