NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 18 January 2010

PLANNING APPLICANT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Report by: Steve Avery, Director of Strategy and Planning

1 Introduction

1.1 English National Park Authorities have agreed a set of performance indicators (PIs) to help provide a consistent way to benchmark performance across various service areas. One of these PIs relates to the percentage of planning applicants satisfied with the service they received.

1.2 A priority for the Development Control Service in this year’s Corporate Plan was to initiate a planning applicant satisfaction survey. At the end of September 2009, questionnaires were sent out to 471 applicants and agents. A copy of the questionnaire and the accompanying letter are attached as Annex 1.

1.3 This report was presented to the Planning Development Control Committee on 15 December 2009. At that meeting, Members noted the report. There were individual Member requests for consideration to be given to carrying out a similar survey about the Authority’s enforcement function and for future surveys to be extended beyond applicants and agents.

1.4 In all other respects, this report is identical to that considered by the Planning Development Control Committee last month. The report sets out the main findings of the survey and how the responding applicants felt the planning service could be improved.

2 Carrying out the survey

2.1 The Authority employed the same questionnaire and methodology as that used by the other English National Parks. To ensure statistical validity, the Authority had to issue a sufficient number of questionnaires to obtain responses from at least 5% of applicants over a 12 month period.

2.4 The survey undertaken was of all agents and applicants who had submitted a planning application between 1 September 2008 and 31 August 2009. Of the 471 questionnaires sent out, 166 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 35%. The questionnaires did not require the respondent to give their contact details most responses were returned anonymously.
3 Summary of the results

3.1 The responses to each of the nine questions are set out below.

Q1 When you made your most recent application, in what capacity were you acting?

Of the responses received, 56% were agents acting on behalf of another party.

Q2 What type of application were you submitting?

48% of respondents were householder applications.

Q3 Please indicate how many times you have applied to the Authority for planning permission/consent?

The majority of respondents had applied for planning permission on more than once occasion in the past three years.
**Q4** Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your most recent experience of the Authority’s handling of your planning application in the last year

- 61% of respondents agreed they were given the advice and help they needed to submit their application.
- 49% of respondents felt the Authority had kept them informed about the progress of their application.
- 55% of respondents felt the Authority dealt with all their queries.
- 62% understood the reasons for the planning decisions made regarding their applications.
- 65% felt they were treated fairly and that their viewpoint was listened to.

**Q5** Setting aside whether any individual application was successful or not, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the service provided by the Authority in processing your application?

![Survey Results Chart]

74% of respondents were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the service provided.

**Q6** Was your most recent application granted or refused?

Of the responses received 143 (85%) had been granted planning permission and 21 (15%) had been refused.
Q7  For each of the following elements of the planning service provided by the Authority please indicate whether you think the service has got better or worse over the last three years, or has it stayed the same?

Q8  The Authority web site offers the following online planning services. Please indicate (a) which of these online services you were aware of and (b) whether you have used the service, or might use it in the future.
Q9 Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your experience of the Authority's online planning service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>It doesn't apply/don't know</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was well publicised that these services were available online</td>
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<td>I found the information I was looking for easily</td>
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<td>There was adequate information on how to use the services</td>
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<td>Documents downloaded easily</td>
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<td>I found the online services reliable</td>
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<td>I would use the online services again</td>
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4 Main findings

4.1 Positive feedback

4.2 It is encouraging that 74% of respondents were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the service provided. Most applicants felt that they were given the advice they needed to submit their application (61%) and understood the reasons for the Authority’s decision (65%). There was a high degree of awareness of the Authority’s on line planning services and generally positive feedback about the ease of use of the on line services.

4.2 The questionnaire included a section for qualitative feedback and comments and 72 (43%) respondents chose to make comments. Details of all these comments are reproduced at Annex 2. Some of the positive comments include:

- Good level of contact with officers (nos. 3, 35)
- Officers are helpful, approachable and proactive (nos. 42, 46, 48, 50, 60, 61, 63, 71)
- Helpful reception staff (no. 56)
- Useful design comments (no. 66)
4.3 **Negative feedback**

4.4 Comparatively fewer respondents (18%) felt either fairly or very dissatisfied with the service they had received whilst more respondents felt that certain aspects of the planning service had got worse rather than better (Q7). There was also a degree of frustration with completing the new application forms (1APP) and the need to submit detailed supporting information (which is currently being reviewed by the Government).

4.5 Some of the negative comments include:

- Delays in returning calls and enquiries (nos. 1, 9, 18)
- Unhelpful design advice (nos. 13, 21)
- Dealing with unnecessary bureaucracy (nos. 24, 25, 29, 31, 54)
- Poor website (nos. 11, 27, 39, 46, 49)

4.6 It was also evident from the answers to Q8 that users would welcome the opportunity to report suspected breaches of planning control online.

4.7 **Suggestions for improvement**

4.8 Some comments made suggestions for how the service could be improved including:

- Communicating by email not letter (no. 26)
- More help with completing application forms (no. 29)
- Advertising applications more widely (e.g. Salisbury Journal or Romsey Advertiser) (no. 30)
- Quicker decisions on discharge of conditions (no. 36)
- Better links to policy documents (no. 39)
- Publish all related application correspondence on the website (nos. 40, 49)

5 **Conclusions and next steps**

5.1 The survey has been very informative and officers are grateful to everyone who took the time and trouble to respond to the questionnaire. The results provide a useful baseline against which to measure future surveys and assess improvements in service delivery.

5.2 We are already looking to improve the range of information available on the website, including making more application documents available online. Since the survey was initiated, new advice on ‘permitted development’, with answers to Frequently Asked Questions, has already been posted on the website. All past planning records are currently in the process of being scanned onto the website.
5.3 We shall also look closely at our customer care standards and seek to address the concerns raised about the timeliness of responding to telephone calls and general enquiries. The Authority strongly supports pre-application advice and has a ‘duty’ planning officer available at all times during normal office hours to answer general planning enquiries. There are plans to supplement this service with a more comprehensive range of standing advice and guidance to assist applicants.

5.4 The results of the survey will be made available and discussed at the next annual Agents’ meeting (Spring 2010).

RECOMMENDATION

That the information in this report be noted.

Annex 1: A copy of the questionnaire and the accompanying letter
Annex 2: Qualitative feedback and comments

Background Documents

Completed questionnaires
List of applicants surveyed

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