

Report to	Governance Committee
Date	24 February 2015
By	Planning Services Manager
Title of Report	Planning Customer Survey 2014
Purpose of Report	To inform Member of the outcomes of the 2014 Planning Customer Survey and to note the consequential Customer Survey Improvement Plan for 2015/16.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to note the outcomes from the 2014 Planning Services Customer Survey and the consequential 2015/16 Customer Survey Improvement Plan, as set out in Appendix 1.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The last financial year 2013/14 was the SDNPA's third year as a formal planning authority. As part of our commitment to quality service provision and as a new National Park Authority, it was considered important for feedback to be obtained on how well our planning services were being delivered. This was particularly important, given the unique delegated development management arrangements that operate across much of the National Park.

2. Background

- 2.1 In the summer 2014, BMG Research Ltd was appointed to undertake the Authority's first planning customer survey. In order to obtain a detailed picture of how well services were being provided, the survey included a number of selected;
- 1) Applicants and agents
 - 2) Third parties making representations on planning applications
 - 3) Town and Parish Councils and
 - 4) Statutory and non-statutory consultees.
- 2.2 Consequently, there were four elements to the telephone based customer survey that was carried out between June and August 2014. This included 305 applicants and agents, 92 third parties, 18 statutory and non-statutory consultees and around 40 Parish and Town Councils. These were spread across the whole National Park, based roughly on the breakdown of planning application caseload by District. It included the Recovered Planning Service areas of the Park. BMG Research Ltd undertook all of this work by telephone survey, on behalf of the SDNPA.
- 2.3 A detailed report has been prepared by BMG which is linked to this report below:-
<http://intranet.southdowns.gov.uk/directorates/planning/BMG-Final-Draft-Report-September-2014.pdf>
- This has been used by officers from both within and beyond the SDNPA (host Authority input) to help prepare a Planning Services Improvement Plan, which will be implemented by both the SDNPA and the 10 host authorities and other partners from 1 April 2015 onwards. This is attached as **Appendix 1** to this report.
- 2.4 As has been explained, the survey was broken down into three elements. Some of the outcomes are reported in a similar way within this report. Satisfaction levels amongst

applicant's agents and third parties (those using our planning service or commenting on our applications) are considered first of all. Feedback from consultees and Town and Parish Councils is then considered. Satisfaction with the IDox UNIFORM planning administration system is also considered. Some of the outcomes are summarised below.

3. Applicants, agents and third parties.

- 3.1 So far as applicant's agents and third parties are concerned, 74% of users were either satisfied or very satisfied with our pre-application service. Similarly, 64% of users were satisfied with the overall planning application process and service provided. Around 75% of applicants and agents were satisfied with the time that was taken to notify them on the outcomes of their application. Overall, these are considered to be good levels of satisfaction, given that our service is still quite young and considering our unique delegated planning arrangements. It is also worth remembering that this first survey also covers customer experiences during our first three years of operation, a period within which our new planning administration system was introduced (with some teething problems) and within which a number of new initiatives and arrangements were still being developed and implemented by the Authority.
- 3.2 There were lower levels of satisfaction with the speed of the service, with 56% of users being satisfied or very satisfied. Some of the suggestions about what could be done better generally included better communication, a faster response to queries, an improved website and less bureaucracy.
- 3.3 It is interesting, however, to note that when asked what was done well, good customer service, good communication, the speed of the process and a good overall service featured well. Members are reminded that satisfaction surveys can be influenced by a number of factors, including the outcome of the application and the decision reached. It should also be noted that nearly half (48%) could find nothing positive to say about the service. Overall, officers consider that better communication and improved feedback is one potential area for improvement.
- 3.4 Users were also asked how the service has changed, where it has been used more than once. Some 13% considered that the services has improved, 62% considered that it has stayed about the same while a further 18% felt that it has got worse. When asked why it had got worse, 43% of users felt that the overall system was too slow or had got slower, 13% felt that communication had got worse and poor advice and information, poor customer service and insufficient staff resources to deliver effectively were also identified in response to this question.
- 3.5 In relation to our planning administration system, 55% of users were either satisfied or very satisfied with the system, while only 10% indicated dissatisfaction. Around 9% of users were neither satisfied, not dissatisfied and a further 26% were unable to answer, as they had probably not used the system.
- 3.6 In relation to our delegated planning arrangements with host authorities 86% of users were aware of the arrangements and 69% of users were either satisfied or very satisfied with them. Only 18% of users indicated dissatisfaction with the delegated arrangements. Reasons for dissatisfaction included the length and complexity of the process and poor communication. Given the difficulties that were experienced with the early implementation of IDox UNIFORM and our unique delegated arrangements, these levels of satisfaction are considered to be encouraging, although there is clearly room for further improvement. The results also clearly provide support for the delegated arrangements being continued in the future.

