

Planning performance and improvement

the changing landscape



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Introduction

The Government's intention to designate councils under Clause 1 of the Growth & Infrastructure Act makes it clear that they see timely determination of major planning applications as an indicator of a good service. But councils operate in complex environments and such a narrow definition of "performance" is risky. We've spoken to several councils about how they locally define performance and their recent steps to improve their planning services.

We've picked four councils to illustrate the variety of work councils are up to:

- **Aylesbury Vale:** After taking part in our benchmark club, AVDC wanted to explore the options they had to improve the service and cut costs. Interestingly they combine two approaches - a desktop simulation model and a series of workshops with key people, incorporating and testing everybody's ideas immediately. They are still debating the results, but this approach demonstrates a great way to expose the options to scrutiny and get buy-in from stakeholders.
- **Lincoln:** As part of a Council-wide "systems thinking" project, Lincoln's planners have dropped all talk of targets. They have also adopted a queuing system to prevent planners being overwhelmed with a large number of simultaneous open cases. The result is higher productivity as peer pressure and routine sharing of progress helps move cases forward.
- **Croydon:** The London Borough of Croydon is going to grow at a great rate over the next decade and they need to find new ways to cope with large schemes. Their response is to organise their teams in a new way, and ensure that a new type of planning committee has more engagement with major developments. This is what "development management" looks like for the biggest schemes.
- **Camden:** Their latest project is based on four themes: time, satisfaction, cost and quality. What stands out is their progress measuring and defining quality. For all planning departments the delivery of a good planning service is crucial, but difficult to pin down. The Camden quality indicator and process might be the beginning of a way to capture, understand and improve the value added by a good set of policies, planners and committee members.

Councils need to be pragmatic. Not all the outcomes we see are positive or predictable, and in some cases changes are still being implemented. This case study shows the sorts of changes underway and demonstrates how essential it is to test and learn as we respond to the changing demands on the planning function.

Simulation at Aylesbury Vale

The Aylesbury Vale development management team are faced with the challenge of either generating more income to cover their costs, or cutting out processes and streamlining their service. They have been participating in the PAS benchmarking programme since 2011, which has helped identify a substantial gap between the level of application fee income received and the cost of funding the development management service.

Their challenge is to significantly reduce that gap during the year ahead. A series of internally led staff workshops identified some immediate savings and suggested many areas where changes to their processes and management system might help, but it was agreed that a solid evidence base was needed to back up these assumptions.

Aylesbury had already collected a large amount of raw data from their benchmarking. They decided that they would use this to become the first pilot authority for a bespoke computer simulation exercise 'PlanSim' that replicates the development management process and tests the effectiveness of all the changes proposed. PlanSim would provide Aylesbury with the solid evidence base they need to make complex decisions that will, inevitably, involve trade-offs and need to take account of political realities.

PlanSim is a modelling tool, which takes as part of its input the data from the PAS benchmark club using Simul8 software to build a model of the planning function to measure and identify:

- holdups/issues in the current development management process
- the impact of proposed changes to methods of working
- the realistic range of likely performance and cost given a range of variable criteria such as volume of applications or staff levels
- the workload tipping points that trigger change in staff numbers resources required
- the risks to service delivery that may arise from the proposed scenarios.

Alasdair Robertson, Director of i-three analytics and developer of the PlanSim software, says "You can choose your future using hunches and best guesses. Or you can decide on the evidence. The benefits of simulation are that it can help authorities to test options for service improvement and efficiency without any of the risks of experimenting in a live service environment."

Engaging staff and stakeholders

The most important element of this approach was to involve staff. Some of the bigger issues already identified were likely to impact significantly on elected members, agents and the community. So it was decided to hold a series of workshops, fully involving their representatives, in the scenario development and simulations.



Fig:2 Results of the survey about the ideas that went into the model

The simulation exercise illustrates where hold ups or inefficiencies occur in the process and what would happen in a variety of scenarios where elements or where combinations of elements of the data are varied.

PlanSim runs the scenarios over a simulated year but repeats the year many times with different random events such as staff absences, the timing of large applications and other real world factors.

The results of each scenario are tested and compared against a variety of criteria relating to time, staff, cost, bottlenecks, etc.

The benefit is that the likely impact of proposed changes is tested in a real time environment, turning 'hunches' into solidly based evidence assessments.

The simulation results reinforced Aylesbury's original thinking in some areas, such as delegation levels. In others, such as changing the length of the committee cycle, it has allowed them to consider the procedural advantages alongside the cost - the exercise clearly demonstrated an adverse effect in terms of an increase in resource required.

Maggie Walsh, Business Support Manager at Aylesbury Vale says that some of the results of the simulation exercise are very surprising, and fundamentally challenge previous thinking, particularly in the areas of pre-application charging and team structure and management roles.

Alasdair is not surprised. He says that there are only three outcomes to any simulation exercise, "the data is wrong; the original model is wrong; or, however unpalatable, the results are right!" Susan Kitchen, Planning Manager, feels that "overall, the exercise has helped staff to visualise where they fit into the bigger picture and has demonstrated the need to focus on what can make a difference". It also helps staff understand the implications of a more risk-based approach to signing off decisions.

Advice for others/Lessons to learn

Susan and Maggie are clear that talking to other authorities and learning from their experiences via workshops and peer meetings has been invaluable in developing their thinking, as well as working with a consultant who has challenged them.

They are proud of the way in which staff have been involved since the beginning of the process and emphasise that this engagement has been invaluable in managing expectations as well as getting as far as they have in implementation.

