DEVELOPMENT CONTROL AND PLANNING
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The development planning system shapes our towns, cities and countryside. Over its first 50 years the system has delivered some important successes...

- the management of urban growth through green belt policy
- the conservation of high-quality natural and historic environments
- improved vitality in our town and city centres
- and, in partnership with others, the regeneration of decayed industrial and urban areas

...and these achievements reflect a service with solid professional and technical skills. Users often praise planning staff for being helpful and well-informed. But authorities must take action in five key areas:

1. Focusing on what matters to local people...
   - reshaping the development plan to address the evolving community strategy
   - moving beyond consultation to a responsive dialogue with those affected by planning decisions
   - securing planning obligations that fit community needs, rather than ad hoc infrastructure improvements

2. Assuring the quality of development...
   - appraising the value that development control adds to the built environment
   - improving the quality of development through effective enforcement
   - providing a clear appraisal of the results delivered by the development plan

3. Enhancing customer care...
   - applying the requirements for improved customer care in development control, as defined in *Building in Quality* and elsewhere (Ref 1)
   - moving forward on the electronic delivery of planning services

4. Reducing delay in development control...
   - managing the development control service carefully to remove any weaknesses in business processes
   - making the best possible use of delegated powers

5. Reinforcing management systems to assure quality.
   - using support staff and improved ICT to enhance customer care
   - increasing partnership working to develop common solutions to shared problems
   - using external resources appropriately, particularly to deal with workload peaks and specialist tasks
   - improving guidance for members, on both formal and informal levels

The pace of improvement in planning services over the past decade has been disappointing. This report aims to highlight key weaknesses in the service – while sharing some of the approaches that have been taken in good and improving planning services.
1. This publication is part of the AC Knowledge series from the Audit Commission, which presents lessons emerging from inspection, audit and other research. It is intended primarily for relevant members and senior officers who need a guide to the main issues facing planning services – perhaps because they are involved in a best value review. A separate briefing is available which highlights the key issues for leading members and chief officers, together with stakeholders in the wider world of government and other relevant bodies.

2. This report reviews the current performance of local planning authorities. The study uses 53 published planning inspections, of which over 70 per cent relate to the development control function rather than the service as a whole. We also draw on initiatives at a number of authorities that have been visited or contacted by the research team, as well as analysing national data and conducting discussions with relevant stakeholders (APPENDIX 1). This evidence is interpreted in the light of the Government’s proposed agenda for reform, expressed in the Planning Green Paper (Ref. 2).

3. In carrying out this study the Audit Commission has worked with a range of stakeholders. Their representatives, including officers from local authorities, formed an advisory group to help the Commission with the work (APPENDIX 1). The Audit Commission is grateful to the members of the advisory group and other commentators for their advice. However, responsibility for the report’s conclusions rests with the Commission alone.
1. WHY IS PLANNING AN IMPORTANT AREA?

4. The planning system plays an important role in shaping and protecting the quality of our towns, cities and countryside. Over its first 50 years, the system has delivered some important successes. These include: the management of urban growth through green belt policy; conservation of unique, high-quality natural and historic environments; investment in the continued vitality of our town and city centres; and, in partnership with others, the regeneration of many decayed industrial and urban areas. Planning makes a central contribution to our well-being and quality of life by:
   • creating opportunities for development;
   • conserving environmental quality;
   • achieving sustainable development;
   • promoting public participation; and
   • helping to protect the rights of the individual.

5. The planning service affects every inhabitant of, and visitor to, a local authority area. The implementation of the development plan can have a profound impact on both the appearance of that area and the quality of life of its population. Planning authorities also have a critical role in the delivery of specific sectoral and area-based programmes, including affordable housing, integrated transport and regeneration initiatives. Development plans provide the framework within which effective development control can operate (BOXES A and B).

BOX A The development plan

An up-to-date development plan should provide a vision for the spatial development of the area. It is complementary to the community strategy and should link clearly to the authority’s strategic priorities. The development plan deals with long-term patterns of physical change and should address the requirements of the many shorter-term programmes in which councils are engaged.

There is currently a complex hierarchy of national, regional, county and local plans and policies. Counties and most non-metropolitan unitary districts are covered by structure plans. Local plans are usually prepared by district councils or national park authorities and set out more detailed policies to guide development in their areas. County, national park and some unitary authorities also have a duty to prepare minerals and waste local plans. In London and the metropolitan areas, and in some non-metropolitan unitary areas, councils produce unitary development plans, which combine the functions of structure and local plans and include policies for minerals and waste. In Wales, councils are in the process of preparing unitary development plans.

Source: Audit Commission
**BOX B Development control and related functions**

Combined with the development plan, development control powers allow the council to influence the location, design, accessibility and environmental impact of development. They also provide an opportunity to ensure that necessary infrastructure is provided by developers. Not surprisingly, local communities consider planning powers and the way that they are exercised to be important.

The local planning authorities normally responsible for development control are: unitary councils, metropolitan districts, shire districts, London boroughs and national parks. County councils may offer a range of additional specialist services, including conservation advice. In addition to their development control function, local planning authorities may be responsible for a range of specialist planning controls, including listed buildings, conservation areas, ancient monuments, archaeological areas and tree preservation. County councils, unitary authorities and national park authorities also carry out minerals and waste planning.

*Source: Audit Commission*

6. There are new government proposals on the table to reform both the development planning system and the operation of development control *(Ref. 2)*. The Government believes that change is needed for a number of reasons:

- The system is unnecessarily complex, slow and unpredictable.
- Customer service is often poor, partly because local planning authorities are overstretched.
- Enforcement is weak.
- Communities feel that the system is remote and difficult to influence.

7. The main changes proposed in the Planning Green Paper are to:

- Replace the complex hierarchical system of plans with new local development frameworks, supported by statutory regional spatial strategies and streamlined national planning policy guidance. The local development framework would connect with the community strategy and help to deliver the policies it contains. It would include criteria for steering future development, as well as action plans for town centres, neighbourhoods and villages.
- Encourage sub-regional planning where appropriate.
- Enhance development control performance by improving guidance to applicants, tightening performance targets, reducing delays by statutory consultees and seeking tougher enforcement of planning controls.
- Improve the level of service to business by providing business planning zones where unnecessary planning controls are lifted, applying separate performance targets for business planning applications and introducing delivery contracts between local authorities and businesses for reaching decisions on larger projects.
- Improve community participation in the planning process, building on the work undertaken for community strategies. This will be particularly important in the production of action plans for the regeneration or conservation of particular neighbourhoods.
- Introduce an integrated and comprehensive sustainability appraisal covering the economic, social and environmental impacts of the local development framework.
• Encourage the masterplanning of major sites to help developers to plan for higher quality development in partnership with local authorities.

• Ensure that planning applicants have clearer information and that improvements are made to the openness and accountability of the planning process.

8. There will clearly be more debate in local government and the planning profession about the merits of these proposals. The Audit Commission hopes that the evidence from best value inspections summarised in this report will contribute to this debate.

9. Because the bulk of inspection evidence relates to the development control function, this report focuses on the following areas for improvement addressed by the green paper:

• development control performance;

• the level of service to business;

• community participation in the planning process;

• information provided to planning applicants; and

• the openness of the decision-making process.
2. WHAT DOES THE SERVICE LOOK LIKE NOW?

INTRODUCTION

10. This section uses a range of information sources to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the planning service. Inspection evidence is the richest source, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative assessment, but it is only available for a relatively small sample of local authorities. National performance indicators and government data on development control performance, plan production and development outcomes have also been used.

11. Broadly, the planning system works well on a professional and technical level. Inspection has found that planning staff are often praised for being helpful and well-informed. In most cases, the service is adding value to the quality of the built environment, particularly through the provision of appropriate development advice and negotiation with applicants. National performance data suggests that progress is being made towards core policy goals, such as the protection of the green belt and increased recycling of previously developed land.

12. But inspection results confirm the need for improvement in other areas. Some planning services have become distanced from the council’s wider vision for the community; this is reflected in the ad hoc delivery of planning obligations and in weak partnership working. The statutory land use planning system is cumbersome and is failing to keep pace with the council’s understanding of local needs. Both businesses and residents are concerned at the potential for delay within the system. Applicants want clearer advice on their development projects, before they submit an application, and a more transparent decision-making process. The service is failing to match best practice in a number of key areas, in particular:

- the delivery of high quality customer service;
- using rigorous performance management systems to improve the service; and
- making the best use of partnership and external approaches to service delivery.

13. Several of these messages echo the analysis of Building in Quality, which is now a decade old (Ref. 1). The Audit Commission’s Review of Progress in Development Control in 1998 concluded that there had been important improvements in the speed and quality of decision-making, but found wide variation in performance (Ref. 3). Progress over the last ten years has been equally disappointing in forward planning:

‘What the last ten years have shown is that there are significant numbers of authorities who can’t produce a plan and, even when they do, they can’t keep it up-to-date.’

Lord Falconer, Planning Minister, Jan 2002
14. In part, familiar problems have persisted because there are some intractable barriers to improvement. These include resource limitations, competing priorities within local government and the inherited complexities of the planning system. But the slow pace of change is also symptomatic of a wider malaise: there has been a reluctance to accept the need for improvement in many cases. In the area of customer service, for example, there is evidence that planning has failed to keep pace with improvements in other council services. Of the planning inspections published so far, most were judged fair or poor, rather than good or excellent. And in most cases there are concerns regarding the prospects for improvement.

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS

15. Fifty-three inspection reports have been published on planning services. These include London boroughs, metropolitan boroughs, two county councils and both district and unitary authorities. Just one report from Wales has been published (for Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority). Over 70 per cent of the reports deal with development control, rather than the planning service as a whole.