4. Parish and Town Councils and Consultees

- 4.1 Parish and Town councils and both statutory and non-statutory consultees were asked similar questions, but with some variations. In terms of being able to easily contact the appropriate person at the SDNPA, 66% of users were satisfied or very satisfied and only 8% were dissatisfied. When asked how well they felt that they knew the SDNPA, 17% felt that they knew a great deal, 59% a fair amount and 24% just a little.

- 4.2 Specifically in relation to the overall planning service, 76% of Town and Parish Councils were either satisfied or very satisfied and only 12% were dissatisfied. Around 61% of consultees were satisfied with the overall service and 6% were dissatisfied. In relation to satisfaction with the delegated host authorities arrangements, 72% of the Town and parish Councils and 81% of consultees were satisfied or very satisfied. Only around 5% of these groups overall were dissatisfied. Again, this provides a further endorsement for our delegated host authority arrangements.
- 4.3 Beyond planning, these stakeholders were also asked to think about the role and objectives of the SDNPA and were asked how well they felt that the SDNPA is meeting its guiding principles, as in its Corporate Plan. Some 54% of respondents considered that we were successful in influencing policy, 51% in building partnerships and bringing people together and 46% in engaging and communicating. These groups were less certain about our success on project delivery and encouraging volunteering, with only 22% responding that we were successful in delivering our flagship projects and 31% in encouraging volunteering. In this respect, many of our projects are still young and this area of our work may be better assessed in the longer term. Around 75% of respondents felt that the SDNPA is normally represented by the right people at the right level and only 5% considered that this never happens.

5. IDox UNIFORM and Consultee Access

- 5.1 During 2013/14, the SDNPA planning team has been working with Town and Parish Councils and other consultees to help more widely implement the UNIFORM Consultee Access arrangements across the National Park. This enables consultees to be electronically consulted quickly on planning applications and related matters and them to be able to respond in the same way. It is a sensitive initiative for some Parish Councils because it does rely upon them having access to the appropriate equipment (such as laptops projectors and screens) and having adequate broadband or internet connection. For this reason, the project is being introduced in a measured way and over what might need to be quite a long period of time. The survey was used to establish information in relation to this initiative across the whole National Park
- 5.2 In terms of the method of consultation, 42% of respondents advised they are normally consulted by letter, supported by hardcopies of paper plans. A further 34% are consulted electronically, with 53% overall being consulted by email. Around 32% of consultees respond using Consultee Access, but a much higher proportion of 71% respond by email. Only 17% still respond by letter.
- 5.3 Despite considerable efforts by the SDNPA, only around 49% of Town and Parish Councils and around 17% of consultees advised that they are aware that the SDNPA is currently introducing Consultee access. Conversely, 78% of those responding confirmed that they were aware of the Consultee Access training for Parish and Town Councils that the SDNPA undertook in 2013, while 22% advised that they were not aware. Some 35% of respondents advised that they would need further Consultee Access training, while 55% advised that they would not. Every Town or Parish Council that responded advised that they have broadband within their town or parish. Finally, when asked if they would need help if the SDNPA decided to stop providing paper plans, 44% of Town and Parish Councils and 17% of consultees advised that they would need such assistance..

