

Key Principles for managing a Development Management Service

A brief guide for practitioners, councillors and senior officers

An application spends most of its life in a queue

Most of the time an application is with an authority it is not being worked on but it is sitting in a queue waiting for something to happen.

Simple applications often get stuck in a queue behind complicated applications

Make sure that your work allocation process is not leading to unintended consequences.

Meeting targets is as much about work flow as it is about capacity

Regularly review how work is moving through the process; constantly ask: is this step / check / hand-off absolutely necessary / what purpose does it serve?

Never underestimate people's propensity to complicate things

It is often anxiety about making mistakes ("what if?") that build delay into the process. Keep things simple by empowering your people and collectively owning mistakes.

Every time work is handed over it goes to the bottom of the next person's in-box

This results in a delay. This is why it is quicker to shop in a supermarket where you only go to the checkout once, rather than going to several small shops. Minimise the number of handovers in the process.

A perfect application process would be this:

- Application arrives complete on day 1 and is registered that day and consultations done
- By day 22 all the consultations are done and the application can be approved.

Any deviation from this means that something has gone wrong.

It could be the applicant or agent's fault (because the scheme is unacceptable or the application cannot be validated); or at the end of the process because they delay completing a legal agreement. It could be other people's fault, for example consultation replies being late. Or it could be the LPA's fault (e.g. an overly complicated local list or poor advice).

You will be tempted to swap expensive staff for cheaper staff

Especially to do the more straightforward parts of the process. **Beware.** Any saving in cost per hour is very quickly lost in the cost of hand-offs, queueing and several people picking up the same piece of work and having to get their heads round it.

Something will go wrong one day

When things go wrong you'll be tempted to get everybody's work signed off by someone more senior (and more expensive). You will tell yourself these extra checks remove the possibility for error. **They won't.** Delegate everything down to a level where people are comfortable with "what is right".

Every minute spent on an application adds up to 2 days work for every 1,000 applications. Small changes in process can make a difference.

Focus on one thing at a time

With a mixed caseload and a lot of balls in the air, there is a tendency for people to try to do everything all the time. They then just do everything a bit...badly.

Keep things moving smoothly

If applications bunch up at the start of the process, for example at the allocation stage which is commonly done by someone fairly senior who is juggling lots of other priorities, they'll stay bunched up throughout. It's a lot easier to find time to sign off one application, than it is to sign off 10 that have bunched up. It's often the same person signing off as doing the allocation.

Handle an application as few times as possible

In an ideal world that would be twice, once when it comes in, once when it goes out. With the correct procedures in place that could be achievable for simple applications. Every time an application has to be handled it gets in a queue again, even if it is the same person doing the handling at each stage.

Know what is right, and get it right first time

If people are getting things wrong, or asking a lot of questions, they may be incompetent but it is more likely that they aren't clear what is right. People need to know what they should be doing, so avoid situations that are open to wide interpretation. This could be agents (or validation staff) not understanding what is required or what is important for an application to be validated. Alternatively it could be officers not being clear on policy interpretation, or on workload priorities (what gets done and what can be left for later). Everybody likes certainty and to be in control of things to a certain extent, to be able to do that they need to know what the right answer is.

Keep the process map as simple as possible.

In an ideal world there would be just one route that every application takes. Wherever there is a branch in a process map there is scope for (mis) interpretation and wrong turns, handovers and delays. This can't be avoided altogether because it starts at the very beginning where there are various ways of entering the system - paper applications vs. Planning Portal - but avoid unnecessary branches.

Ownership and responsibility of tasks is important.

Know whose fault it was - or rather make sure everyone knows whose job it is. Generally if people are clear that something is their responsibility they will do their best to do it well. Where work is shared in an unstructured way there is a risk of things being left for someone else to do. Where there is a lot of checking, amending and double checking people will take less care because in the end it isn't their piece of work. If it goes wrong it won't be their fault and nothing will be learned.

Do it because it's good customer service not because the targets require it.

In most cases if you are providing good customer service you will also be meeting the targets. Don't do things to meet the target which actually make the service to the customer worse.

Published as a working paper 24th March 2016 by Planning Advisory Service