



Partnership working will drive planning administration service improvements in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

Summary

Local authorities in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (HIOW) are considering proposals to reorganise the common administrative elements and back office functions of their planning departments. The aim is to achieve service improvements and cost savings.

The Integrated Development Control (IDC) project used input from Hampshire County Council and four participating local authorities – New Forest District Council, Hart District Council, Winchester City Council and Rushmoor Borough Council – to review current planning administration processes, and consider alternatives with a view to their better management.

The resultant business case suggests that the creation of a joint local hub (expanded from an existing local authority operation) is the way forward to register, validate, scan, and publish planning applications. This option not only embraces the concept of partnership working, but also responds to other local government drivers such as Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

The IDC project published its findings in early October 2008 and all 16 HIOW local authorities are now considering its report.

They have been asked to detail their responses by the end of the year which the project team will collate into a final recommendation in January 2009.

Any implementation will then be staged progressively during the year.



Quotation

Chris Elliott, Head of Development Control, New Forest District Council:

“The IDC project began when HIOW local authorities were invited to identify projects for improving planning services by working on a partnership basis, and it was very clear from an early stage that it should concentrate on the largely administrative functions of development control.

“It has focused on the processes involved when a planning application is submitted and before a file is passed to a planning officer for professional appraisal, and not on the way planning applications are considered, or on the relevant decision making processes.

“Rather, it has identified the potential for real service improvements which could be available to the region’s local authorities should the concept of sharing services be adopted.”

Project background

Over 12 months, the IDC project has investigated ways of ironing out the variations, inconsistencies and inefficiencies that have evolved locally in validating planning applications. These are mostly the consequence of each HIOW authority undertaking its own planning administration and local interpretations of planning regulations

Initially supported by the Planning Advisory Service, and latterly by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight (HIOW) Improvement Board, the project has also explored opportunities for partnership working in response to challenges posed by the CAA, the new cross-inspectorate approach to council assessment and other public services. A key function of this framework will be to assess and report on how well public money is spent.

At the same time, the fall in the number of planning applications (particularly for major projects) prompted by the 2008 economic downturn means that authorities are facing up to 50 percent reductions in sector income without any clear signs of improvement. Staff numbers, on the other hand, remain constant with the resulting discrepancy just adding to local authority woes.

“Planning has common administrative elements which are well defined nationally and have the potential for centralisation locally, given the cost and service improvement targets being applied by local government,” explained IDC Project Manager Ivor Bundell who also emphasised that the project was not solely driven by the desire to save money.

“The benefits to service delivery of a more collaborative approach to planning administration are much more persuasive,” he commented.

Across the region there are significant differences in planning processes and data management due to variations in administrative staffing levels and capacity. Planning validation, for example, is fundamental to the planning decision process which must be completed within a statutory 56 day period. One authority might commit to helping an applicant get their planning application right by allowing for up to three follow ups if the original submission lacks the required elements; another may just send the application straight back if it does not comply.

The result is performance discrepancies across the region. An authority failing to meet its statutory obligations could be named, shamed and designated a ‘standard authority’ with financial monitoring and other strictures placed upon it. In extreme cases, a whole new emergency management team might be parachuted in by central government.

Project objectives

Partnership working therefore offers HIOW local authorities the potential for a degree of standardisation in planning administration that will substantially aid performance.

To this end, the project looked at the relative costs, benefits and risks of four different options for administering planning applications in the region.

Ivor Bundell again: *“First, we considered the implications going forward of each local authority continuing to manage its own planning administration. To this we added the options of creating a local administrative hub and establishing a new build centre, each serving a number of local authorities.”*

“Finally we looked at the adoption of a totally outsourced solution.”