6. Analysis and conclusions

- 6.1 The above outcomes from the survey are not intended to cover all the matters that were included. However, they do provide some initial insight into satisfaction levels with both the SDNPA planning service and also provide feedback on some wider issues for the Park Authority as a whole, as perceived by our many customers in the summer of 2014. Given some of the initial difficulties in implementing our planning administration system and the risks associated with the untested and unique delegated host authority arrangements, the outcomes from this first customer survey are generally considered to be quite pleasing

- 6.2 However, there are clearly some areas for improvement which can be best addressed through the implementation of a related Improvement Plan.
- 6.3 The main areas for improvement appear to relate to a number of themed areas, which include the following:
- Communication and feedback
 - Quality and consistency of service provided
 - Improved performance and greater efficiency
 - Continued improvements in the use of information technology
 - Feedback on successes.
- 6.4 These themes have been applied to help develop the recommended Improvement Plan, which is attached as **Appendix I** to this report. The plan is generally self-explanatory and has deliberately been kept succinct. To be successful, it will be need to be implemented by the SDNPA, the host authorities and other partners who help to provide our planning services. The main areas included in the plan are explained below.
- 6.5 There are clearly some issues that need addressing around improved communication and feedback, with help needed here from the partners delivering our services, making sure that applicants, agents and third parties (as well as consultees) are kept informed about progress on applications and related matters. This must, however, be a two way process if it is to succeed. Members will note that one of the actions in the Improvement Plan is for service standards to be published, so that our customers will know what type and level of service to expect and what will be needed from them too.
- 6.6 Some respondents indicated concern about the speed and quality of the service provided. Monitoring of overall performance does suggest that this can vary and perceptions around delays can arise from a lack of communication with and between applicants, agents and third parties. However, there is clearly some room for improvement here and the Governance Committee will be monitoring planning performance across the Park from now on.
- 6.7 The levels of awareness and satisfaction with our delegated host authority arrangements were comparatively high and suggest that these arrangements are working generally well. Members are reminded that we are currently coming towards the end of the first year of the second round of three agreements with the host authorities. Negotiations for the period thereafter will need to commence in about a years' time. Subject to agreement being reached on all relevant matters (including levels of payment), our customer survey does suggest that there is valid external customer support from planning service users for the SDNPA to continue with delegated host authority arrangements.
- 6.8 As is mentioned in paragraph 6.3 above, the standards and level of service that we will expect to be provided do need to be communicated to and then understood and accepted by our 10 host authorities. This will require adequate training to be given to both host authority officers and Members, in order to help ensure that this is achieved. Training in this regard is planned later this year after the general election to ensure that it is received by the right people and the right time. Well established officer groups also meet regularly and consider such matters.
- 6.9 The use of information technology is a key part of the modern planning process and the SDNPA is continuing to introduce improvements and new initiatives, but on a measured basis. We will continue to introduce Consultee Access, but this will require some further training and potentially other support to be given to some third parties. Members will also be aware, the SDNPA website is currently being improved and this includes a complete rebuild of the planning section of the site, which is designed to provide a better service for our customers and other users.
- 6.10 Good and effective communication is not only about keeping planning users informed about the progress of their planning application. It is also important to remember that all of our customers can be affected by many of our final decisions and the consequential outcomes. There is an opportunity for us to better celebrate our achievements and this should not be

limited to planning outcomes. There are many other projects that we deliver well on and the publication and celebration of these on our website and through other means will help to ensure that our customers better understand our work and what we are achieving.

- 6.1.1 All of the above matters are covered in the proposed Improvement Plan. It is proposed that this will be implemented throughout 2015/16 and Members may, therefore, wish to consider this further and review progress in about 18 months' time. In the longer term, we can only assess whether our services are being improved and how well we are doing by undertaking a further customer survey. Experience suggests that these are not useful or do not provide good value for money if they are undertaken too regularly. It is recommended, therefore, that a further customer satisfaction survey is undertaken during 2017/18. This would allow a reasonable period of time between surveys would also allow the effectiveness of our improvement plan to be assessed at that time.