Susan's final thought is that undertaking the workshops and simulation review has required the whole team to let go of any pre-conceived ideas and that testing the benefits of actions to provide a solid evidence base is enabling the authority to focus on what is really worth pursuing to make the difference.

Lincoln's "measures not targets" approach

Lincoln's "measures not targets" approach

In 2011, the City of Lincoln was part-way through the first phase of a "Systems Thinking" approach to service delivery. Planning Manager, Paul Seddon, took the opportunity to volunteer the development management service as the next area to undertake this challenge.

Paul admits there were concerns; the staff had already moved a long way in their thinking from Development Control to Development Management and he was determined that this progress should not be lost in the review. There was also scepticism around 'How can a system developed for the manufacture of cars work for us?'

Systems Thinking

The Systems thinking approach was developed in the 1940s at Toyota and is built around five core principles of management:

- better service costs less
- good people want to do a good job
- measures not targets
- change will not happen unless you first understand and then change the work
- change should be led by management but done by the staff

Lincoln used an external consultancy company to facilitate a systems thinking approach and set the ground rules for the review. These are important as too narrow an approach risked compromising the new development management culture. A review team, drawn from a mix of planning officers, administrative and technical support, under Paul's leadership, worked with the consultant to ensure that the process changes weren't just about speed, and that quality would be maintained.

The process adopted a Check:Plan:Do approach.

- CHECK – understand what we do and we do it from a customer and a staff perspective.
- PLAN – build a blueprint, identify value steps and redesign to remove waste and set measures.
- DO – live pilot and compare.

Purpose of the service

Paul feels the most important decision in the early stages was to agree what the purpose of the service is. This ensured the focus was on Development Management, not just on creating a cheaper way of making speedy decisions.

To make decisions which allows deliverable development that meets the wider aspirations of the city. And to deliver this purpose:

- as fast as possible
- with the right amount of support
- as efficiently as possible.

The review team agreed that everything relating to a single item of work should be referred to as a “case”. This meant that requests for pre-application advice, discharge of conditions, enforcement or “one off” pieces of work are identified as “cases” and can be given a similar priority to planning applications. Following an intensive four weeks’ of process mapping and continuously asking the question ‘have we got it good enough?’, a pilot scheme introduced a number of major changes to the system.

Use of the development support team

Staff identified ways of working and large caseloads as the main cause of stress and delays. Staff observed during the review, spent days trying to complete urgent reports whilst being continually interrupted by calls and queries about other cases or pre-application advice. For a service that prides itself on ease of access for customers and quality advice, this was clearly coming at a cost in stress levels and productivity. It was agreed to introduce a process of managing customer contacts so that case officers were not constantly reacting to customer demands and had the time to get on with progressing applications. The challenge here was maintaining the quality of advice and service to customers.

The review team decided to transfer all access (phones, e-mail enquiries and departmental visitors) from case officers to the development support team backed up by a single duty officer. This system redesign does not prevent contact between case officers and stakeholders; it allows them to proactively manage that interaction. Today, appointments are scheduled or contact details are taken. This allows case officers to make contact at a convenient time towards the end of the day or, at the latest, the next day.

To reduce unnecessary contacts, all correspondence was reviewed and rewritten to better explain to customers how they would be dealt with. Case officers now make contact with an applicant/agent once a case is allocated to them; again, putting the case officer in control and delivering a better service.

The Development Support team now answer as many queries as possible and this has proved motivational in enhancing their role and developing their careers. Paul cites as an example two technicians who have been given the opportunity to cover the maternity leave of one of the case officers, because of their increased confidence and knowledge.

Case allocation

Without a consistent approach to caseload management, planners were expected to manage caseloads and contribute to timely decision making, without any protection from the typical peaks and troughs in workloads and with often conflicting priorities across the service. Case officers might have up to 50 open cases at any one time. To ease the immediate pressure on case officers, an optimum number of open cases for officers are identified and all cases not allocated are kept in a holding system. Validation

and consultation is carried out by the Development Support team at receipt stage and cases are then allocated out to officers on a first in, first out basis as cases are completed.

Concerns about how queries on cases in the holding system would be dealt with were voiced, but the evidence was that there were rarely any queries about the progress of a case in the first three weeks after submission. The Development Support team normally deals with queries about unallocated cases. The number of cases and the length of time they are in the holding system can vary significantly. One advantage is that once allocated, a case is transferred to the case officer as a complete file, so can often be dealt with in a concentrated three or four day period rather than sitting in a pile and being dealt with in week 7. Paul describes the holding system as a buffer; it moves the stress of dealing with varying levels of workload away from case officers and rightfully makes monitoring a management issue.

Scrapping target dates

Building on the development management culture that is already improving the balance between speed and quality, the review team decided that the eight or thirteen week target was not only a poor measure of performance but often has perverse effects. Timeliness is acknowledged as important, but often cases that missed their due date do not command the same level of urgency as those approaching their deadline - and often regardless of the scale or value of the development to the city, the local economy or the applicant.

Throughput Board

Target completion dates no longer appear on documents. Instead, a visual display, known as the Throughput Board was created. It tracks the progress of all allocated cases



Fig: 3 Illustration of Throughput Board and associated Visual Measures Board

until completed. The Board is a graphical snapshot of the caseload at any one time. 'Live' cases are displayed and 'waiting' cases stored in the holding system. All available case officers attend a daily session to update progress, receive new cases and 'problem solve'. Having the visual display openly available has provided some positive peer pressure, which has helped improve consistency, achieve faster results and improve and re-affirm good team working.