16. Almost 60 per cent of planning services were judged as fair or poor, and over 40 per cent were judged unlikely to improve or will not improve. This is similar to the profile for all services, described in Changing Gear, the Commission’s best value annual statement for 2001 (Ref. 4). According to those inspections that reviewed development control only, performance is worse than for other services: two-thirds received poor or fair ratings, with most judged unlikely to improve or will not improve (EXHIBIT 1, overleaf).

DELIVERY AGAINST NATIONAL TARGETS

17. The national performance figures describe a service that is failing to deliver against prescribed targets for speed of delivery (BOX C). Over 90 per cent of councils are failing to meet the target that 80 per cent of applications should be determined within eight weeks. Many councils are also failing in their statutory duty to have an up-to-date development plan in place. Although the current plan-led system was put in place in 1991, 13 per cent of councils have still to complete their first plan and 214 plans are now out of date.

BOX C National performance figures on planning applications

A total of 545,000 planning applications were received and 504,000 were decided in 2000/01. These are the highest figures in ten years.

Sixty-three per cent of decisions were made within eight weeks in 2000/01. This figure has fluctuated in the range 60-65 per cent over the past ten years, although there were improvements in some poorly performing localities in the early 1990’s (including London and the metropolitan districts).

The proportion of applications granted has remained constant in recent years (87-88 per cent).

Source: http://www.planning.dtlr.gov.uk/devcon/devcon01/index.htm
FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS TO LOCAL PEOPLE

18. The planning service has a long history of consulting with the public. Despite this, planners are not at the leading edge of community engagement in most councils. Complex and protracted plan-making procedures are a deterrent to all but the most dedicated participants, or those with a major financial or personal interest in the outcome. The workings of planning committees remain obscure and difficult to follow for many members of the public, although their active involvement is now being encouraged in many councils.

19. It is vital that the community is engaged effectively in land use planning decisions. Authorities that are performing well in this area are ensuring that consultation extends beyond those directly affected, to engage a wider cross-section of those who live and work in their area. However, poor community engagement is a recurrent theme in inspection reports. Planning services are often criticised for being inward-looking and detached. This is reflected in a number of ways:
• limited awareness and involvement in community planning processes and in the associated activities of the local strategic partnership;
• uncertainty about how the development plan should be amended to react to emerging priorities in the community strategy;
• limited emphasis on directing the planning service to the achievement of wider council and community goals;
• ad hoc negotiation of infrastructure benefits through planning obligations, with limited reference to wider community requirements; and
• a need to improve the quality of member involvement in the planning process.

ASSURING THE QUALITY OF DEVELOPMENT

20. Many planners have argued that further progress towards the target of determining 80 per cent of applications within eight weeks would detract from the quality of decision-making. The best authorities are now making some attempt to demonstrate that their development control function is adding value to the quality of the development achieved, as well as taking all possible steps to streamline the decision-making process without affecting quality. Inspectors, similarly, have revisited some planning applications (and the resulting developments) to appraise the value added by the development control process.

21. Overall, inspection suggests that the development control process is enhancing the quality of the built environment, although the evidence is inevitably partial and qualitative. It is clear, however, that few authorities make any systematic attempt to gauge the value added through their development control activities.

22. There is limited inspection evidence relating to the whole planning service. However, from inspections to date, it appears that monitoring of the development plan frequently fails to provide a clear evaluation of the social, environmental and economic gains achieved through the effective implementation of the plan.

23. At a national level, there is some attempt to monitor patterns of land use change against selected policy objectives. The data sets are complex and there is a long time lag in the analysis of this information. However, recent findings show that:

• Some progress is being made in increasing the level of recycling of previously developed land – one of the Government’s 15 headline sustainable development indicators. The amount of land changing to residential use which was previously developed increased from 41 per cent in 1988 to 47 per cent in 1998 (England only). The proportion of new dwellings built on previously developed land (or through conversions) is higher than these figures suggest, because average densities are higher on recycled land. Between 1995 and 1998, this proportion has remained constant at 57 per cent, in comparison with a national target of 60 per cent (adopted in March 2000).

• Green belts remain an effective, but by no means watertight, policy instrument. New residential uses affect some 0.02 per cent of designated green belt land each year, with almost 60 per cent of these new dwellings on previously developed land.
• The proportion of new dwellings built within flood risk areas is relatively high and has been for many years. Between 1989 and 1999, about 9 per cent of land changing to residential use was in flood risk areas. Over the same period 11 per cent of all new dwellings were built in flood risk areas (http://www.planning.dtlr.gov.uk/luc/stats/index.htm).

24. Weak enforcement is jeopardising the quality of development. Local authorities are required to undertake a range of informal and formal activities to investigate alleged breaches of planning control and, where appropriate, to seek to remedy those breaches (BOX D). The level of formal enforcement activity by planning authorities is low and is currently declining on an annual basis. In 2000/01, authorities reported issuing 4,343 enforcement notices, 4 per cent fewer than the previous year. This is the fifth successive year in which the number has fallen and the lowest since data collection started in 1992/93, when a total of 7,758 enforcement notices were served. The number of stop notices and breach of condition notices issued also declined in 2000/01, to their lowest level since records began (http://www.planning.dtlr.gov.uk/devcon/devcon01/03.htm).

25. In addition to these discretionary powers to take enforcement action, a local planning authority may serve a planning contravention notice on an occupier or developer in order to obtain information about activities on land where a breach of planning control is suspected. In 2000/01, 4,179 planning contravention notices were served; this is 15 per cent fewer than in the previous year.

26. A number of inspections have highlighted the inadequacy of existing enforcement arrangements and have included recommendations to reinforce this part of the service. Specific weaknesses identified by inspectors include:
   • the lack of an enforcement strategy that sets out the priorities for the service and communicates these to local people;
   • a low level of enforcement activity, which compromises the council’s aims for development, reduces public confidence in the planning service and leads to an increasing backlog of complaints;
   • failure to prioritise enforcement activity;

BOX D Planning enforcement

Local planning authorities have discretionary powers to take formal enforcement action if, in their view, an unacceptable breach of planning control has occurred. This is a resource-intensive action and is a last resort for most councils, with informal efforts to remedy breaches a preferred solution. Most enforcement activity takes place in response to complaints.

The authority may issue an enforcement notice requiring the alleged breach to be remedied. If an authority considers that any activity alleged in an enforcement notice should cease before the end of the specified compliance period, they may serve a stop notice prohibiting continuation of that activity.

Where conditional planning permission has been granted for a development of land and there has been a failure to comply with one or more of the conditions, an authority may serve a breach of condition notice on anyone who has carried out development, or anyone having control of the land, requiring compliance with the conditions specified in the notice.

Source: Audit Commission
• weak systems for recording of case histories and outcomes; and
• limited investigation of the potential for partnership working with other councils.

27. The current system of enforcement is complex and cumbersome. When formal action is necessary, it can be expensive for local authorities to pursue the issue. There is pressure on planning resources in general, and discretionary enforcement activity is suffering as a result. This is an unsustainable situation, which could further damage the credibility of the planning system in the longer term.

ENHANCING CUSTOMER CARE

28. Quality of service is important to the immediate customers of the development control system; the half million plus applicants (per year) and their agents, together with those commenting on their development proposals as objectors or consultees. The wider needs of other communities and stakeholders are discussed in paragraphs 18-19.

29. The Planning Green Paper states that ‘Planning is not customer focused and local planning departments are overstretched’ (Ref. 2). On the basis of inspection evidence, it is clear that this is the case in many authorities. Applicants want clearer advice on their development projects, before they submit an application, and a more transparent decision-making process. While some progress has been made in implementing one-stop shops and improved advice for applicants, there are still outstanding customer service issues in many authorities. These include:
• the lack of a customer charter or service plan with clear service standards;
• difficulty in arranging pre-application discussions;
• limited availability of duty officers to deal with enquiries;
• the lack of targets to deal with some aspects of the service, such as answering letters;
• little feedback to customers on the progress of their applications; and
• little dialogue with customers and stakeholders to drive service improvement.

30. But inspection evidence also suggests that many authorities are providing a high quality technical and professional service to their development control customers, in a number of important ways:
• Many users praise the helpful and well-informed response that they have received from frontline planning staff.
• Many authorities are negotiating positively with applicants to improve the quality of the submitted scheme – this is a valued aspect of the service, although it can have implications for the speed of decision-making.
• Neighbour consultation arrangements have improved, partly because of the use of appropriate computer systems to facilitate the task.
• A growing number of authorities are allowing members of the public to respond to the planning officer’s recommendation at committee (both for and against) – this now happens in over 60 per cent of authorities.
REDUCING DELAY IN DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

31. The complexity of the statutory system of development planning is well documented elsewhere (Ref. 2). There are four land use planning tiers in some areas. The requirement for consistency among these levels of decision-making often extends the plan preparation process. The rest of this section deals with speed in development control, since there is limited inspection evidence relating to the wider operation of plan-making processes.

32. National performance data on the speed of decision-making reveal great variations between authorities. While some authorities have successfully increased their speed of decision-making, this has had little impact on the national average over the past decade. Evidence from inspection confirms that the speed of decision-making remains a source of irritation, for householders and businesses alike, in many areas.

33. Failure to make significant progress against the speed target has brought the planning system into some disrepute. The view of many in the development sector has recently been summarised in the journal of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors:

(\textit{the system at present}) \ldots \textit{\textquote{hampers both the efficient functioning of business and the provision of housing and social needs. There is a great deal of agreement on the problems that affect the current planning system – inconsistency, slowness, and an increasingly complex framework of plan-making and guidance}}.

Chartered Surveyor Monthly, Dec 2001

REINFORCING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS TO ASSURE QUALITY

34. Inspectors have demonstrated that the planning service is failing to match best management practice in a number of key areas, in particular:

- putting the customer first;
- using rigorous performance management systems to improve the service; and
- making the best use of partnership and external approaches to service delivery.

Issues of customer service are discussed in paragraphs 28-30. This section summarises issues related to performance management, partnership and outsourcing.

