



reading

improving the process of
dealing with major applications



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executive summary

By taking a more focused, documented approach to performance management, in conjunction with an increased emphasis on improving processes, Reading Borough Council has demonstrated significant improvement in the number of major applications they have processed within target times in the last two years.

After developing a vision for taking the planning team forward – that included an emphasis on pre-application becoming an established and well thought out part of the planning process – Reading has an established timetable in place for processing applications and increased staff motivation. This success has led to the planning team being recipients of high planning delivery grant awards based partly on this performance.

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about the area

- Reading is one of the principal regional and commercial centres of the Thames Valley. The town is strategically well located, with important transport and communication links. It lies approximately 65 kilometres west of London, close to junctions on the M4 and to Heathrow airport. The population of the borough is approximately 148,000 and this is not predicted to increase significantly over the next few years.
- Reading has a buoyant economy and major applications usually come from organisations that are well resourced and can employ professional advisers to engage with the planning service.
- Reading Borough Council is a Labour controlled unitary authority. It is relatively prosperous and an area that traditionally has experienced large amounts of growth; is seen as the capital of the Thames Valley and its success is critical to the economic success of the wider area. Questions concerning growth relate directly to achieving sustainable development by balancing economic, social and environmental considerations whilst delivering innovative and unique design in an urban area.
- It has been a question of managing growth and facilitating urban renaissance. Given the considerable pressure for development it has been important to mitigate the impacts of development and to improve the social and physical infrastructure of the town.

background

- In 2001–02, Reading achieved a rate of 73 per cent in deciding all applications within eight weeks. However, when the ODPM split BVPI 109 to enable the government to monitor major, minor and other applications, the picture in terms of this performance changed.



- The planning service had a Best Value Inspection, carried out by the Audit Commission in May 2002. The council was assessed as providing a 'fair' one-star service that had 'excellent' prospects for improvement.
- This provided a benchmark, which helped the planning service concentrate on its processes as well as developing a vision for taking the service forward.
- In 2002–03, the first year of recorded performance information for major applications, Reading decided only 31 per cent of major applications within 13 weeks, against the new national government target of 60 per cent, and a minimum standard of 45 per cent set by ODPM for the council for 2002–3.
- The planning team found that applications were entering the system without comprehensive supporting information. In addition applicants were occasionally reluctant to spend time and resources in the pre-application stage even though it could speed the process up quite substantially.
- With the government setting and expecting stretching planning performance targets to be met, Reading needed to undertake change within the service if it was to meet its own ambitious programme for improvement.

what were the key issues or problems in reading?

- Reading wanted to make their major application process more efficient, in terms of time management, and to make pre-application an established, complete and well thought out process.
- The need to move towards a managed pre-application discussion process was essential in speeding up the formal application timescale and so avoiding the drip-feeding of information at the application stage.



- Supplementary planning guidance on planning obligations was needed: to make it easier for applicants and planners to know in advance the levels of financial or other contributions which would be likely to be sought by the council, such as affordable housing, to mitigate the impact of new development on social and physical infrastructure and to provide balanced communities.
- There was also a need to change, from a flexible accommodation of others' timescales, to a more focussed time management of the whole process, for both planners and applicants. Planning had never really set out its expectations on timescales to the customer.
- In addition, there was a drive to focus on improving performance and process management and as a result to improve staff morale.

what reading did in response to these challenges

- A revised section 106 legal agreement process for planning obligations, whereby applicants were encouraged to submit heads of terms of the agreement with their application so that work on the agreement could commence as early as possible (on a without prejudice basis).
- Detailed supplementary planning guidance on planning obligations was published to make the process more transparent and speedier.
- A monitoring process including quarterly published reports on performance, communicating improvement to the councillors, the public and staff.
- Issued a planning application checklist, to agents. This explained the new performance targets, what was required in terms of supporting information for an application and also encouraged



pre-application discussions in order to improve the quality of submitted applications.

