

Key Principles for Managing Planning: Back Office Systems

A brief guide for practitioners, councillors and senior officers

General principles / requirements of any 'Back Office System'.

Be dissatisfied

Almost all of the systems used by planning departments compare badly with the systems we all use in our private lives with online retailers or our phones. They have not made the same progress over the last decade for some structural reasons in the market but also because of a lack of ambition in councils. Councils don't buy systems very often – when they do they should be brave, demanding and fear long-term commitment.

ICT systems are important

An 'effective' system has the following characteristics:

- Is simple to use
- Gives information to users that helps them do their job
- Is 'integrated'. This means that workflow, administration and document management (and web publishing) all are linked together automatically.

ICT people are important

Planning systems are often provided by the IT department, so the expertise is external to planning leaving a gap in expertise between users and providers. This situation discourages experimentation among users. Finding people with an intersection of interests and skills that covers planning, ICT and GIS is not easy. Try to have more than one, even if it means sharing with other departments or part funding within the IT department itself. Once you've found them (or grown your own) give them time and space to liaise with their network. Systems providers offer working parties, or there may be a technician's group in your region. Systems need to adapt and change, and people like to discuss and review what needs to happen together. Give ICT a standard item in the team meeting, so they can let people know what changes are in the pipeline.

Understand what users need the system to do FIRST

Probably the most commonly-committed mistake is to change the way people work to fit the system. This is the wrong way around. The users define what is needed to do the job efficiently and effectively, they then decide how the 'system' could help, and then the system designed and deployed.

Try not to be special

Every bit of customisation or localised tweaking gives you a long-term headache and additional maintenance cost. Before you design around your existing processes see if you can agree on a standard process (particularly for things like reports, letters, standard communications) with your neighbours. Standardisation brings many benefits – you can share staff, documents and reduce cost. Take care not to confuse standardising systems-driven things (like letters) with standardising your overall approach e.g. to customer service – avoid communicating with customers ONLY by (a systems-driven) email when a phone call would be more effective/customer focused.

Do not tolerate work-arounds

People are ingenious, and any unsolved problems will generate work-arounds. They are often the knock-on effect of designing the work around the system. It is inefficient, wastes resources and misdirects creativity and innovation.

Remote access

Access to the back office system should be available from anywhere to allow remote/home/on-site working.

In general

Make sure there is a process for both the maintenance of the systems/software and updates to the systems. Often Councils will require 'test' areas being set up before they allow updates to be installed. If this is the case in your authority, make sure it is set up at the same time as the new system and make sure that there is a service level agreement to install updates in a timely way, say within 5 working days of it being released. Ensure that when updates take place the staff know what they are and what needs to change in your internal processes, ensuring you DO NOT put in 'work arounds' which can quickly destroy all the hard work you have done!

Part 1: Application processing

This needs several basic elements:

- A simple layout that reflects the processing of a planning application i.e.
 - Receipt
 - Validation
 - Consultation
 - Assessment/Report writing
 - Decision Making
 - Planning Obligations
 - Appeals
 - Summary

- **Self-populating fields**
Fields within these pages need to be self-populated and validated e.g. electronic data is automatically put into the fields, consultation end dates are automatically calculated and intuitive e.g. decisions on planning applications cannot contain conditions if an application is a refusal!

- **Descriptions of the fields need to be clear and self-explanatory.**
Make it easy for people to get things right the first time. Having clear descriptions that everyone understands will reduce errors, inconsistency and incomplete data.

- **Fields NOT used need to be hidden**
All systems provided by suppliers are generic and not every authority will need to see every input field in the system. Having 'clean' input pages to work with will help speed things up and reduce errors - work towards only having the fields you need displayed.

- **Reports should be self-populated but simple**
As far as possible with data from within the system and formatted to meet the requirements of the Council (logos etc.). But be careful, some councils adopt a template system so complex that it costs more time than it saves. And, even worse, the outputs of template systems can be poor decisions – full of copy & paste conditions that don't make any sense. Automation – less is probably best.

- **Workflow**
The system needs to show where each application is in the process, what the next steps are in the process and how timely the processes are being made/completed.

- **Standard documents should be 'email-ready'**
All standard documents need to be designed and tailored for electronic communication rather than 'snail mail' and an ability to print and email 'correspondence' at the same time is essential.

- **Focus on 'active' documents**
The system needs to be able to identify active documents and 'hide' old or inactive document types. This can be a real problem especially if many 'one-off' documents are

created within the system for special applications. You'll need to take a view on who can change and create documents. It needs to be done with care – you can restrict authority to admins or help everyone understand the need to reduce complexity.