Visual Measures board

A more in depth understanding of the performance across all work areas led to the development of a Visual Measures Board. It was agreed that the displays should be kept as simple as possible and very visual. Originally, meetings were held around the Visual Measure Board on a fortnightly basis and these meetings also acted as further problem-solving sessions. As the system has become routine, these meetings have reduced to a monthly cycle that allows Paul to identify and respond to problems. Case officers take it in turns to

lead the discussion about the measures and what they indicate about performance each month.

Paul remembers that they “took a deep breath, held their nerve – and it worked!” He reports that by the end of the pilot there were no stalled ‘old’ cases remaining anywhere in the system. Furthermore, because there was continuous discussion between the pilot team and those still working in the old system, by the end of the three-month pilot period all of the case officers had opted to work under the new system.

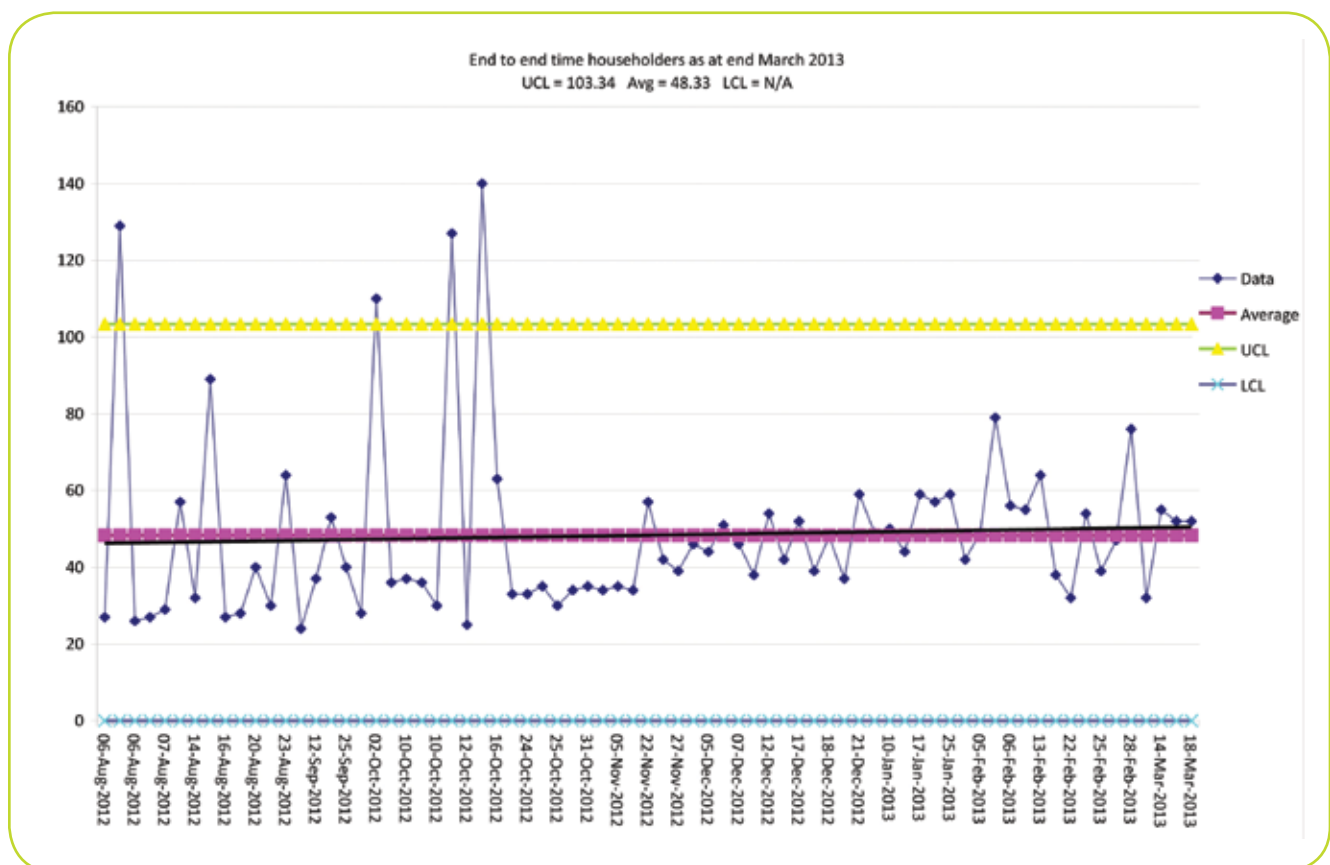


Fig: 4A Graphs from the Throughput Board and associated Visual Measures Board

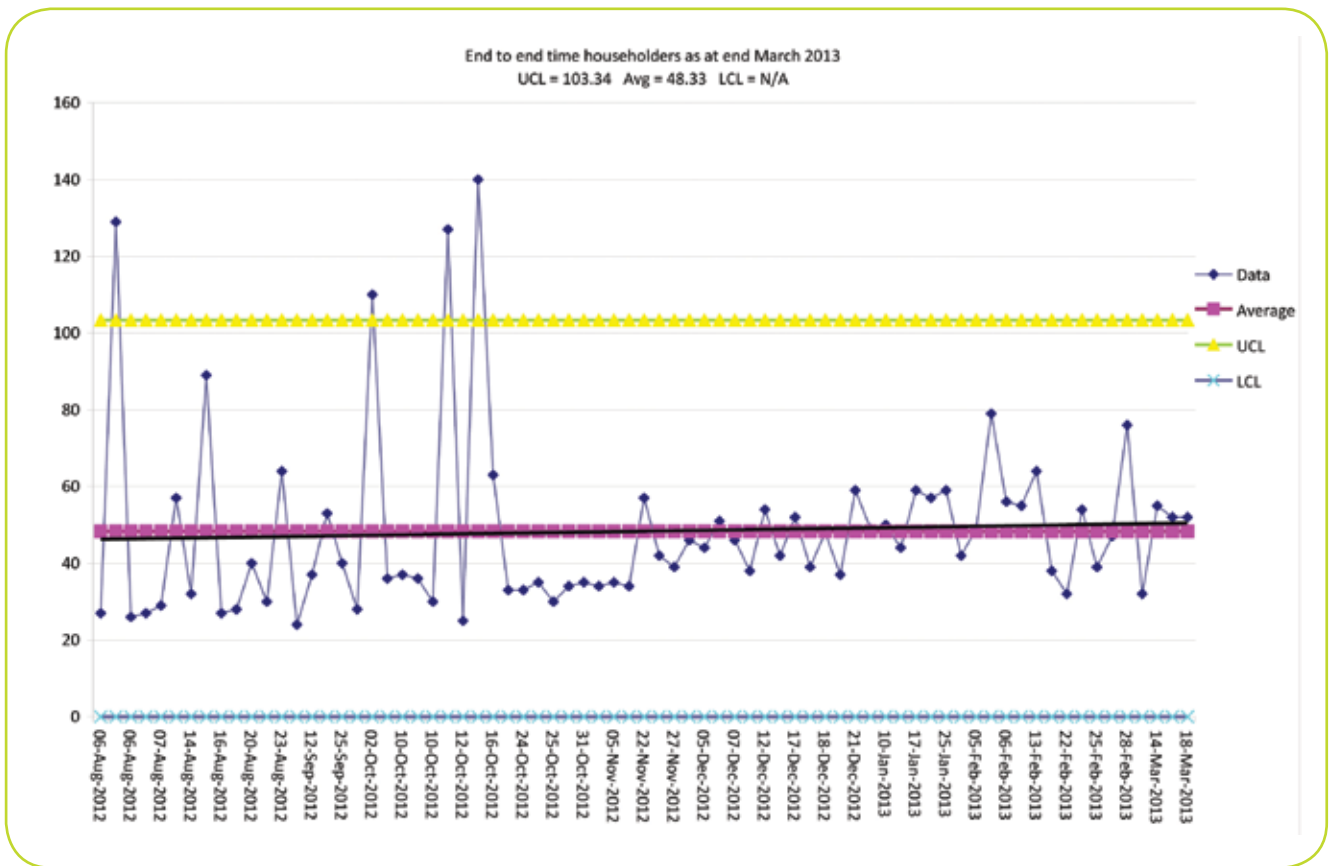


Fig: 4B Graphs from the Throughput Board and associated Visual Measures Board

Advice for others/Lessons to learn

Paul is proud that the team spirit of his staff has survived intact from what could have been a very bruising process, and that the new system helps them “to want to do the best job they can”.

- Never use the term “waste” to describe any work currently being done. Lincoln decided to designate such work as “avoidable” which was less de-motivating to staff.
- Ask “can we avoid/reduce the cost but still provide the same quality to the customer in a better way?”
- Prepare a deliverable action plan that staff are fully engaged with.
- Pick the right team, lead from the front through to completion and beyond.
- Pick the right consultants to work with. In Lincoln’s case the consultants were essential; they challenged the pilot team at every step, listened properly, understood the role of planning and development management at Lincoln, and were prepared to concede points and move their ground when overwhelming evidence was provided.
- Work hard to manage stakeholder’s service expectations, especially around access to case officers.

- expectations, especially around access to case officers.
- Ensure that case officers return calls promptly to prevent repeat customer calls.
- Collecting performance data is resource intensive, so be realistic about how often monitoring meetings are held.

The tests of success