35. Many inspections have identified weak management systems, including:

- inadequate performance benchmarking;
- poor quality service and business planning; and
- inadequate mechanisms for managing the performance of individual members of staff.

36. Accurate data on the costs of service components and the associated resource inputs are usually lacking. Some councils have made progress in introducing user forums to diagnose service delivery problems and to drive improvement, but many have not. Many authorities lack a clear strategy to drive improvement, even after their best value review.
37. The planning service relies on effective partnership working. National and regional government, utility companies and other councils all have roles to play. Active engagement with private and voluntary sector partners is essential. Some authorities have formalised these links through multi-agency working groups and co-ordinated development teams.

38. However, effective partnership approaches remain the exception rather than the rule. Many authorities share similar planning problems, yet joint initiatives to develop policy responses or implementation programmes are unusual. Partnership work with other council departments and external stakeholders is often limited.

39. The shortage of trained planning staff is causing authorities to concentrate their staff in development control, to the detriment of both forward planning and enforcement. But few authorities are responding with a fundamental challenge to their method of service delivery, based on a full evaluation of options. The best value review should be used to drive this kind of analysis, but the scope of the review is frequently too narrow to provide a suitable framework. Fundamental review requires active involvement of members and staff, with tough scrutiny by external assessors and users. These elements are often lacking.

40. Inspections have identified a number of important shortcomings in the planning service, many of which have also been identified in earlier studies. The central message of this report is that existing good practice advice is not being applied consistently within the planning service. Nevertheless, there are examples of effective responses to the challenge of service delivery improvement. The rest of this report presents illustrations of how the most significant shortcomings in planning services can be tackled.
3. HOW TO IMPROVE

INTRODUCTION

41. This chapter explores in more detail the causes of variations in performance and identifies ways in which improvement can be achieved. It does not put forward a standard checklist of good practice, since the good and improving authorities attribute their strengths to a wide variety of working practices. Instead, it describes various ways of working that are effective for councils in their own local context. Its purpose is to stimulate challenge about local practices, particularly during best value reviews. Some of the case studies illustrate specific initiatives, and not all case study authorities have been rated as good or improving in all aspects of their planning service.

42. Analysis of inspection evidence has confirmed that better performing authorities are addressing five key areas that are critical to the delivery of effective planning services (EXHIBIT 2):

- **Focusing on what matters to local people.**
  Improvement is necessary to:
  - reshape the development plan to address the evolving community strategy;
  - move beyond consultation to a responsive dialogue with those affected by planning decisions; and
  - secure planning obligations which fit community needs, rather than ad hoc infrastructure improvements.

- **Assuring the quality of development.**
  Reviewing the quality of decision-making and its impact on the local environment by:
  - appraising the value added to the built environment through development control;
  - improving the quality of development through effective enforcement; and
  - providing a clear appraisal of the results delivered by the development plan.

- **Enhancing customer care.**
  Applying the requirements for improved customer care in development control, as defined in *Building in Quality* (and elsewhere) and moving forward on electronic delivery of planning services (Ref. 1).
Better performing authorities are addressing five key areas.

- **Reducing delay in development control.**
  Sound management of the development control service to remove any weaknesses in business processes and make the best possible use of delegated powers.

- **Reinforcing management systems to assure quality.**
  Ensuring that existing resources are used to best effect, by:
  - appropriate use of support staff and improved ICT to enhance customer care;
  - more partnership working with councils and others to develop common solutions to shared problems;
  - appropriate use of external resources, particularly to deal with workload peaks and specialist tasks; and
  - improved guidance for members, on both formal and informal levels.

**FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS TO LOCAL PEOPLE**

43. Planning authorities have a duty to deliver the statutory development plan and to take account of extensive and detailed national and regional planning policy guidance. There is a risk that these responsibilities may overshadow the planner’s creative role in shaping the locality, in response to community needs. This has been identified by the Government as an issue for planning reform:
'As the years have gone by, planning has become very much a regulatory and rule-driven profession and its visionary nature has got lost in bureaucracy and complication ... Instead of trying to identify what is the best result for an area, planners are trying to work their way through a complicated thicket, trying to work out what the rules prescribe.'
Lord Falconer, Planning Minister, Jan 2002

44. The Government now sees processes for developing community strategies and area-based renewal and regeneration initiatives as being more flexible and inclusive than statutory land-use planning procedures (Ref. 2). The Planning Green Paper proposes a statement of community involvement within the new local development framework, to define how the community will be involved in the continuing review of the framework and in commenting on significant applications.

45. As community leadership roles develop, particularly through the implementation of community strategies by local strategic partnerships, planners need to (EXHIBIT 3):

- mould their vision for the development of the area to address the evolving community strategy;
- move beyond consultation to a responsive dialogue with those affected by planning decisions; and
- ensure that planning obligations achieved through the development control system meet community needs.

EXHIBIT 3 Mould the development vision to the community strategy

The emerging community strategy provides a framework for development planning.

Source: Audit Commission
MOULDING THE DEVELOPMENT VISION TO THE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

46. Some authorities have introduced systems across their full range of services to help to identify the contribution that each department can make to the achievement of corporate objectives (CASE STUDY 1).

47. Other planning services have devised their own methods of supporting the council’s corporate priorities (CASE STUDY 2).

CASE STUDY 1 Meeting community needs

North Somerset District Council decided that the whole of the organisation should be geared towards meeting community needs. An overarching group of officers looks at needs and how these can be reflected and delivered, perhaps by inclusion in the local plan. For example, the social services elderly persons section might bring forward a proposal for a day centre. The officers’ group would consider whether the proposal fits into the corporate strategy, who should provide it (the council or some other body), and whether it would be an effective use of resources. If accepted, the proposal could be included in a schedule of community needs for a particular area and form part of the planning service’s approach to local development.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

CASE STUDY 2 Planning policy supporting corporate priorities

At Chichester District Council, the planning service has examined how it contributes to the council’s vision and priorities and ensures that this is reflected through planning policy and at operational level. Departmental managers use team meetings to ensure that all staff are familiar with the council’s priorities and how they personally contribute. They consider that understanding the ‘bigger picture’ gives their officers focus and direction.

One example of supporting council priorities was where the planning service contributed to the priority of supporting local businesses. The local area has a long history of market gardening, so the local plan identified sites suitable for industrial sized greenhouses to enable local businesses to expand production. Through close contact with these businesses, the planning service became aware of their need to branch out into related forms of added value enterprises and worked with them to ensure that they could expand in a planned way.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
BEYOND CONSULTATION – TO DIALOGUE

48. When considering consultation in planning services, authorities should focus on:
   • who should be consulted and how to make consultation inclusive;
   • how to move beyond single purpose consultation to ongoing dialogue with service
     users and other stakeholders;
   • how consultees will receive feedback; and
   • how the results of consultation will be used to drive service improvement
     (CASE STUDY 3).

49. Councils use a range of approaches to engage the wider community in their planning
    process. Many now have a corporate citizens’ panel, or other forum, to establish some form
    of dialogue with users. Examples include Cambridge City's disability panel and Braintree
    District Council’s access group, which advises on social exclusion issues. Many authorities also
    have an agent and developer forum, specifically for planning issues. Such groups can help to
    ensure that the public view is heard from an early stage. Some authorities are working to
    engage people, particularly parish councils, on an ongoing basis (CASE STUDY 4). For
    example, Chichester District Council’s local character enhancement schemes fund parish
    councils for small local schemes.

50. Authorities need to consider how to involve groups who might be significantly affected by
    development proposals but who are less vocal or are simply unaware of them. This may
    include young or elderly people, people from ethnic minorities or with disabilities, small
    businesses, voluntary organisations and individuals and groups who are not aware that they
    could gain or lose from proposals (CASE STUDY 5).

CASE STUDY 3 Developing a strategy for consultation

The London Borough of Camden's planning department decided that greater clarity was needed about consultations so that
in all cases people would know:
   • what they were being consulted about;
   • what could be influenced by consultations; and
   • the sorts of comments that could be used by the Council.

The department identified optimum methods of consultation by asking people who had commented on planning
applications how they had found out about the application. They then estimated costs for the various consultation methods
and the results of a MORI survey were fed into the process. Further consultations were undertaken with members, staff and
the development control user panel, which includes applicants, representatives of local groups, local architects and interested
individuals. As a result, the planning service was able to produce a policy setting out standards for neighbour consultations.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
CASE STUDY 4  Dialogue in public consultation

Cambridge City Council regularly consults and involves the public on both planning applications and forward planning. They have held a number of workshops with local people, for example, in helping to draw up a planning brief for a site or wider area. They hold public meetings on planning applications and encourage developers to discuss their preliminary proposals at public forums, prior to the submission of an application. The approach is time-consuming, but this is offset by improvement in the post-application process and the eventual result.

The Council also has a development control user panel that includes agents, residents associations, housing associations, university colleges and members. As well as being a good sounding board for matters brought by the planning service, the panel gives feedback on the quality of service and makes suggestions for service improvement and development.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CASE STUDY 5  Disability consultative panel

Cambridge City Council’s disability panel has been meeting for over two years and includes representatives of various disability interests. The group comes together monthly to give feedback on planning applications and other matters. Their comments are incorporated into reports and taken into account in negotiations and in the determination of applications. The remit of the group may be widened into a more wide-ranging access panel. Despite difficulties with setting up and maintaining the group, the consensus of opinion is that it has been successful.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS THROUGH PLANNING OBLIGATIONS

51. The positive application of planning obligations is an area of achievement for the planning service (BOX E, overleaf). Councils have become increasingly adept at negotiating significant amounts of affordable housing and contributions to public spaces, community trusts and training schemes as part of the process of agreeing planning permission. However, as discussed in this section, the system of planning obligations has been a source of controversy for decades and is now likely to be subject to fundamental reform. The Government is proposing a system of standardised tariffs for different types of development, to be set by local authorities as part of the plan-making process. Negotiated agreements would then only be required to supplement tariffs and would be available for public inspection (Ref. 5).

