

PLANNING PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK: 2011-12

FEEDBACK REPORT: West Dunbartonshire Council



Date performance report due: 30 September 2012

Date of receipt of report: 28 September 2012

National Headline Indicators

- We note that your local plan was 2 years old at the end of the reporting year and that your Local Development Plan (LDP) was on course for adoption within the 5-year cycle. This is something which is essential in giving a clear lead and certainty for future investment in development. We want to see good progress maintained with your LDP and subsequent plans, project planned through to adoption.
- Your data in relation to land supply and delivery is noted, as is the supporting contextual information. It is encouraging to see more than the minimum 5 years supply of effective housing land set out in your draft (pre-consultation) figure and hope this is maintained. Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS) are currently preparing definitions for recording 'employment land' and 'commercial floorspace' for the second round of reports to bring consistency to these measures.
- A number of authorities have not been in a position to accurately report pre-application discussion rates. We welcome your commitment to record this from 2012-3.
- None of your 7 major applications had been subject to processing agreements, although we note all had pre-application discussions in line with your developers protocol. You advise that you encourage developers to enter into processing agreements. You will be aware that the Scottish Government has recently published a template, alongside publicising the benefits to all of processing agreements to add a level of certainty and focus to the handling of major applications. We hope the template will act as a good starting point and encourage take-up in future.
- Your delegation rate was below the national average although we note your explanation about the influence of local authority interest cases in your area. You might want to amend your arrangements for handling these cases following legislative change on schemes of delegation.
- Decision-making timescales: there was one discrepancy, in the average timescale for householder developments showing as 7 weeks on the NHIs but as 8.3 weeks in the table on page 19. There were also several figures missing from that table; including the average timescale for cases with legal agreements. You should ensure this is fully completed in future reports.

- Your average timescales for deciding major applications were favourable compared to Scottish figures, as were your proportion of local developments decided within 2 months.
- There were however some wide gaps in average timescale between local applications decided within and outwith the 2-month period; which you have acknowledged as being down to a small number of applications being delayed over long periods, particularly at the request of applicants. Long-running cases have been shown to distort overall statistics, damaging planning's reputation, and you should work with applicants to avoid this wherever possible.
- Effective enforcement is an essential element in ensuring public confidence in the planning system. We note your intention to review your enforcement charter and you should ensure a rolling programme of reviewing and updating this within the statutory 2-year cycle.
- The PPF has changed the way enforcement activity is measured, bringing more focus to cases being 'resolved' rather than relying on numbers of formal notices. You have provided a note of the number of breaches identified during the year, but not the number resolved; you should include this in future reports.

Defining and Measuring a High Quality Planning Service

- This section of your report was very well structured, setting out key examples of actions taken, with a focus on outcomes, and supported in places with quotes obtained through feedback. There were a few references to actions taken during business year 2012-13, after the end of the year being reported on but before your report was finalised.
- Your report demonstrates activity within your authority that is recognised as being helpful to those looking to invest and being 'open for business' which is well illustrated by the introduction of the developers protocol and helpfully supplemented with testimonies from developers who have engaged with the service. You could also explain in future reports how this approach to open early engagement with developers and consultees is helping to ensure information requests are proportionate.
- You provided 3 good examples of how the authority's planning service has played an important role in facilitating the delivery of development, regeneration and enhancement of the local environment – something you have recognised as a strategic priority for the council. Future reports could also highlight any current and emerging policy support for good quality design and placemaking, and also any steps you are taking to review and learn from planning's influence over recently completed developments.
- You have demonstrated the benefits from having a relevant, robust and up-to-date development plan and the certainty it can provide as a reliable guide for future development. Also good to see recognition that an effective website and published advice can help to guide people through their involvement or engagement with planning. This can be supplemented with a commitment to helpful pre-application advice for all types and scales of development. Future reports could explain availability of this.

- You have demonstrated a good range of actions to engage with customers to support positive working relationships. Your publication of a customer charter should help with this and it would be useful to include some customer feedback on this, including any data on customer satisfaction levels. Regular engagement through customer forums will also help to share expectations of each other and provide scope to improve; although we note the forum you referred to was in August 2012 and should have featured in your next performance report.
- We were interested in your comments about the improvement to customer service as a result of your office refurbishment, creating a more welcoming and helpful office environment for customers to visit and including visual information on key priorities and recent good quality developments. Have you received positive feedback on this, and is it something you would be able to share as good practice?
- We note the reorganisation of your team structure to enable officers to focus on priorities and more proactive efforts to attract development. We also encourage you to operate the flexible approach you mention so that officers can work between teams where needed and continue to share good practice.
- We welcome your involvement in a benchmarking group with neighbouring councils. This is a very good example of planning authorities taking the initiative, enabling you to learn from and challenge each other on improved delivery of the service. We would encourage you to use the measures and themes from the Planning Performance Framework for future benchmarking discussions. It would be interesting to see some outputs from the operation of this group.

Service Improvement Commitments 2012-13

- You have made a range of commitments that are clearly linked to improvement needs identified in your performance report; for example continuing your efforts towards better front-loading of the service and through peer review of the effectiveness of changes you have made recently to service delivery. We look forward to following progress in your next report.
- Your commitment to progress your action plan on Audit Scotland's recommendations for planning authorities could have included more specific actions, that could then be reviewed in your next report.

Service Improvements 2011-12: Delivery

- Although you had no service improvement plan from 2011 to draw on, you have demonstrated a wide range of improvement actions and initiatives that appear to have brought benefits for the authority, its customers and the area. In your next report, you should report directly on the actions taken in respect of the service improvement commitments made for 2012-13.

Conclusion

- Overall, you have produced a very positive report showing a shift towards a planning reform and performance culture, supported by evidence provided by customers, and we welcome the commitment you are making to continuous assessment and improvement. Some wider information on overall customer satisfaction levels would supplement your evidence on customer experience.
- The format of your report allows for a very clear read of how changing behaviours are influencing outcomes and service quality.
- We are encouraged to see you working with an up-to-date local plan, with the likelihood of replacing it within the 5-year cycle, and a decent record on decision-making timescales albeit with some scope to improve in that area by moving on some longer-running cases.

The feedback in this report is based solely on the information provided to us within your Planning Performance Framework Report covering the period April 2011 to March 2012.

If you need to clarify any aspect of the report please contact us on 0131 244 7076 or email andy.kinnaird@scotland.gsi.gov.uk.

*We hope that this feedback will be of use to you in the preparation of your next report which covers the period April 2012 to March 2013. Please note that the next reports are due to be submitted to us at sgplanning@scotland.gsi.gov.uk **before 30 September 2013**.*

The Scottish Government, Planning and Architecture Division
June 2013