Paul's tests of success are that the changes remain firmly in place after more than two years, continue to be liked by staff and customers and, most importantly, they 'work'. Paul is also pragmatic about the need for continuing change at Lincoln. While many things have worked very well, there remain problems around the pre-application offer to developers and some aspects of cost management. He and his team are clear that their improvement work is not complete, and probably never will be.

Delivering large scale developments in Croydon

Croydon is a London Borough with sustained and significant levels of projected growth. Mike Kiely, Director of Planning & Building Control, admits that the Borough has, historically, not always handled large-scale developments well. The challenge was to ensure that Croydon could provide an efficient and timely service to its residents, businesses and investors whilst at the same time making it clear that they would only accept good quality development.

Political control within the borough is subject to change and the areas with most potential development are those that are most vulnerable to changes of control. So, to achieve this goal Croydon have made a number of changes to the way it deals with strategic planning issues.

The “virtual team” approach

Mike says that the challenge with major applications is that they need a different approach, but as pieces of work they are a bit like buses; they do not come along evenly. It’s a challenge to maintain and manage the necessary skills and resources, even in a large borough like Croydon. Mike’s solution involves setting up a Strategic Applications Team that acts as a “virtual team”. In practice, any officer in Development Management can deal with a major application but when they do, they report to the Strategic Applications Team Leader rather than their area based team leader.

This means that the approach Croydon takes major applications is maintained and developed effectively.

The design team approach

All large applications are seen as discrete projects with a single lead officer, and a team of planners, urban designers, highway engineers, etc. is formed as required to effectively progress the scheme. Mike describes this as a ‘design team’ rather than the usual development team, because the emphasis is on working with the developer at the earliest possible stage to influence the scheme’s design. This helps the project progress in a logical way and to the satisfaction of all parties. The key inputs of urban design and development management are deployed as required throughout the process. In practice, the balance of inputs changes through the life of the application as the emphasis shifts from strategic planning to development management.