52. Many councils do not take a strategic approach to link the overall needs of the area to individual developments, and so fail to identify broader objectives that might be secured through planning obligations. Some are losing opportunities for legitimate contributions. Late identification of the need for an agreement causes frustration and delay.
**BOX E Planning obligations**

The system of planning obligations, or planning gain, enables authorities to negotiate contributions from developers towards the costs of physical infrastructure required to service their scheme, as well as associated social and economic needs. This is usually achieved through a contractual agreement between the council and the developer (using section 106 agreements) and normally involves a financial contribution. The agreement often includes provision for the required off-site road access to service the development. Many councils also use the system to increase the component of affordable housing within the scheme and to improve the provision of public open space.

*Source: Audit Commission*

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33. Evidence from inspections confirms that a more structured approach to the achievement of community needs through planning obligations is required. Many authorities are now including specific policies for planning obligations within their development plans, particularly to deal with affordable housing and public open space. But few authorities have policies to guide their agreements on social services facilities, school places or public transport infrastructure. This confirms the findings of the recent District Audit bulletin, *Developing Probity in Planning*, which also shares examples of good practice in the treatment of planning obligations *(Ref. 6)*.

34. Some authorities are ensuring that developers of specific sites and types of development are aware of likely requests at the outset *(CASE STUDY 6)*. Leicestershire County Council co-ordinates a group of district council representatives and local house builders to discuss the benefits that the district councils would look for on major developments. These include new schools, play areas, flood drainage/relief, open space, libraries and community facilities.

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**CASE STUDY 6 Meeting community needs through planning obligations**

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council’s planning policy and practice is clearly related to the council’s overall priorities, as illustrated by its treatment of affordable housing. The local plan incorporates policies that encourage the provision of an element of affordable housing within all residential developments over a certain size, with some provision for rural exceptions. This is supported by supplementary planning guidance setting out the Council’s policy in more detail. The outcome of this policy is ‘to ensure equality of opportunity throughout the borough, focusing on social well-being for all at neighbourhood and community level.’ This supports two of the Council’s corporate themes. The local plan also includes a chapter on implementation that explains that contributions will be required from the private sector through section 106 agreements.

The planning service has produced a community infrastructure best practice note as a guide for developers, housing associations and council staff. This sets out the type of community infrastructure needed. It includes forms to determine requirements generated by planning applications for residential development or specific housing allocations in the local plan. It also includes specimen legal agreements and a list of appropriate contacts. This brings certainty to the developer and consistency to the process. It has also enabled the service to reduce the time needed for drawing up agreements.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview*
Planning obligations are usually negotiated between planning departments and developers, with limited involvement from other parties. An ongoing study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has emphasised that a mechanism is needed to ensure that planning obligations help to deliver the proposals set out in the community strategy and in masterplans for town and city centres, which are based on more inclusive partnership activity. This work, based on a survey of 117 authorities, suggests that some 10,000-15,000 homes are being provided annually through planning obligations, against current Government estimates of around 30,000 (http://www.society.guardian.co.uk/housing/story/0,7890,592371,00.html).

As community leadership roles develop, particularly through the work of local strategic partnerships, planners need to ensure that their activities address the evolving community strategy and that they are based on a responsive dialogue with those affected by planning decisions (CHECKLIST 1).

### CHECKLIST 1  Focusing on what matters to local people

**AUTHORITIES SHOULD:**
- Ensure that their planning policies and decisions respond fully to the emerging community strategy.
- Exchange views regularly with those affected by the service – and ensure that this communication leads to real improvement.
- Agree and publicise the objectives to be achieved through planning obligations, in line with community needs, so that the requirements are clear to developers and other parties.
- Develop clear procedures to guide officers and members through the complex area of planning obligations, including guidance on costing mechanisms for deriving financial contributions.

**CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:**
- Engage with relevant stakeholders, as part of the development of the Planning Green Paper proposals, in order to:
  - Simplify the planning system, making it more accessible to the public and easier to update plans.
  - Reinforce and update guidance on the use of negotiated planning agreements.

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### ASSURING THE QUALITY OF DEVELOPMENT

This section focuses on the end product of the planning system – the built and natural environment and the quality of life of residents, visitors and businesses. Planning outcomes are affected by the quality, content and timeliness of the development plan, by effective partnership action to implement the plan and by the consistency and quality of decision-making in the development control process.

Authorities need to:
- find the balance between quality and speed in development control – all stakeholders are concerned that rapid turnaround should not be achieved at the expense of appropriate planning decisions;
- appraise the value added to the built environment through development control work;
• ensure that the quality of development is assured through effective enforcement; and
• provide clear appraisals of the results delivered by the development plan (EXHIBIT 4).

EXHIBIT 4  Focusing on the end product of the planning system

The planning system has a direct impact on local quality of life.

Source: Audit Commission

FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN QUALITY AND SPEED

58. Many councils have demonstrated that they are effective in negotiating improved schemes through their development control work. The rewards of negotiation are likely to be more compelling on larger development projects. There is generally less scope for effective negotiation on minor and householder applications, which form the majority of applications. In these cases there is more opportunity to determine applications quickly, without sacrificing quality, releasing resources for those applications where the greatest added value can be achieved (CASE STUDY 7).
CASE STUDY 7 Improving speed without reducing quality

Between 1995 and 1999 Ashford Borough Council experienced a decrease in its performance on processing householder applications, coming in lower than most authorities against the national target of 80 per cent determined within eight weeks. In 1999/2000 Ashford reversed this trend and is now in the top quartile of district councils, with 90 per cent of decisions made within eight weeks. Ashford, which has a high proportion of major developments, is also performing in the top quartile on the indicator for processing non-householder applications.

These improvements do not seem to have been achieved at the expense of quality. One indicator of quality and consistency is the number of planning refusals that are appealed and the level of appeals allowed. In 1999/2000 only about 4 per cent of Ashford’s decisions went to appeal and of those only 21 per cent were allowed. This also puts Ashford into the top 25 per cent of district councils nationally for this indicator.

The increased performance has been largely due to improved working practices. Examples include:

• streaming and prioritisation of caseloads (for example, splitting major projects from other applications);
• improved rates of delegation to officers;
• improved delegation of workload from the unit manager to the principal planning officer; and
• adopting a duty officer system, linked to ‘quiet time’ periods, to allow planning officers to concentrate on casework without interruption.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

APPRAISING THE VALUE ADDED BY DEVELOPMENT CONTROL WORK

59. In its inspections, the Audit Commission will look more favourably on authorities with above average costs if they can ‘demonstrate clearly that counter-balancing quality considerations are at work.’ (Ref. 7). It is clear from inspections that most planning services are not attempting to do this.

60. The best authorities are using a number of approaches to assess the quality of their decision-making:

• monitoring the proportion of refusals that go to appeal, and appeal performance figures, as an indication of the robustness of their planning decisions;
• using case studies to track the benefits gained as a result of negotiation and other advice to applicants;
• auditing a sample of recent decisions to monitor the implementation of key development plan policies;
• asking applicants, agents and developers to evaluate advice received from planners during the application process; and
• asking neighbours, consultees and other stakeholders about their ability to make representations and influence development outcomes.

61. Post-development consultation is also valuable, to learn how people feel once the upheaval of development is over; for example, visiting a new housing development to find out what residents think (CASE STUDY 8, overleaf).
CASE STUDY 8 Feedback on development outcome

Following completion of a residential development at Whitchurch, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council undertook a qualitative assessment of the scheme. They talked to people who had opposed the development and to the parish council and new residents. The new residents were happy with their new surroundings and some of those who had originally opposed the development decided that the change in their environment was not as bad as they had feared.

The planning officers learned that the way in which the estate had been laid out did not encourage integration between new and existing communities, and council members were able to see the effects on the ground of a development control decision. The Council now proposes an annual visit to completed sites, in addition to the existing visits to sites that are subject to a planning application.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

62. Further guidance on appraising the value added through development control work is available in the Planning Officers Society’s Guide to Best Value and Planning (Ref. 8, http://www.barnsley.gov.uk/planning/index.html) and in the Council for the Preservation of Rural England’s publication, Delivering Best Value in Planning (Ref. 9).

EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT

63. There is pressure on planning resources in general, and discretionary enforcement activity is suffering as a result. Evidence from inspections has confirmed the inadequacy of existing enforcement arrangements. While resources are a real issue for some councils, more could be done to improve partnership working with building control officers and with other councils (CASE STUDY 9).

64. A national initiative is needed to raise the profile of this critical, but often ignored, part of the service. The current system of enforcement is complex and cumbersome. When formal action is necessary, it can be expensive for local authorities to pursue the issue. The Planning Green Paper proposes a review of current enforcement arrangements, with the intention of introducing simpler procedures and more effective sanctions against those that do offend (Ref. 2). Some councils are already moving towards a more proactive, risk-based enforcement regime, rather than the traditional complaints-led approach (CASE STUDY 10).

CASE STUDY 9 Building control on the enforcement frontline

Oxford City Council building control inspectors are used as the ‘first set of planning eyes’ when development starts. They check that buildings are correctly sited and that tree protection requirements are met. Building control staff notify the enforcement team whenever they receive a building start notice for a scheme being checked by approved building inspectors, so that the planning team can initiate their own inspection.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service
CASE STUDY 10 Risk-based enforcement

Durham County Council has recently adopted a more systematic approach to monitoring the implementation of planning permissions. It now makes a risk assessment based on the nature of the site, the developer and the development. Visits are scheduled to a timetable appropriate to the risk. Inevitably, there are sites where there are disputes. One problem for the service is that it sometimes has to carry out covert surveillance of alleged breaches of conditions but, in the meantime, is criticised by residents for not acting. Inspectors reviewed records of visits, spoke to site operators and to residents and concluded that the system was working well.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF THE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

65. Planning authorities are required to monitor and evaluate the performance of their development plan. Inspection evidence suggests that this aspect of the service may be poorly resourced. A number of inspected councils were criticised for failing to monitor the success (or otherwise) of planning outcomes. An absence of performance indicators and monitoring procedures meant that it was often not possible to measure the effectiveness of the local plan. Specifically, inspectors have recommended that planning services:

- broaden their monitoring activities to include a qualitative assessment of their performance against the plan's objectives; and
- link their monitoring work to the emerging community planning process.