7 Resources

- 7.1 Much of what we will be seeking to implement during 2015/16 can be delivered without the need for additional resources. However, Members are reminded that some initiatives, such as the enhancements and further development of IDox UNIFORM modules, training third parties and helping to implement Consultee Access will require both staff and potentially some financial resources to be provided. Overall, however, the potential implications are not considered to be significant for 2015/16. Resources will need to be identified in 2017/18 to enable a further customer survey to be undertaken.

8 Risk Management

- 8.1 There are no specific risks associated with the outcomes from the customer survey or the proposed Improvement Plan.

9 Human Rights, Equalities, Health and Safety

- 9.1 There are no implications arising from this report, although the recommended improvements are designed to provide a better, fairer and more equal planning service overall.

10 Sustainability

- 10.1 This report supports the sustainability principle of promoting an excellent planning service

11 External Consultees

- 11.1 A wide variety of external consultees were included within the 2014 planning customer survey and the 10 host authorities and other partners will need to help us deliver the planned improvements. Host authorities have already been advised of this need as part of their financial offers for continued delegation in 2015/16. This message is also being communicated through appropriate officer working groups and will also be conveyed as part of the host authority training planned for later this year.

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Appendices I. SDNPA Planning Customer Survey Improvement Plan for 2015/16.

SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive, Director of Planning, Director of Strategy & Partnerships, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Operations, Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer, Legal Services

Background Documents

BMG Research Ltd Customer Survey Report for the SDNPA Planning Service – September 2014

<http://intranet.southdowns.gov.uk/directorates/planning/BMG-Final-Draft-Report-September-2014.pdf>

South Downs National Park Authority –Improvement Plan arising from the 2014 Planning Customer Survey

Action Number	Action	Implementation Responsibility	Outcomes	Comments and Specified Actions
1	Improve feedback and communication	SDNPA Host Authorities	Improved outcomes from 2017/18 customer survey Interim case review and possible customer feedback.	a) Undertake a second Planning Customer Survey in 2017/18. b) Undertake feedback on random cases using card system sent with decision notices or similar. c) Selective review of specific cases annually.
2	Prepare and publish service standards within new Codes of Practice.	SDNPA Host Authorities	General correspondence, applications and enforcement to start with. Consider and agree further areas during the year.	a) Codes of Practice to be agreed – phased implementation throughout 2015 to include: 1. General correspondence and enquiries. 2. Processing planning applications. 3. Enforcement of planning controls 4. Provision of our pre-application advisory service. 5. Undertaking publicity on planning applications. 6. Publicity for planning appeals.
3	Improve overall performance and efficiency	SDNPA Host Authorities SDNPA Governance Committee	Ongoing and improved performance monitoring, reporting and scrutiny.	a) Help implement new corporate performance reporting arrangements through the SDNPA Governance Committee. b) Link improved reporting to IDox module implementation. c) Use performance data to help inform future host authority payments levels.
4	Continue with delegation but work to improve the quality of the overall service provided.	SDNPA Host Authorities	Ongoing and improved performance monitoring	a) Current Section 101 Agreements operate until 31 March 2017. b) Seek to improve overall performance to raise standards and improve customer satisfaction. c) Apply data when commencing discussions on potential future arrangements late 2015/16.
5	Provide training and support to host authorities		Improved understanding and decision making across the National Park	a) Training planned for host authority officers and Members from summer 2015 onwards (post General Election). b) Use established and refreshed officer groups to help deliver improved understanding of expectations and related outcomes.

Action Number	Action	Implementation Responsibility	Outcomes	Comments and Specified Actions
6	Make better use of website and tackle IT issues	SDNPA	New website and improved IT system stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Website development already underway and stability issues to be considered with IDox and through PAUG. b) Planning section of website under full reconstruction and modernisation. c) Continue to implement Consultee Access throughout 2015/16 (measured approach). d) Develop realistic plan for future IDox module implementation.
7	Celebrate our outcomes better and tell customers what we have achieved	SDNPA Host Authorities	Use the new website more effectively and consider an Annual Report setting out achievements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Undertake quarterly review of good outcomes to celebrate for website. b) Encourage host authorities to contribute and nominate good schemes (partnership). c) Consider other potential methods for communicating successes.