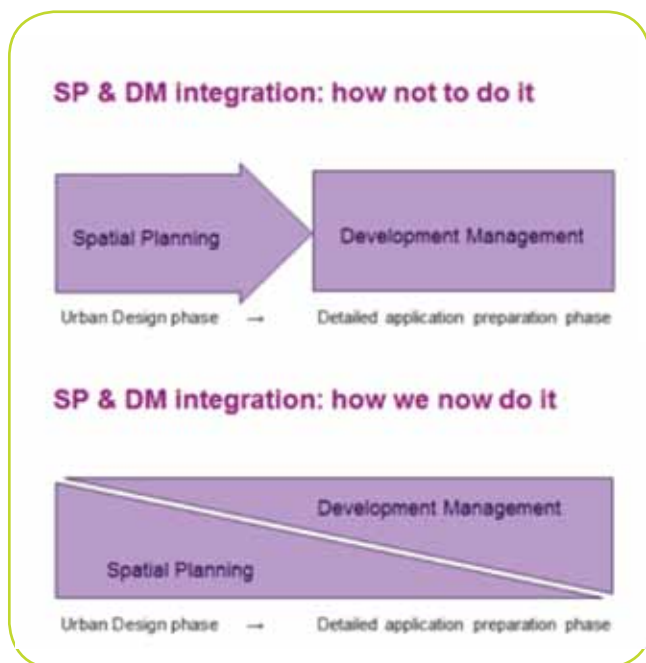


Fig 5: Croydon’s “design team” approach

A Strategic Applications Committee

Mike decided that the improvement programme must be whole-heartedly embraced by the politicians, and so a separate Strategic Applications Committee has been set up to run alongside the Planning Committee. The Strategic Applications Committee deals with only two types of item:

- applications requiring a developer presentation
- major applications for determination.

The developer presentations are held in public but there is no public speaking allowed. Mike says that, initially, the tricky thing was getting members to understand that they must not be seen to pre-determine applications. Worries about this were quickly

overcome and members welcome the opportunity to be involved at an early stage. A bonus has been that if politicians have not raised issues during the early stages it has proved possible to deal with some of these major applications as delegated decisions.

Involving elected members in the vision

In addition to developer presentations, Croydon’s planners also hold a series of workshops over the year to develop the “vision” for 16 key places within the borough. Mike involves junior officers in this work to develop skills within his team, especially among junior members of staff who regularly present items and their own ideas to the Member Liaison Forum (MLF). The MLF is a cross-party group that meets to develop planning policy for the Borough. It is made up of two elected representatives from each quarter of the Borough, together with the Portfolio Holder and the Chair of Planning. The deliberations of this group are not binding but go a long way towards informing the policy decisions taken by Cabinet.

Croydon has now adopted masterplans for five key development areas. These have been developed through Boards that have been set up to include landowners, developers and local authority representatives. Working in this way means that all parties have agreed and taken ownership of the masterplan and are then happy to deliver on that basis. Mike comments that this consensus means the planners can move forward confidently, knowing that they have political “buy in” to schemes, although he warns that it can still take a frustratingly long time to get development going on the ground.

Measuring quality at Camden

LB Camden used the “wakeup call” of the Killian Pretty Review to introduce a culture change towards Development Management throughout the service a few years ago. More recently, a new set of performance measures have been introduced which focus on four key areas to produce “slicker processes” and the right outcomes:

- Timeliness
- Customer satisfaction
- Cost
- Quality

Timeliness: getting away from Week 8

Like many other authorities, most minor application decisions at Camden were being taken during the eighth week because that was the deadline and measurement for performance. Many of these decisions could have been taken earlier and so the Camden team agreed to shift away from measuring against the Week 8 target and instead focus on average time taken instead. This has reduced the time taken for minor application decisions by about a week over the last year.

Customer satisfaction – aim for perfect

Camden has been seeking the views of applicants, agents and third parties at the point that a decision is issued. However, they have been frustrated by low participation rates and some technology problems that have limited the usefulness of the data provided.

The team admit that improving their customer service is one of their biggest on-going challenges. They are currently undertaking a ‘systems thinking’ review that is looking at each element of the development management process as it affects customers. They hope to identify changes that can be made to improve and add value to the service provided.

Principle	Examples of direct action
Going 100% electronic	Support members, Conservation Area Committees, officers, neighbours and meetings Improve website to increase self-service Information storage
Focus on receiving clean information	Review web forms Accredited agent scheme Validation process
Minimise hand-offs	Simplify Member Briefing and DC Committee processes Scanning and indexing Review approach to checking and allocation
Strip out waste	Templates Pre-app fee structure Work with post room and receptions IT & website improvements Administrative processes
Focus on value for the customer – aim for perfect	Detailed analysis of Duty Planner service Quality and monitoring of pre-apps Communicate with consultees and customers IT improvements Ongoing training & development

Fig 6: Camden's criteria for systems thinking review of customer service

Costs

Faced, in 2011, with needing to make significant changes to arrive at an acceptable budget, the team agreed that this could be achieved through a variety of methods:

- Increase revenue: Pre-application advice charging – now introduced for minor applications (although not for third party advice)
- Decrease costs: Reduction to the core number of permanent staff – using more temporary short term contract staff as and when there are peaks in application levels
- Decrease costs: Authority-wide savings to core centralised services were negotiated as part of a new business model
- Decrease costs: Customer service focus and process efficiencies – around validation processes, better website information.