66. A clear appraisal of the social, economic and environmental outcomes of development plan implementation is required as part of the ongoing plan review process. The Planning Green Paper proposes sustainability assessments of local development frameworks (Ref. 2). These should be linked to appropriate headline indicators and targets to monitor effective delivery of community needs.

67. Few councils are systematically reviewing the quality of their decision-making throughout the service and its impact on the local quality of life. More attention is needed to ensure that the planning system enhances the built and natural environment and the quality of life of residents, visitors and businesses (CHECKLIST 2, overleaf).
CHECKLIST 2  Assuring the quality of development

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:
• Use a range of approaches to measure the effectiveness of their development control work. This should include using feedback from developers and consultees.
• Provide a regular, user-friendly appraisal of the impact of their development plan on local quality of life.
• Work in partnership with building control staff to strengthen enforcement.
• Move to risk-based enforcement systems.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD:
• Make effective enforcement a priority within the planning service.
• Develop guidance on the use of sustainability assessments for local plans and link them to headline indicators and targets.

ENHANCING CUSTOMER CARE

68. Applicants, agents and developers are direct customers of the development control process, alongside objectors, parish councils, other statutory consultees, residents and interest groups. Authorities need to focus on the quality of care that they receive.

69. In a wider sense, the full range of communities within each locality relies on the planning service to shape the local environment to meet their needs. The response of the planning service to this wider group of stakeholders is considered earlier in this chapter (paragraphs 43-45).

70. Building in Quality clearly specified requirements for improved customer care in development control (Ref. 1). Ten years later, some planning services are still failing in important areas. Inspection evidence confirms the need for further improvement in:
• access to good quality, consistent advice in written form and through pre-application discussions;
• a transparent process of decision-making, based on agreed policy; and
• the provision of information to the applicant and other interested parties throughout the decision-making process.

71. In addition to standard management practices and approaches to customer care, the electronic delivery of planning services has an important contribution to make in accelerating improvement in these areas.

72. Five areas need to be addressed by authorities (EXHIBIT 5):
• publishing clear standards and targets;
• improving accessibility to customers;
• providing advice on development issues;
• ensuring that decision-making is open and transparent; and
• delivering planning services on the web.
EXHIBIT 5 Putting the customer first

Some planning services are still failing in important areas of customer care.

Source: Audit Commission

PUBLISHING CLEAR STANDARDS AND TARGETS

73. Inspectors frequently found that planning authorities did not have an adequate customer charter, despite the availability of model charter standards for planning since the early 1990s (Ref. 10). The customer charter sets out for the community what they should expect from their planning service and defines clear standards for service delivery. A charter provides guidance for staff, as well as the public, and contributes to consistency and equity of service (CASE STUDY 11, overleaf).
CASE STUDY 11 A customer charter

The London Borough of Wandsworth’s Planning Service has a citizens’ charter that sets out in detail what the service provides and the standards of service the citizen can expect. It includes full contact details and a series of commitments that are also available as separate leaflets. The charter standards relate to many aspects of the service, including:

- publicity and consultation;
- information for applicants for planning permission (leaflet sent to all applicants);
- information for those raising enforcement issues;
- involvement in the unitary development plan; and
- customer service (leaflet sent to anyone making a complaint about the service).

The charter is available in a large print version and includes a message for people who speak Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY TO CUSTOMERS

74. Modern public services should be accessible to users and stakeholders through a variety of channels. For planning services, these channels include an efficient reception desk, access through a one-stop shop, effective phone response and duty officer systems and a user-friendly website. The particular information and access requirements of hard-to-reach groups need to be taken into account.

75. The first contact many people have with planning services is the reception desk. A duty officer system is available in many authorities to provide relevant information and professional advice to personal callers. Inspectors usually check such systems through ‘mystery shopping’ and the quality of service varies. The better performing councils provide a prompt response through a duty officer, linked to a one-stop shop which is equipped to field all development queries. The physical layout of reception areas can also be an issue. They are not always accessible to people with disabilities and it is often difficult to hold a private conversation.

76. While facilities to deal with initial planning enquiries are often satisfactory, many applicants complain that it is difficult to track the progress of their application once it has been submitted. Few authorities have developed systems to respond to this requirement, which can be addressed through computer tracking systems linked to help desk and internet access. The London Borough of Wandsworth’s planning website illustrates what can be achieved (http://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/planning/default.htm).

77. Some authorities are making their decision-making more accessible to the public, engaging them in the process by allowing them to speak in planning committees. In some cases, site plans are projected so that everyone can follow the discussion. Opening out the committee process is generally welcomed, but it can stimulate criticism of the use of planning jargon without adequate explanation. Public involvement in committee meetings is discussed further, later in this chapter (paragraphs 85-88).
78. There can be a further ‘black hole’ for applicants after the committee meeting, with some applicants complaining that it is difficult to get a timely response from council staff on outstanding issues once the decision has been made. Consultees and objectors also complain that they are not always informed of the outcome of the decision.

PROVIDING ADVICE ON DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

79. Many applications are poor quality submissions, lacking the detail required for effective processing. This is not surprising, given that many customers use the planning service only a few times during their lives. Providing good advice to applicants to enable them to improve the quality of their submissions is important to councils wishing to reduce delay and improve the quality of service. The Planning Green Paper proposes a planning checklist to explain requirements to applicants in plain English (Ref. 2). It also suggests that authorities will be able to charge for pre-application advice in future.

80. Inspection evidence suggests that applicants place particular priority on clear planning policies, user-friendly printed information, well-informed staff and a corporate approach from the council (where more than one department is involved). They welcome the opportunity for pre-application discussions.

81. Most authorities have some printed planning guidance in place. Many have a good range of literature on a variety of common matters, such as roof extensions or garages. But inspections have found that individual leaflets are not always kept up-to-date and often do not use plain English. In some cases, there is limited coverage in other relevant languages. There is often scope for improved coverage of frequently asked questions through published guidance and advice.

82. Most authorities offer pre-application discussions. This, together with written information, should enable applicants to submit a better quality application and obtain a decision more quickly and with less uncertainty (CASE STUDY 12).

83. Some authorities also use pre-application awareness days to provide information to larger groups (CASE STUDY 13, overleaf). This is a powerful way of reinforcing other forms of advice to applicants. Others are using computer systems to provide rapid turnaround reports that summarise the planning issues affecting a specific site (CASE STUDY 14, overleaf).

CASE STUDY 12 Pre-application discussions

North Somerset District Council emphasises the need to work closely with applicants and agents, to encourage them to work within the constraints of the system.

Any application that is obviously not going to succeed is refused immediately. At this stage, pre-application discussions are offered so that any subsequent application will be of a much higher quality. The Council has employed some development control officers with urban design backgrounds who can help to critique the quality of development at the early stages.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
CASE STUDY 13  Pre-application awareness days

Mid Suffolk District Council has held Trader Awareness Days to brief contractors on various specialist subjects. Subjects already covered include lime wash and timber. There are a number of further training days scheduled and staff have indicated that the quality of applications relating to listed or older buildings has improved, with more attention being paid to the specific materials to be used in alterations or building works.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

CASE STUDY 14  Concept Statements for major sites

Chelmsford Borough Council prepares ‘Concept Statements’ for major sites – an A3 folded sheet that sets out the site’s planning history and objectives and relevant planning policy. It includes an annotated site plan, giving clear advice to potential developers. This statement can be produced at 24 hours notice for sites coming to the market unexpectedly.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

84. Many councils already provide advice for some specific sites in the form of development briefs, setting out the type of scheme that might be permitted and the constraints that might be encountered. This approach is consistent with the increased emphasis on masterplanning and community-oriented action planning for specific sites in the Planning Green Paper (Ref. 2).

ENSURING THAT DECISION-MAKING IS OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

85. Inspection has identified some concerns over the consistency of the decision-making process. Sometimes, it is not clear to applicants that council policy has been applied consistently and it may appear that matters other than material considerations have been taken into account. It is not appropriate to comment on individual allegations without in-depth investigation and best value inspection is not the appropriate mechanism for resolving such disputes. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these issues remain live in some localities:

• Some inspection reports commented that recommendations and decisions did not always adhere to the overall policy and strategy of the local plan – even where no departure from the plan was advertised.

• Sometimes the reasons for decision were not made sufficiently clear, particularly when members had rejected an officer recommendation. This may be an issue for applicants, or others interested in the decision.

• Development control customers are not always clear about the circumstances for making a delegated decision, although authorities are required to have a code of conduct that lays down the relevant criteria.

86. A number of inspection reports refer to the importance of a good relationship between members and officers to assist the speed, consistency and quality of decisions and the transparency of the process. Relationships between members and officers have been addressed in the decent District Audit bulletin; Developing Probity in Planning (Ref. 6). This concluded that:
• Authorities with a planning code of practice, in plain English and tailored to local circumstances, are more likely to have an environment conducive to making proper planning decisions – but most do not have such a code. Where codes are in place, they are not always up-to-date and may not cover key areas, such as development plan compilation.

• Site visits by members need careful management to limit the opportunity for lobbying by applicants and objectors, yet some authorities have no written guidance on how such visits should be managed.

• Some authorities need to improve reporting and justification of their planning decisions, particularly where an officer recommendation has been overturned by members.

• On the declaration of interests, hospitality and lobbying, authorities should issue clear guidance on what is acceptable and this should be reinforced through training and monitoring.