- Negotiating a service level agreement with the in-house legal team, to process section 106 agreements to the planning timetable, which quickened the legal process.
- Reading revised their delegated powers in order to reduce the number of applications going to committee while ensuring that the major ones, the sensitive ones and the ones that were called in by councillors were still considered.
- A staff manual was produced providing new guidance on procedures.
- Members were consulted in a positive way during the introduction of these changes. This ensured that they were well informed throughout of the changes and continued to give support.
- Flexible staffing including deploying planners across area teams and employing contract staff to meet variations in workload as well as an emphasis on continuous development.
- The introduction of a timetable outlining the key milestones along the 13-week major application process. This gave planners within the team a clear framework for knowing at what point in the application process they should be working at or toward.

key outcomes

A significant overall improvement in performance: Reading became a top quartile performing authority in all types of applications in 2003–04, meeting all three BV109 targets.

1 improved performance

The national target for major applications was exceeded for the first time in 2003/4 after a process of continuous improvement.



2 improved customer satisfaction

Applicant satisfaction improved from 59 per cent in 2000 to 69 per cent in 2003 (BV 111).

3 applications given a timetable

Guidance was produced in the form of a timetable for how long the application process should actually take by identifying the key stages and milestones – which were measurable (please see appendix 1).

4 better quality applications

More applications are being submitted with the necessary supporting information.

5 overall service improvements (as a result of planning delivery grant)

Improved performance has provided increased resources to develop the service as a whole, including specialist advice on urban design for example.

6 empowered staff

Planning staff had clearer objectives and responsibilities. More junior staff had the opportunity to deal with complex applications and have ownership of the whole of an application, with mentoring being provided by more senior staff.

7 recognition of service improvement by the audit commission

In a whole service review of the council's environment directorate undertaken by the Audit Commission in 2004, the service was assessed as providing a "good" two star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. The council's improvement in handling major planning applications contributed to this judgment.

8 other achievements

The council is now planning to introduce a validation checklist as supplementary planning guidance in accordance with recent



ODPM good practice guidance. This will require applications to be submitted complete with all the necessary supporting information.

A further review of officer delegation powers will also take place.

The council has also introduced the option of a unilateral undertaking in place of a legal agreement for less complex obligations where only a financial contribution is required and is payable on the grant of permission. The council has produced a standard format for this type of undertaking.

how much did this cost? how was this achieved?

- The cost of the initial improvements for the handling of major applications – new procedures, in house officer training, publication of the planning application checklist and increased officer delegation – which were introduced between April and September 2002 were met from within the existing budget. More flexible staffing through the introduction of contract planners to deal with simpler applications had already been introduced in 2000.
- The cost of the service per head of population rose from £9.81 in 2000–01, to £14.39 in 2001–02 and £15.99 in 2003–04. The impact of the planning delivery grant is reflected in these costs. Subsequent improvements across the planning service as a whole were funded by the planning delivery grant (PDG), from the ODPM, as a reward for improved performance (PDG awarded: £203,8467 in 2003–04, £501,000 in 2004–05 and £338,466 in 2005–06). These improvements have included contributions towards funding additional staff in other departments of the council to provide planning related legal and valuation expertise.
- In addition, this money was spent on developing a more flexible approach to managing staff to deal with peaks and troughs in workload by employing contract staff when needed.



- Staff development was a key priority, including outside professional training and coaching and senior staff being deployed flexibly, between area teams, to cover variations in workload.
- Reading also appointed new graduates and funded their planning training by day release at university.
- Reading were also able to use resources to retrain staff, upgrade their computer systems as well as employing contractors to provide specialist advice on urban design and ecology, throughout the process.

who was involved?

- Head of planning and transport, who assumes a strategic role for planning within the council.
- Planning managers, who report to the head of planning. They were responsible for initiating the re-engineering of the processes needed to improve performance. In addition they are responsible for monitoring performance on a monthly, quarterly and yearly basis.
- Team leaders monitor performance on a weekly and monthly basis as well as cascading performance information to the rest of the team.
- Planning legal solicitors played a key part in speeding up the section 106 process by enabling this to run parallel with the planning application, rather than toward the end of the process.
- Administration staff were important in providing statistical monitoring information on performance and ensuring decision notices were despatched expeditiously.
- Councillors were key in their willingness to support the process and the emphasis on moving to a pre-application process.



what barriers were faced and how they were overcome?