As a result, the planning service has increased its income for the last two years and is forecasting further cost savings for this and future years.

Quality: The Camden Quality Indicator

One of the areas that the Camden team decided to focus on was Quality; “the Holy Grail”, according to Frances Wheat, Camden’s Head of DM. But how do you measure the quality of planning applications? Until the review Camden had simply calculated the percentage of applications approved that met a minimum quality standard. This was of limited use and there was unease about setting up any form of

local accreditation scheme for agents to improve quality overall.

So the decision was taken to move towards an outcomes based measurement of quality which would encompass design, sustainability, transport and land use. The quality measurement would initially be undertaken for all major applications (except for change of use cases).

Because quality is potentially a subjective thing to measure, Camden decided to adopt and tweak the CABA Building for Life criteria. Sara Whelan, Camden’s Advice & Consultation Team Manager, says that the CABA’s criteria had the advantage of being a nationally recognised standard which applicants and agents would find acceptable and credible.

The set of 20 criteria cover aspects of the environment and community, character, streets, parking, pedestrianisation, design and construction (including sustainability). The Camden Quality Indicator provides more detailed policy weighting for each of the 20 elements so that each development submitted can be scored out a maximum of 20 marks.

	Building for Life	Camden Building for Life
1	Does the development provide (or is it close to) community facilities, such as a school, parks, play areas, shops, pubs or cafes?	To score a point the development should meet all of the following criteria. To score 0.5 points the development should be within walking distance to two of the following criteria: 1) 400m of local shop, 2) 800m of open space, 3) 800m local centre, 4) 800m to a primary school by the shortest walking route
6	Is the design specific to the scheme?	Does the scheme respond successfully to its context? This should be explained in the Design and Access Statement. If yes 1 point should be achieved, if not no points should be achieved.
12	Is the car parking well integrated and situated so as to support the street scene?	If the building is secured as car free or car capped the scheme should achieve a point (including disabled parking). If car parking has been approved and there is adequate justification it should achieve 0.5. If parking has been proposed with no justification then it should achieve 0.
16	Is public space well designed and does it have suitable management arrangements in place?	Public space – In Camden this question should apply to public and private open space and scoring 0.5 of a point should be dependent on both the quantity and quality of space. In assessing the quality of space its suitability, the proposed function as well as aesthetic issues should be considered. Suitable management – will the developer or the council manage any adopted highway or new public space? If they have a straightforward management plan then the scheme should be awarded 0.5 point.

Fig 7: Examples of criteria from the Camden Quality Indicator

Developments are measured by the case officer at four stages:

- Pre-application
- Application submission
- Approval of scheme
- Completion of scheme.

This ensures that the value added by engagement with the planning system throughout the process can be clearly demonstrated and shown diagrammatically as Fig 8 below.