87. Some inspections found that committee meetings are not always user-friendly. They should be held where and when it is most convenient for members of the public to attend. Projected plans, clear explanations of what is happening and the use of plain English are necessary to support public involvement. Members of the public should be able to respond to the recommendation, both for and against.

88. Mediation between conflicting views through the use of an informal development control forum is a further method of hearing the public voice. This is a welcome step towards improved transparency in decision-making (CASE STUDY 15).

CASE STUDY 15 Hearing the public voice

Cambridge City Council has set up a development control forum to seek agreement between all parties prior to the determination of a planning application. If a petition of at least 25 signatures expresses significant concern about a major planning proposal, a maximum of three petitioners can have their views heard at a forum meeting. The meeting is informal and the forum is not a decision-making body. However, there are rules and guidelines including order of speaking and time allowed. As well as petitioners, the applicants attend and up to three can speak. Members of the planning sub-committee may attend the meeting, if they wish to do so. Monthly slots are programmed into member and officer diaries at the start of the year. People are able to have their say, issues can be resolved early and meetings have often resulted in better outcomes. For example, a housing development was amended to provide additional play space, after local residents raised concerns about the lack of open green space in the area.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

ELECTRONIC DELIVERY OF PLANNING SERVICES

89. Planning services have a high profile in the e-government initiative, with £6 million of government funding provided for the new Planning Portal project. This project aims to allow easier access to national, regional and local planning policies. It will soon be possible to make applications for planning permission and planning appeals online. The intention is to unlock efficiency gains and to allow people to track the progress of their applications more closely.
90. Websites are being used more widely for information provision by planning services. With over 40 per cent of households already on the internet, it is important that planning services prepare to offer full electronic delivery. This will provide an opportunity to make the planning system more transparent and accessible, as well more responsive and efficient, while relaxing the burden on frontline planning staff dealing with personal callers.

91. The Government has recently completed a study of ICT in planning (Ref. 11). This study raises the concern that many planning services remain far from meeting the Government’s target of full capability for electronic delivery by 2005. The study identifies action that needs to be taken by local planning authorities and central government, as well as the leading software suppliers. Good practice guidance on e-planning has recently been promised by the Government.

92. Existing websites for planning services usually contain background information on the service, contact information, local planning news and a variable amount of advice for applicants. Sometimes, forms can be downloaded from the site. A small number of authorities are approaching readiness for online submission of planning applications, including the accompanying plans (CASE STUDY 16).

**CASE STUDY 16 Planning services on the web**

The London Borough of Wandsworth’s website offers information about current development proposals (including their current status), a news bulletin, printable application forms, a searchable planning register, and access to publications (in English and minority languages), help and advice.

There is also information about the pathfinder project which, for planning users, will offer:

- online planning applications (include payment facilities and drawings);
- online, map-based view of planning data for specific sites;
- access to the council’s unitary development plan proposals with a map at individual property level; and
- further abilities to track progress in the handling of their correspondence.

*Source: London Borough of Wandsworth website*

93. Planning services have a wide range of direct customers and their needs are important. Improvements to customer service are needed, to apply the messages from *Building in Quality* and other good practice guidance (CHECKLIST 3).
CHECKLIST 3 Enhancing customer care

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

• Publish clear targets and standards for the service.
• Make the service accessible through a range of channels – including a user-friendly website.
• Ensure that a realistic approach is in place to achieve the e-government target for planning services by 2005.
• Make it easy for applicants to find out about progress on their application.
• Provide opportunities for the public to speak at planning committees.
• Improve communications with applicants and other interested parties after the committee meeting.
• Have a clear framework for offering pre-application discussions.
• Check the available range of published advice and consider other ways to inform applicants – such as awareness days to deal with specific problem areas.
• Consider the use of mediation if there are conflicting views on major applications, using a development control forum.

REDUCING DELAY IN DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

94. It is clear from inspection reports that applicants are concerned about the speed of decision-making on planning applications and are frustrated by what they see as unnecessary delays. The average speed of application processing is often slow and varies a great deal between authorities. Nationally, the average speed of processing has changed little over the past ten years, despite continued pressure from central government for authorities to achieve its performance targets. Yet further improvement is possible. Some councils are still using defective processes that cause unnecessary delay in development control.

95. The speed of decision-making cannot be considered in isolation. There is sometimes a trade-off between the quality of service delivery and the speed of processing. Negotiation with applicants, for example, is an important but resource-intensive process that takes development control planners away from their outstanding caseload. Nevertheless, some inspections have identified areas for improvement in application processing which need not detract from quality and which will lead to the more efficient use of available resources (EXHIBIT 6, overleaf):

• removing weaknesses in business processes, such as issuing the decision notice;
• making the best possible use of delegated powers;
• improving the quality of advice on development issues (paragraphs 79-84); and
• improving performance management systems (paragraphs 101-104).
Applicants are frustrated by what they see as unnecessary delays in development control.

96. Business process mapping is an established procedure for the identification of bottlenecks and for streamlining procedures. Some councils have used such approaches to improve their application processing. Sevenoaks District Council, for example, studied 100 planning applications to find out where delays in the process happened. This focused attention on delays resulting from revisions to planning applications (post-submission) and demonstrated that their new registration process was working well.

97. Analysis of business processes can also reveal whether the appropriate level of skill is being applied at each point in the process. For example, some authorities use customer care staff on reception to deal with general enquiries and development control staff to answer straightforward queries on planning policy.

98. Inspectors have sometimes identified the committee cycle as a barrier to the achievement of the eight week target. The optimum committee cycle will vary according to the size and characteristics of the caseload, as well as the level of delegation to officers. The committee cycle needs to be reviewed periodically to ensure that unnecessary queues are not forming. At the same time, the ‘hypnotic treadmill’ of a burdensome committee cycle is to be avoided.
The committee meeting is a critical element in transparent decision-making for some applications, but it is important that the committee's attention is focused on the relevant cases through the extended use of delegated powers (see below).

MAKING THE BEST USE OF DELEGATED POWERS

99. The government has set a target of 90 per cent for the delegation of planning applications to officers. While planners have suggested that this is an unrealistic target for some councils, a minority are already achieving this level of delegation. There are obvious benefits in the speed of processing for delegated applications. However, it is important that officers have clear guidelines for determination so that possible tensions with council members are managed effectively and that the transparency of the decision-making process is not threatened (CASE STUDY 17).

100. Delay remains a source of frustration to users of the planning service. When resources are under pressure, it is important that everything possible is done to improve the productivity of the service (CHECKLIST 4).

CASE STUDY 17 Delegation to officers

The London Borough of Camden currently has a delegation rate of approximately 90 per cent. Where objections have been received on applications that officers would normally determine, which they consider may be of only local interest to members, a panel sits to determine whether or not the case should be referred to the planning sub-committee. This helps to manage differences between members and officers.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CHECKLIST 4 Reducing delay in development control

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

- Work with applicants to improve the quality of submissions.
- Be rigorous in the streamlining of business processes.
- Make the best possible use of delegated powers.
- Use targets and indicators to monitor and manage both speed and quality.
- Reinforce performance management systems.
REINFORCING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS TO ASSURE QUALITY

101. Planning, like many areas of public service, is finding it difficult to attract and retain high quality professional and technical staff. There is now a growing shortage of qualified staff within the planning service, particularly in London and the south-east. In London, some councils are reporting only two or three applicants for each planning job advertised. A number of inspection reports have commented on the fact that there are vacancies waiting to be filled. Also, the number of young people starting professional training courses for planning is declining, particularly at undergraduate level.

102. This resource shortage is particularly problematic at a time when the number of planning applications received is at a peak. Creative management solutions are needed to ensure that existing resources are used to best effect. It is important for all planning services to prioritise the use of existing staff, financial and other resources to achieve key objectives. This relates directly to the need to ensure that planning engages directly with corporate and community priorities.

103. In the medium and longer term, resource restrictions are likely to be eased through an amended fee regime. The local government White Paper has prepared the way for charging for discretionary services and for greater financial freedom in general (Ref. 13). The Government has undertaken to review the planning fee regime in the Planning Green Paper (Ref. 2).

104. Inspection evidence has highlighted these areas for improvement (EXHIBIT 7):

- improved allocation and management of available staff;
- appropriate use of external resources, particularly to deal with workload peaks and specialist tasks;
- more partnership working with councils and other partners to develop common solutions to shared problems;
- the use of ICT to improve efficiency;
- comparing performance, including the use of performance indicators;
- improved training and guidance for members, both formal and informal; and
- stronger business planning to improve the service.
Creative management solutions are needed to ensure that existing resources are used to best effect.

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<th>EXHIBIT 7 Reinforced management systems</th>
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Creative management solutions are needed to ensure that existing resources are used to best effect.

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<th>IMPROVING THE ALLOCATION OF AVAILABLE STAFF</th>
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105. A number of authorities are improving resource allocation by:
- restructuring to strengthen staffing in key areas and reallocate workloads;
- reviewing job descriptions as vacancies occur, to ensure that the new appointment meets the needs of the service;
- revising working practices in one area to release staff for reallocation elsewhere;
- improving staff training in the use of standard procedures – for example on when to negotiate and how to deal with frequently asked questions; and
- using policy staff to train development control staff, enabling them to deal with some straightforward policy queries.

A number of additional initiatives to ease the resource shortage have recently been proposed by planners in London (BOX F, overleaf).

106. Such approaches can carry risks. Several inspection reports refer to a shift in resources from forward planning work to development control. Also, although enforcement is an important means of ensuring that planning decisions are implemented properly, inspections suggest that this is most likely to receive a low priority.
Easing the resource shortage

Wider initiatives that have been proposed to ease the resource position in the planning service include:

- a job shop web page, shared by pressurised authorities seeking appointments, linked to planning authorities and planning schools across the world;
- a not-for-profit job agency, to cut the high costs of using agency staff;
- trainee posts aimed at school leavers, tied to day release courses and linked to promotional initiatives in schools;
- pooling resources to create lead authorities in specialist services such as enforcement, urban design or ecology;
- closer links between colleges and employers, with more short-term placements for final year students;
- key worker housing schemes; and
- partnering with consultants, using call-on contracts to provide cover for long-term vacancies.