- The variety and unpredictability of applications by type, size and degree of complexity. This was addressed by moving to a micro-management approach of each application. This required regular and consistent monitoring of the progress of each application.
- A lack of consistency in the way the development industry approaches the submission of major planning applications. This was addressed by publishing a Planning Application Checklist to achieve better consistency.
- A preference expressed by some applicants to continue negotiation over a longer time period than the timetable if this meant achieving a permission at the end of the day rather than a refusal of permission within the target timescale. The council has not accepted this reason as justification for delaying determination of an application. However, where unavoidable procedural difficulties arose a further delay might be justified, for example if a new material planning consideration came to light. Each case had to be considered on its individual merits.
- Difficulties sometimes arose where applicants and their legal advisors were unable to co-ordinate timely completion of a section 106 agreement by all the parties who had an interest in the land. Submission of outstanding information and amended plans could also cause delay. Where a delay was considered unavoidable, the timetable was relaxed in the interests of customer care. Where delay would have been avoidable, applicants were asked to withdraw an application and resubmit it to avoid a refusal of permission. On several occasions applications were refused when a legal agreement was not completed on time without explanation. This sent a clear message to applicants that the national BV targets needed to be owned by both the council and its customers.

the critical success factors

- Accepting the challenge of national targets as an incentive to improve.
- Developing and implementing a best value improvement plan for the whole planning service of which development control performance was one element.
- Changing staff and customers' perceptions about what constitutes quality service delivery.
- Provision of a good quality pre-application service.
- The introduction of the planning application timetable and its effective communication and implementation.
- Negotiating a Service Level Agreement with in-house legal team to have section 106 legal agreements running parallel with planning application.
- Continuous performance management at all levels.
- Improved staff motivation through dialogue and clear communication of success.
- Clear written procedures for staff to follow.



contact details for further information

David Breeze, Planning Manager (Implementation)

Tel: 0118 9390410 Extn: 2410

Email: David.Breeze@Reading.gov.uk

appendices

major planning application 13 week timetable – an example

It is not possible to prescribe every milestone in terms of number of days elapsed. However, a number of the dates are fixed by the validation date. For instance, once the council is satisfied that the application is valid then (i) the start date, (ii) the 13 week date (iii) the date by which the s106 needs to be completed (ie. either one or two days before the 13 week date) and (iv) the start and end date for public consultation can be fixed.

As the planning committee meets once a month, the planning officer has to identify which available committee meeting is most likely to consider the application in order to allow sufficient time to complete the draft s106 and still meet the 13 week target date. This should also be discussed with the applicant at pre-application stage.

Days elapsed	Milestones
0	Valid application submission with heads of terms of legal agreement under s106
5	21 day consultation period commences Legal Services instructed to prepare draft (s106)
14	Letter to applicant identifying any outstanding issues (14 calendar days to submit further information)
26	End of statutory consultation period
28	Date for first submission of outstanding information by applicant
33	Further letter to applicant detailing any minor amendments/further information required in response to consultations/appraisal and additional information (five working days to submit)



- 40 Date for submission of any minor amendments/further supporting information
- 42 Carry out re-consultations considered necessary as a result of any minor amendments further information (14 days)
- 54 Finalise recommendation for Planning Committee on day 77 (All issues including heads of terms of s106 with conditions to have been resolved/agreed)
- 56 Date for any final consultation responses
- 61 Committee report finalised: Recommendation either to (i) approve subject to completion of (s106) agreement by day 90 (with delegated authority to refuse if s106 agreement is not completed by day 90) or (ii) to refuse
- 77 Planning Committee consider application with officer update report if necessary
- 78–90 If application is approved subject to completion of s106 agreement, complete agreement and prepare decision notice
OR
If application refused, issue decision as soon as possible
- 90 Last date for completion of s106 agreement
- 91 13-week deadline. Last date for issue of decision notice



Planning Advisory Service (PAS)

Improvement and Development Agency
76–86 Turnmill Street
London
EC1M 5LG

telephone: **020 7296 6880** (ihelp)

email: **pas@idea.gov.uk**

web: **www.idea.gov.uk/pas**

Advisory Team for Large Applications (ATLAS)

English Partnerships
Central Business Exchange II
414–428 Midsummer Boulevard
Milton Keynes
MK9 2EA

telephone: **01908 353 912**

Front cover photo: the Oracle is a shopping and leisure complex on the banks of the River Kennet. It is named after the workhouse that once stood on the site.

Photo: Reading Evening Post

Printed by KLM Press UK on paper made from 100% chlorine free pulp from sustainable forests.

IDeA IDT 1303