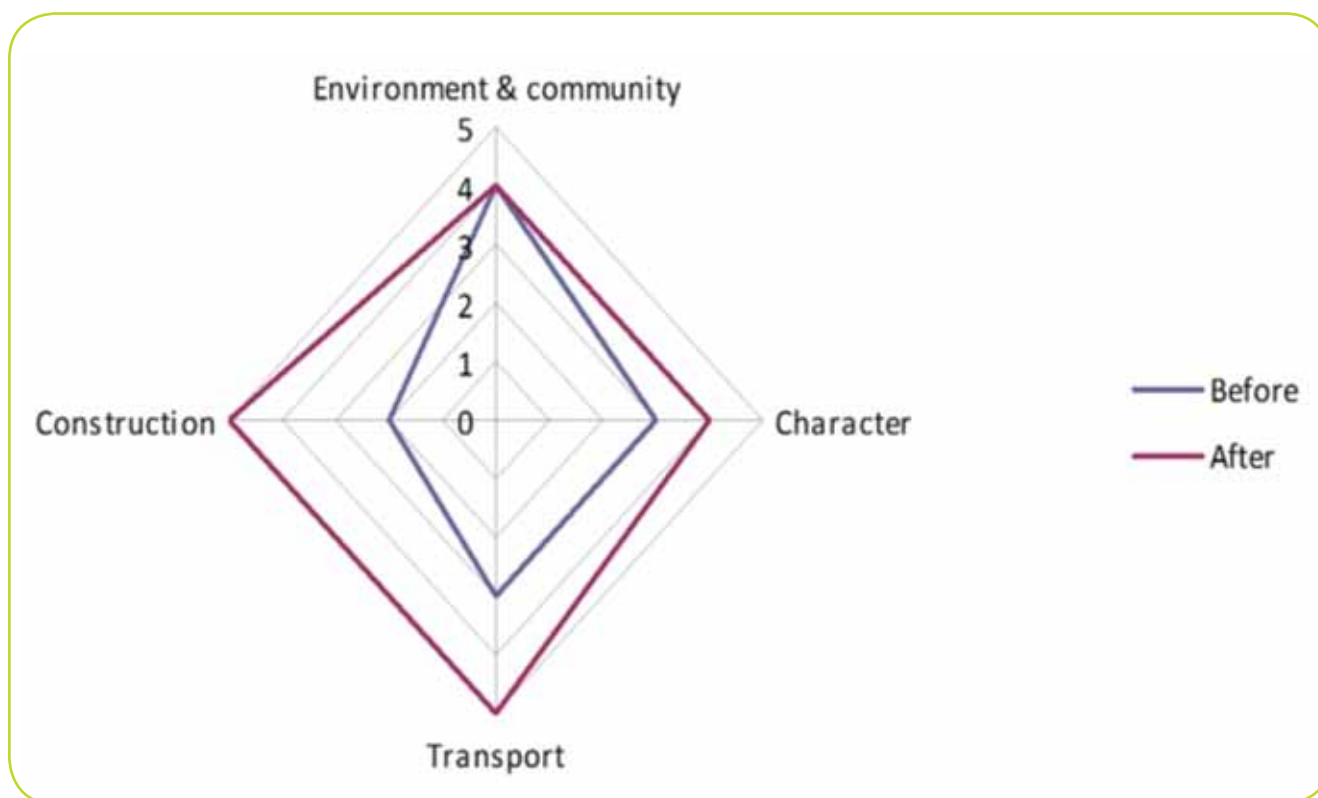


Fig 8: Diagram of quality indicator

The results can also be displayed cumulatively showing the scores for all majors dealt with over a given period of time, based on averages. The diagrams can identify the areas where most value has been added, for example in construction or character. They will also be able to compare the quality of council schemes against private developments and whether the planning department adds the same value and increases the quality of all schemes, regardless of ownership.

All of the measuring will be monitored by Camden's Placeshaping Team for consistency of approach into the scoring.

Sara says that the scheme has been enthusiastically received by elected members but that agents are more cautious and are anxious that, at this stage, it should only be used as an internal monitoring tool.

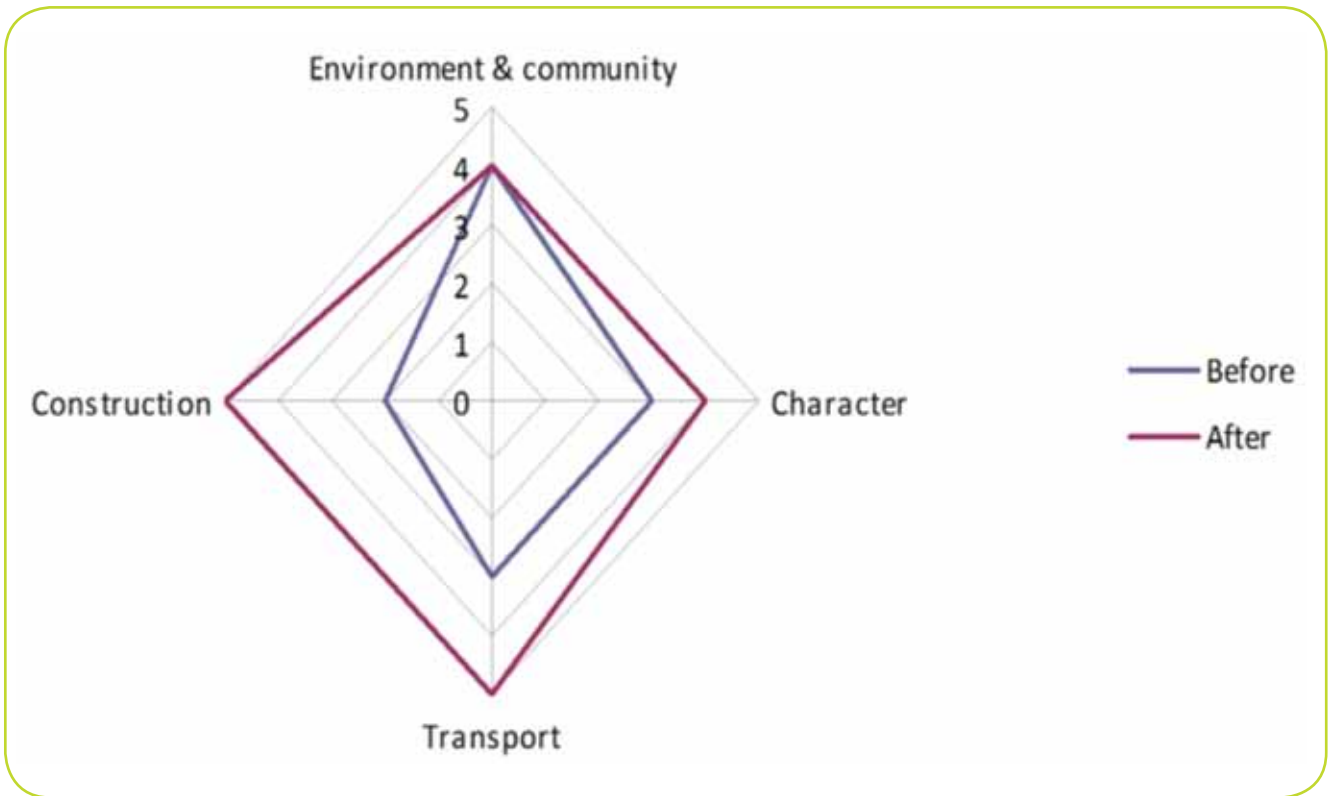


Fig 9: Quality indicator case study 1 – Pre-application engagement

Redevelopment of a site to provide 91 residential units (12 affordable and 79 market tenure, Class C3) in a building comprising basement, ground and four

upper storeys, with basement parking and associated hard and soft landscaping (following the demolition of original office and residential buildings).