Source: Association of London Government / Association of London Borough Officers Working Group on Recruitment and Retention

However, inspectors have found several successful examples of improved resource utilisation (CASE STUDY 18 and CASE STUDY 19) including:

- using less experienced and less highly trained staff to deal with straightforward applications;
- sharing staff and skills, for example, between policy and development control or between councils;
- appointing non-planning graduates and sponsoring them to gain planning qualifications; and
- creating a local register of all qualified planning personnel and using consultants or agency staff.

CASE STUDY 18 Managing the workload

Elmbridge District Council has dealt with an increase in workload by employing consultants and the temporary use of staff overtime. Having looked at likely future workloads, they have come to the conclusion that appointing more permanent staff would be more cost-effective, but less flexible, when dealing with peaks and troughs. In planning policy they are considering a shared consultancy arrangement with a neighbouring authority. They have appointed non-planning graduates to certain posts and will provide them with appropriate training.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CASE STUDY 19 Joint working to pool resources

The Surrey Planning Officers’ Association is developing ideas for joint working. These include having a pool of labour, assigning specialist officers within partner authorities to deal with particular aspects of the service, such as household applications, and shared approaches to various sections of their local plans.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
**USING EXTERNAL RESOURCES**

108. Evaluation of alternative forms of service delivery is consistently weak in planning, as in many other areas of public service. In several cases, inspectors noted that no appraisal of external service delivery options had been attempted. A number of reasons have been given to justify this position, including:
   - probity issues;
   - an immature external market for service provision;
   - the cost of assessing the competitiveness of the service;
   - the lack of internal performance data for comparative purposes;
   - the lack of commercial benchmarking information; and
   - corporate legal advice against outsourcing.

109. Some of these arguments may have validity when considering the wholesale outsourcing of the planning service, but they would not prevent the more selective use of external resources. Several authorities have demonstrated that specific functions can be outsourced without any threat to probity or legal requirements. Inexperience in market-testing is an issue for some authorities, but experience is developing in both the public and private sectors and this is not an insuperable barrier.

110. The planning consultancy market is well developed in many areas. The use of planning consultants for specialist development planning studies, masterplanning projects and specific development control functions (such as major appeals, retail impact assessment and traffic impact assessment) is well-established in many localities. Indeed, the planning consultancy market is keenly competitive and responsive to new business opportunities that provide a commercial return. One significant barrier to entry for some consultants, however, is the potential loss of lucrative private sector work due to conflicts of interest when acting for the local authority in a development control capacity.

111. Arguments relating to the cost of comparison and weaknesses of internal performance data systems are unconvincing. Sound management requires timely performance data, and benchmarking against other providers is an indispensable requirement of a quality service.

112. Successful approaches to testing competitiveness identified in inspections include:
   - commissioning management consultants, a private firm or a local academic institute to explore the market place to assess the level of interest in the market place *(CASE STUDY 20, overleaf)*;
   - advertising for potential contractors in a national planning magazine to test the market; and
   - sharing experience of private consultants with other councils.

113. Some planning authorities have pursued selective outsourcing. For example, the London Borough of Sutton developed an outsourced team dedicated to processing householder applications. This helped to improve overall performance against the eight week target. There is also some use of the private sector to cover peaks in workload *(CASE STUDY 21, overleaf)* or to provide specialist development control expertise (such as for archaeology, landscaping or appeals).
CASE STUDY 20  Testing the market

The London Borough of Camden employed KPMG to look at the external market for all regulatory services across the Environment Department. Following a half-day workshop attended by senior officers and by private firms to look at options, the Council concluded that there was little interest in providing these types of services. Senior managers are now considering what further action to take.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CASE STUDY 21  Dealing with resource shortages by hiring in staff

Oxford has a ‘Planning Bank’ to address peak workload issues. This is a pool of professional planners who are available for use by the Council on short-term contract. They are locally based, are not seeking permanent employment, and are vetted by the Council in advance.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

114. Alternative service delivery options include partnership working with other councils, interest groups and the not-for-profit sector. There are some good examples of partnership initiatives with other local councils including: joint commissioning of work; joint funding of specialist posts; and co-operation in the preparation of local plan policies and information leaflets. Such approaches help to spread ownership of issues across the council and among stakeholders.

115. There are some examples of innovative configurations of services or joined-up working arrangements between service teams. These include planning policy, development control, building control, land charges, enforcement, transportation, environmental strategy and conservation. For example, transportation engineers at the London Borough of Wandsworth are part of the forward planning department. At Chichester District Council, the planning, transportation and environmental strategy service units have been integrated. Nottingham City Council is also using an integrated approach (CASE STUDY 22).

116. There are examples of well-developed links across the council, through cross-functional working groups and joint initiatives, as well as partnership working between authorities (CASE STUDY 23). In some cases, economic development and planning services have combined with other stakeholders to support business and training initiatives (CASE STUDY 24). In others, planning and legal services take a joint approach to solving problems and improving the process. At Wigan Council, officers working in the enforcement section link closely with the legal department to negotiate to a satisfactory resolution rather than progress quickly to some kind of formal action.
CASE STUDY 22 An integrated approach

Nottingham City Council has been awarded centre of excellence status by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions for their integrated approach to transport. The transportation strategy team is based in the Planning Department and integrates transport and planning to facilitate sustainable transport. There is a specific section in the local transport plan that is designed to assist development control with planning decisions.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

CASE STUDY 23 Partnerships between authorities

The Welland Partnership is a group of five small authorities, similar in size and character, from three adjacent counties. The working group for planning policy has agreed an approach to reviewing local plans and supplementary planning guidance, whereby one authority prepares supplementary planning guidance on a particular subject on behalf of all the partners. The authorities are aiming to use common planning policies, such as those for the protection of ecological sites and listed buildings.

The Partnership has also jointly commissioned specialist services, including a person to advise village communities on drawing up village design statements and someone who advises on identifying sources of external funding.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CASE STUDY 24 Working with other organisations

Braintree District Council has set up a partnership board to produce their economic development strategy so that they can target the issues that are most important to the agencies represented. The board includes representatives from the Small Business Service, Essex County Council Enterprise Unit, Braintree Foyer, Braintree District Council (officers and members), Braintree College, North Essex Community College, four local Chambers of Trade, local employers, the job centre, Essex Careers and Business Partnership, Essex Economic Partnership, Reed in Partnership, Business Link Essex, Seetec and the Learning and Skills Council. They have also half-funded a post with the Rural Community Council of Essex to help parish councils with village design statements.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

USING ICT TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY

117. Poor implementation of ICT systems within the planning service can be a barrier to effective delivery. There are frequent references in inspection reports to ICT systems that are incompatible and to staff who have not been trained adequately to use them.

118. ICT systems should be delivering efficiency improvements by facilitating routine tasks including database searches, production of standardised documents and routine report production. While specialist, tailored computer systems have long been available to the planning service, it is apparent from inspection results that they have not been implemented universally. Successful implementations of conventional database and geographic information system applications within planning services include:
• Lincoln City Council – the system is used to prepare much of the routine documentation associated with planning applications and is used for monitoring and reporting on processing.

• London Borough of Wandsworth – forward planning, building control, development control and land charges functions share integrated ICT systems, which enable shared information access.

• Rushcliffe Borough Council – the system provides an online service to view planning histories, decision notices, weekly application lists and a ‘top ten’ chart of the most interesting applications. The system incorporates aerial photographs and historical map records.

119. The use of ICT to improve the accessibility and quality of the planning service is discussed earlier in this chapter (paragraphs 89-93).

COMPARING PERFORMANCE

120. Many authorities do compare their performance with other local authorities (CASE STUDY 25), but few do it well. The most common format is to benchmark against a number of neighbouring authorities, or another family of authorities which is judged to be broadly comparable. This approach is not sufficiently challenging, unless the neighbouring authorities are strong performers. Authorities need to think more widely when choosing with whom to benchmark (CASE STUDY 26). For development control, in particular, there is insufficient rigorous comparison against performance in the top quartile.

CASE STUDY 25 Benchmarking with other councils in the area

Kent’s district councils undertook a major comparison exercise in 1999, looking at performance and workload issues. Measures were grouped under seven headings – how difficult, how busy, how fast, how efficient, how amenable, how defensible and how aggravating. All this information was readily available and enabled each of the councils involved to identify areas of strength and weakness.

Elmbridge is involved in the north west Surrey benchmarking group, which consists of five districts. It looks at a variety of issues, including planning policy, and compares budgeted costs, staff cost and staff time allocations. It has developed a checklist that seeks to assess the level of success in preparing and implementing local plans and to compare the differences in output against inputs. The checklist includes: level of central support and salary costs, level of input to the development control process, plan preparation times, plan implementation, amount of supplementary planning guidance work and conservation activities.

Elmbridge is also involved in the Surrey and Blackwater Valley local plans best practice group. This focuses on best practice in the planning process and has compared staff structures, service activities and costs, staff allocations and local plan progress.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
CASE STUDY 26  Benchmarking with the private sector

In Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, the process of dealing with planning applications has been compared against processes for dealing with applications for housing benefit and claims for insurance, for example validating and registering an application, considering the merits of the case, making a decision and informing the applicant. For this reason Basingstoke and Deane are considering benchmarking internally with their housing benefit colleagues and externally with a local insurance company to compare how they manage their internal processes.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

121. For planning policy and enforcement, in particular, the use of performance indicators is inadequate; few authorities are using locally developed measures. It is important that authorities identify and monitor their achievement against what is important locally. Examples of indicators that have been recommended during inspections include:

- the number of affordable housing units secured;
- the number of schemes that have created jobs, or where community safety or environmental improvements have been negotiated;
- the number of successfully defended enforcement appeals; and
- the number of modules developed for training of members.