- **Reporting / monitoring reports (1)**

Standard monitoring reports need to be easily accessed, run and be self-validating i.e. PS1 and 2 returns and any regular management reports needed. Careful thought needs to be given to what reports are produced and how regularly they are run i.e. monthly performance figures against DCLG targets, local performance indicators, delegated v. committee decisions etc.

- **Reporting / Monitoring Reports (2)**

Stay in control. Remember, these systems are 'relational databases' and that you own the data. You should be able to run standard reports and or 'one offs' simply using a Structured Query Language (SQL) such as MS Access or Crystal Reports. Train your own team to do this. DO NOT rely solely on your system provider to run reports. Reporting should be owned by the team involved, and performance reports should never be a shock.

- **Auditing**

It is important that you have the ability to see 'who input what data when'. This is a basic necessity to trace the sequence of events and to link training to mistakes.

Part 2: Document Management (also known as Electronic Document Management System EDMS)

- **Linked systems**

Planners need the case on their screen to show the relevant plans and documents. There needs to be a direct link from the 'processing system' to the EDMS. Any joins should be seamless – don't make people type things out of one system and into another.
- **Efficient filing systems and document naming conventions**

Consider whether different filing systems are required for different responsibilities e.g. Development Management, Tree Preservation Orders, Enforcement or appeals. It may be better to have separate filing systems rather than 'clutter' one system with document types that will only be used by a limited number of people.
- **Keep the system clutter-free**

Be rigorous in limiting the number of document types as once created they tend to hang around for ever. Every now and then count them and prune ones that don't get used.
- **Take care with how you describe things**

The descriptions you use for documents will often be what is published on your web site and read by the public. For example, on a small application a simple description: 'Proposed Plan' is fine, but for one where there are 50 proposed plans it is not. In these cases, it may be better (if more time consuming) to have the actual plan title e.g. Northern Elevation, Section A-B etc. Your users will thank you, and your upfront investment will save lots of people time.
- **Web publishing**

Systems need to be set up so that certain document types, i.e. 'Locplan', automatically publish to the web site when an application is made valid. The system also needs to be able to 'un-publish' documents simply by changing the document type.
- **Publishing protocols**

Thought also needs to be given as to what documents are published (e.g. all neighbour replies?), consultee comments, officer reports and how long they stay on the web site. Remember, the Part 2 register only needs certain documents to be published. In addition, it is a good idea to have a 'retention policy' setting out how long documents stay in the system before being archived. Remember you can talk to your neighbours about all this.
- **Avoid duplication**

EDRM systems will also have report writing and 'forms'. This may duplicate or replace standard reports in the 'processing' software. It is always advisable to just use one system rather than two, but there is nothing wrong with using the 'processing' software for just that and producing letters, reports and other documents in the EDRM system. Just not both.

Part 3: Web access

- **Web access is about more than publicity**
Web access is not just for the publicity of applications, it is also a key tool in carrying out consultations quickly and effectively. It is also the ‘face’ of the department and will be the first experience many first time users will have of the service. So make sure it looks good and is simple to use.
- **Sign everyone up to web-based consultations**
Apart from statutory consultees who have all ‘signed up’ to web based consultations, all ‘internal’ consultees should be contacted in the same way. The system needs to be simple and emails with direct links to documents is a minimum requirement. Avoid making people ‘work’ to access/find things
- **Use standard formats**
Documents that have been published should be in a standard format, Adobe pdf style is common, with the ability to annotate and measure electronically as well as saving a copy so that ‘suggested amendments/comments’ can then be sent back to the case officer. Be aware of a push towards ‘open data’ formats. Expect people to be dissatisfied if you publish a weekly list as a pdf that has to be read by a human.
- **Clear pages and plain language aids understanding**
The layout of the published pages needs careful thought out as does the use of ‘planning terms’ within the pages. To a member of the public the term ‘Appeal’, may relate more to the lodging of an appeal against granting the application. Make sure plain language is used and where planning terminology is unavoidable, make sure it is explained.
- **Simple navigation**
Is it easy to find what you want to know and is it an ‘on click’ to find the plans? Has the web page got a ‘map’ based search facility?
- **3rd Party notifications**
Many systems now allow registration so that the 3rd parties can get notifications about planning applications they may be interested in. Think about how you keep this data and if it could be used in the future for other purposes such as ‘user satisfaction’ surveys?