Total score before pre-application discussions = 9

Total score after pre-application discussions = 16.5

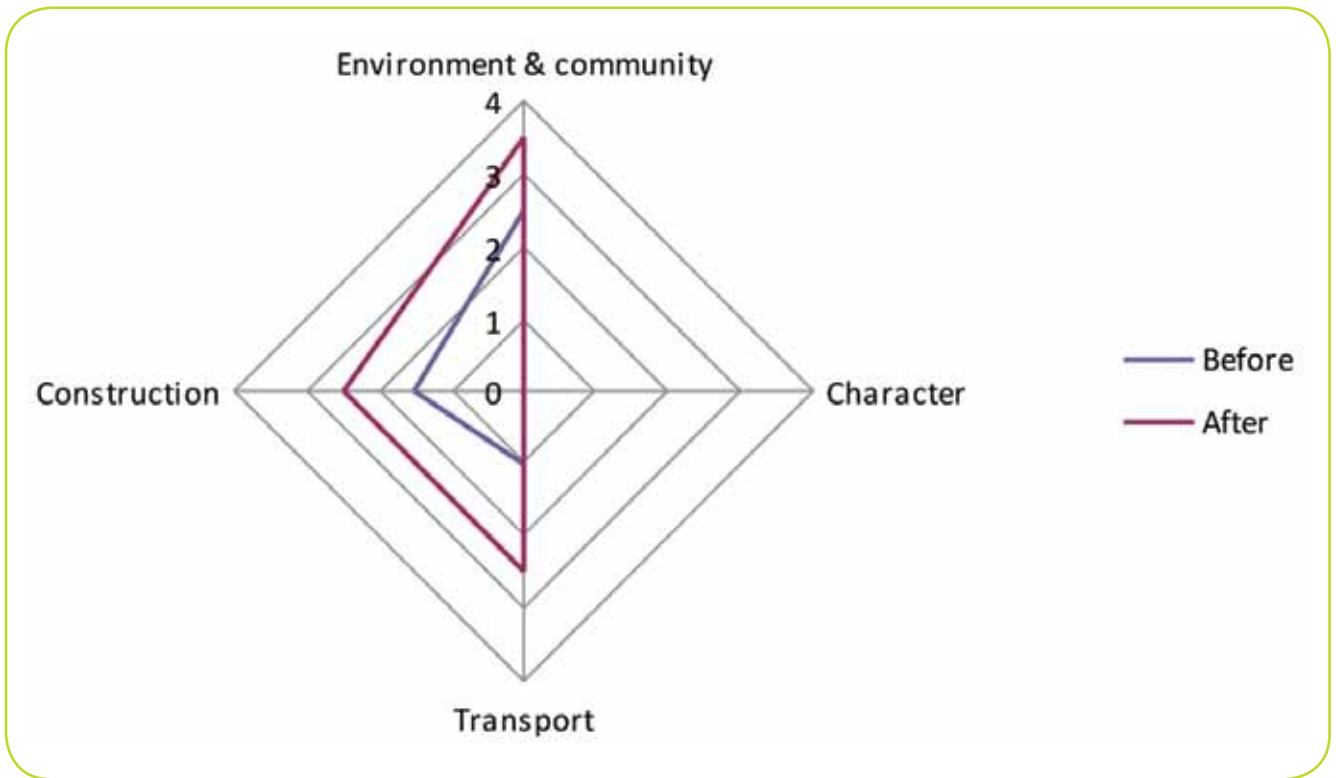


Fig 10: Quality indicator case study 2 – Planning application

Change of use of second to seventh floors of building from offices (Class B1) to 8 self-contained residential units (Class C3), provision of bike and bin stores in rear

courtyard, replacement of window with door on rear courtyard at ground floor level, green roof above second floor level, replacement of windows and associated works.

Total score before = 5

Total score after = 8.5

Note - no addition to character score as application was for a change of use – application dealt with within 13 weeks

Its early days yet for this initiative, but both Frances and Sara agree that the measurement results are helping to focus minds on the quality elements of an application and should build in longer-term durability and quality in Camden’s built environment.

Top Tips from the authorities

We asked the four councils in this case study for their top tips to share with other authorities. Together, and in no particular order, they came up with nine:

1. make sure staff are aware of what is going on and are kept informed of progress throughout
2. ensure you have the support of elected members and other departments
3. having a vision for your area can be very powerful but it must be intellectually robust and challenging
4. if you are using a consultant make sure that you pick someone who will work well with your team and is genuinely interested in helping you improve
5. have a published work programme that everyone is satisfied can be implemented
6. don't underestimate the time and effort that data gathering will take
7. making small incremental changes can be easier to manage than wholesale transformation
8. test improvements and look for evidence to back up changes
9. be patient – it will take time to make a difference.

The right environment for change

Final thoughts from PAS

From our own experience of working alongside councils, their list is missing one crucially important element. The one thing that each of these councils share is that their success is built upon projects that involve a group of thoughtful and capable **people** who have the **backing and goodwill** of their senior management and political teams. In our view, these councils are able to deliver change because of a **long-term commitment** to the service that now allows them to draw on the expertise and talent they have nurtured.

Moreover, all these approaches have been driven by local priorities and local opportunities. None of them are working to a template, and each has taken their own view on what they're trying to achieve.

What is marked is that that have all chosen several indicators of success, and none of them are satisfied trying to manage down to a “quick and cheap” metric. It's also clear that councils have learnt much from the big-bang, invest-to-save projects of the past, with most interviewees acknowledging that no service is ever improved enough.

These councils may be worthy case studies now, but soon every council will need to ensure that their work includes an element of testing, changing and learning.

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Documents consulted:

CABE Building for Life criteria

Camden Quality Indicator, 2012

City of Lincoln 'Lean Systems Thinking Report: Findings of Review', March 2011

i-three analytics 'Improve the Service' workshop and PlanSim documentation



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