122. Other possible measures can be found on the Audit Commission/IDeA library of local performance indicators (http://www.local-pi-library.gov.uk).

123. A significant number of authorities are employing external frameworks to measure how effective their services are. For example, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model is widely used to link processes and outcomes. Many others have gained, or are seeking, external recognition such as Investors in People, Charter Mark and ISO 9000.

124. Cost comparison is a consistently weak area. In February 2000, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) introduced its Best Value Accounting Code of Practice (Ref. 14). The Planning Officers Society recommends that all local planning authorities adopt this model and includes a chapter on the cost of the planning service in its Guide to Best Value and Planning (Ref. 8).

TRAINING AND GUIDANCE FOR MEMBERS

125. Inspectors of planning services have often identified a need for a member training programme in order to ensure that there is consistency in decision-making. Training should be on both specific legislation and more general planning matters, such as material considerations. It should be seen as an opportunity to increase the mutual understanding of members and officers on planning matters.

126. Informal training through site visits, both before and after development has taken place, is helpful (CASE STUDY 27, overleaf). This allows members to appreciate the practical impact of a planning decision.
CASE STUDY 27 Informal member training

Melton Borough Council takes members on site visits to illustrate what planning officers believe to be good and poor examples of development. They also involve applicants and builders in discussing whether a development has been successful.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

BUSINESS PLANNING TO IMPROVE THE SERVICE

127. The implementation plan that follows a best value review is the primary tool for driving service improvement over the next five years. Inspectors report that the quality of improvement plans varies greatly; this problem is common to most service areas.

128. The most commonly reported weaknesses in service improvement planning are:
   • no long-term (three- to five-year) vision for the service;
   • inadequate challenge to the existing mode of service delivery;
   • improvement objectives that are not linked to corporate aims, prioritised and timetabled;
   • unclear targets that are not time-bound and specific;
   • inadequate emphasis on how the proposed changes will improve service outcomes; and
   • the lack of a project management plan for implementing the improvements.

129. Fundamental challenge to the pattern of service delivery can be reinforced in a number of ways. At Sevenoaks District Council, a group of councillors discussed, defined and developed issues around the planning process and reported to a planning advisory group of members. This had significant influence on the aims, process and planned outcomes of the planning service best value review. Elmbridge Borough Council used an officer from one of their benchmarking groups during their best value review. The London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea used the corporate business excellence model ‘Rapidscore’ to make an analysis of service strengths and weaknesses. Planning staff were involved in the review through working groups, brainstorming, seminars, newsletters, questionnaires and a suggestion box scheme. An external consultant was employed to consider the draft report and to advise on whether it was sufficiently rigorous.

130. The required framework to support implementation of the improvement plan is often lacking. An effective framework includes:
   • good performance management systems;
   • mechanisms for corporate support, for example finance and ICT;
   • initiatives to foster a culture that supports change; and
   • clear responsibility for implementation of the improvement plan (CASE STUDY 28).

131. Many planning services can be further improved through the application of established management approaches to improve resource utilisation (CHECKLIST 5).
CASE STUDY 28 Focusing on performance management

In North Somerset District Council the development control service has decided to give one member of staff specific responsibility for performance management. This person is expected to ensure that operational staff are fully equipped to do their jobs, through the combination of good working practices and a desktop manual.

Examples of steps being taken to improve performance include:

• a new computer system allowing weekly tracking of individual workloads and improved management information about pre-application discussions, applications, enforcement and appeals; and
• a change in the process for making section 106 agreements and the preparation of a standard model of documentation.

The performance manager will be responsible for ensuring that these and other plans are implemented and that other departments, such as the legal department, are appropriately linked into the planning process.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

CHECKLIST 5 Reinforcing management systems to assure quality

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

• Evaluate their current use of professional, technical and administrative resources to ensure that priorities are addressed.
• Ensure that ICT systems are delivering real performance benefits, through continuing investment in system development, maintenance and staff training.
• Develop partnership approaches to address issues which are common to other councils and reinforce other partnership arrangements to tackle cross-cutting issues.
• Use external contractors, where appropriate, to manage workload peaks and specialist tasks.
• Benchmark against the best and ensure that comparisons lead to service improvements.
• Ensure that the service is implementing a clear improvement plan that addresses all major areas of weakness.
The experience of planning service inspections set out in this report suggests that authorities should ask themselves a range of questions covering forward planning, development control and enforcement (BOX G).

The case study overleaf (CASE STUDY 29, overleaf) shows some of the steps being taken by one authority to improve their service. Camden’s current success in delivery of planning service follows a difficult period in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its recovery is largely due to strong financial and performance management driven by effective corporate management and leadership.
### BOX G Questions to drive service improvement

**Are we focusing on the right things?**
- Do we know what matters to local people?
- Do all planning service operations reflect community priorities, including our approach to planning obligations?
- Have service priorities and targets been agreed and made clear to all in a customer charter?
- Are we talking to our users and improving the service to meet their requirements?
- Are resources directed to achieving these priorities?

**Are we working co-operatively?**
- Are all the necessary partnerships and working agreements in place with other council departments, other councils and other organisations?
- What can be done to improve engagement with hard-to-reach groups?
- How can officers and members work together to improve services?
- Are members supported through training and clear, considered recommendations?

**Are our processes user-friendly?**
- Is the plan properly communicated to users and partners?
- Is it easy for people to find out about and get involved in our planning service?
- Is it easy for people to submit complete, good quality applications?
- Can development control customers find out about progress on their application?
- Do our ICT systems help staff to make a good quality decision as quickly as possible?
- Is the website being developed to support online planning applications?

**Is our planning service effective and efficient?**
- Do any of our processes cause unnecessary delay?
- What will we need to do to meet the Government’s performance targets on speed of determination?
- Can people get away with inappropriate or illegal development?
- Have we got clear and concise measures of the effectiveness of our development plan?
- Can we demonstrate that our development control work is improving the built and natural environment and the quality of life in this area?
- Do we know what the service costs and how this relates to service outputs?
- Is the service providing value for money?
- How do we compare against the best planning services?

**Are we open to change?**
- Is best value part of day-to-day management?
- Is everyone committed to continuous improvement?
- Have we considered all the service delivery options, with external help?
- Are we willing to work with other organisations to improve services?
- Do we demonstrate competitiveness?

*Source: Audit Commission*
CASE STUDY 29 Bringing it all together

The London Borough of Camden is a diverse area, including the urban villages of Hampstead and Highgate, the inner city environment of Kings Cross and the commercial areas of Holborn and Euston. It handles a high and increasing workload, with almost 5,000 planning applications per year. About 20 per cent are classed as major applications. In 1995/96 the number of decisions made within eight weeks was 30 per cent and Camden was the lowest performing planning authority in London. The Council was selected as a best value pilot authority and the Environment Department undertook a best value review of development control. This identified four challenges:

- to develop more detailed understanding of the costs of the service;
- to identify performance indicators for comparison with other London authorities;
- to ensure that the wider community and users become more closely involved in shaping the environment; and
- to ensure that the service is receptive to innovation and new ideas.

The service continues to tackle challenges in these areas, including the following examples:

**PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

- Introducing a performance management system to deal with applications within the eight week period. Area team managers are responsible for monitoring outstanding applications.
- Employing a consultant to help staff to map processes. The initial emphasis was on the speed of determination of householder applications; some tasks were streamlined. Staff discovered that post was being delayed in the post room for two to three days; this was resolved by getting a dedicated postcode. When similar attention was paid to other types of application, performance improved on these as well.
- Introducing regular discussions at team meetings to improve performance. Each team has statistics of its own performance that are discussed at management meetings.

**PROCESS IMPROVEMENT**

- Changing the delegation agreement, so that only about ten per cent of cases are reported to the sub-committee. Where objections are received on an application that would normally be considered by officers, a panel of members determines whether the case should be referred to sub-committee.
- Introducing a geographical information system to identify consultees and generate letters automatically.
- Producing regular briefing notes to keep staff up-to-date with progress on projects.

**ENGAGING THE PUBLIC**

- Setting out a consultation strategy.
- Improving information for the public at committees. Those attending receive a copy of the area team reports and a paper on committee protocol.
- Introducing dedicated professional staff at the enquiry desk to provide informal pre-application advice.
- Developing a diversity action plan – for example, training staff to use specialist equipment and ensuring that key documents are translated into appropriate languages.

**MAXIMISING RESOURCES**

- Reducing the cost of implementing the consultation strategy; renegotiating the cost of service level agreements; and identifying areas where costs could be reduced as part of the process mapping exercise.

*continued opposite*
CROSS-DEPARTMENT WORKING

• Setting up the ‘boulevard’ project. This involves the combined work of different services to upgrade the townscape within Kings Cross and Camden Town.

• Developing a project to ensure that people intending to submit applications for cafés, restaurants and/or public houses receive a co-ordinated response from the Environment Department.

REWARDING ACHIEVEMENT

• Initiating a biannual design award scheme. New developments are inspected by a group drawn from amenity societies, local architects, architecture students and the local paper.

OUTCOMES

The rate of determination of householder applications has improved from 60 per cent in 1995/96 to 78 per cent in 1999/2000. The rate of determination of non-householder applications (a large proportion of the total) has increased to 59 per cent. Camden is now in the top quartile of London boroughs on both indicators. The planning service is turning things round and demonstrating a clear commitment to deliver. Work continues to improve the service in terms of both speed and quality.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

134. The good practice identified in this report does not provide universal solutions; each authority must analyse its own problems with reference to local circumstances. Neither are solutions likely to be straightforward, since barriers to improvement are often linked to complex issues affecting several council departments. Sometimes, further improvement can only be achieved through effective partnership working with other authorities. Wide-ranging best value reviews will help councils to identify ways to improve, learning from the experience of their peers and the increasing flow of inspection judgements.
APPENDIX 1: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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STUDY TEAM

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REFERENCES