Chris Elliott, Head of Planning at New Forest District Council, the project group’s lead authority added: *“The ultimate aim of the project was to see where service delivery could be improved by sharing resources for the registration and much of the administrative processing, while individual local authorities retained responsibility for the actual assessment of proposals and all final decision making.”*

Benefits achieved

With the overall business case still under consideration by all HIOW local authorities, the project team found that, of all the options reviewed, the outsourced solution was the cheapest, although not necessarily achieving the best value.

Rather, a remotely located joint hub or external centre solution will provide the most attractive benefits.

Both of these options deliver on the important issue of service improvement by consistently handling all the common administrative tasks (validation, registration, input and notification) in line with existing IT-based planning systems such as Acolaid and UNI-form. A turn-around time of 24 hours to publish 95 percent of all validated applications should be achievable. Currently one of the region's better performing authorities targets three days to validate applications – but achieves it in less than 50 percent of cases.

Among other benefits are the availability of planning applications on local authority websites at the same time as notices are posted on site and the common application of well-defined processes, which will reduce errors during the 56 day decision period.

Crucially, fluctuations in demand will be better managed by dedicated validation and registration staff who will provide cover for absence and illness.

With the administrative function remotely located, planning officers will be spared any ad hoc involvement in the process, receive the documentation they need quicker and have more time in which to consider each application.

“Importantly, the joint hub/centre will also allow HIOW authorities to combine service benefits with the retention, and thereby the protection, of their own data,” explained Ivor Bundell. *“Only the administrative function will be moved over.”*

Of the two options the joint hub is more attractive given the capital costs of building a new centre, especially at a time when fewer large planning applications mean a fall in planning revenues. In fact projections show that the break-even point for a joint hub would be year 4 whereas the investment payback for a new build would still be in deficit after seven years.

Regarding cost savings, the capital and revenue expenses of each option will be offset by local authorities sharing the staff resource for the administrative process. In the case of the joint hub, for example, the total cost for a local authority to validate applications would be reduced by £20,000 per annum. There will be savings on accommodation, too, estimated at 25 percent.

Critical success factors and lessons learned

Preparing the business case for greater partnership working in planning administration exposed a lack of detail concerning the workings of the various planning departments, which varied from authority to authority.

For example, it became apparent that while there was sufficient staff to cover planning administration duties on the whole, it was not always clear what percentage of their time was actually spent on administrative matters in relation to any other roles they may be required to service.

Clearly more detailed figures would have been ideal but interrogating staff individually on their roles would not have been tactful and may have sent out entirely the wrong messages. The project team therefore did the best it could with full time employee numbers estimating, from these, a rate per day to validate applications.

The three months (ending in December 2008) for the region's local authorities to consider the business case is also proving to be crucial. This is the period when key decision makers, from heads of planning to chief executives, will be involved to provide a wider perspective on the issues from each authority's point of view. They will provide essential input that will substantially add to the budget and staffing detail secured from development control officers.

Risks

The move towards integrated development control is primarily at risk from two factors – an inability to get the business case through to the necessary decision makers and the comparative weakness of the financial case for change. However any misgivings on the latter should be more than counter balanced by potential gains in service improvement.

“There is a perceived lack of commitment to externalise generally which may be a stumbling block,” adds Chris Elliott. *“Integrating development control is a new area.”*

“It will require funding too, although there may be support for any implementation process. Ultimately, though, no-one likes to be the first to manage change preferring, instead, to profit from the experience of those that go before.”

“These are all potential risks but, happily, none of them should prove to be insurmountable.”

Role of HIOW Improvement Board and IESE

The HIOW Improvement Board, and latterly Improvement and Efficiency South-East (IESE), supported the project with £80,000 of funding which provided a project manager and specialist consultancy support. This is likely to continue into the implementation stage during which learning transfer will be facilitated across the region.

The project benefited too from being part of the HIOW Improvement Programme, which gave the project a higher profile with key decision makers as well as providing independent challenge and assistance in overcoming obstacles to progress.

In addition, the Planning Advisory Service provided initial funding and continues to act as a critical friend to the project.

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