

REST customer engagement report

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0.1	5 th September 2014	First draft
1	19 th September 2014	Updated following feedback from the project team

This document requires the following approvals:

Name	Role	Date approved
Mike Redman	Director Environmental and Regulatory Services	19/9/2014

This document has been distributed to:

Mike Redman, Richard Hall, Customer engagement attendees

Introduction

A project is under way to transform the Environmental and Regulatory Services Division. This division encompasses a wide range of services: Building control; Townscape; Green team; Enforcement; Planning; Public protection; Housing and communities; and bereavement.

The project has the following objectives:

- Ensure that the needs of customers drive the way services are delivered
- Make services more supportive of economic growth
- Make services more efficient – with joined up services provided at optimal cost

The first step in our process to improve the division is to hear the voice of the customer. We needed to find out what's working well, and what's not working so well, from the customer's perspective. We therefore organised three customer engagement sessions, and invited customers with recent experience of all of the in-scope services to meet with officer representatives. Just over forty customers attended, with each group going through the same exercises to: identify what people complain about / what frustrates customers; prioritise specific issues for improvement; review member views on priorities. In all sessions, customers were asked to vote for their top three issues for improvement. In the second two sessions, customers were also asked to vote for the top three priorities of those identified by members.

This document shows the ideas and issues raised by customers (grouped under themes), the priorities that they identified, and concludes with the next steps for the project. While the majority of material shown below offers constructive criticism, it should be noted that in all three sessions there was a general consensus among customers that the division is performing well given the resource constraints, and that the project is about making a good division, even better.

What do people complain about?

Communication and engagement

- Council / partnership structure is confusing - not sure who is responsible for what. e.g. two trees side by side can be responsibility of different agencies. Tree in a park - council, on the pavement - Glos Highways. End up contacting the wrong person and getting passed around.
- Council's website is unattractive and looks dated.
- Information is not shared effectively between departments e.g. building control not aware of information provided to planning team. Customer has to present the same information twice.
- Lack of response from officers - sometimes you don't hear anything after sending emails / leaving phone messages!
- Interface between customers and council is what matters - need personal, individual response from Council. Often the only response to detailed planning application feedback is an automated reply. Would be nice if someone spoke to the consultee once an application was determined.
- Council should track customer interactions – should know how many times customer has been in touch, and what the enquiry was about.

- Phones should be answered by knowledgeable people who are able to resolve enquiries first time.
- Staff answering phones should be courteous and helpful. Sometimes they don't offer to take messages if the desired member of staff is unavailable.
- Difficult to establish how far my planning application has progressed - would like to be able to track the progress of my planning application / other enquiry online.
- Council wasn't clear about which address invoices should be sent to.
- Complex community funding opportunities should be explained so that the community can participate effectively e.g. Community Infrastructure levy.
- Lack of joined up thinking and information sharing between departments - customers should be able to tell the council something once and have this cascaded to relevant teams.
- Garden code needs to be bigger and more visible.
- Not enough communication regarding development of the high street / other big schemes. What's happening, when? When are shops changing on the lower high street (link to Brewery). When will traffic route change (Boot's corner)?
- Can't find officer contact information or structure - not sure who reports to whom.
- Lack of clarity over process for participating in Joint Core Strategy development. Customers needed to fill in a form to attend an appeal - but this wasn't clear.
- Communication with people with visual / hearing impairments could be better.
- Cheltenham Civic society set up a forum for residents and community groups – good, but infrequent. Are there ways the Council can generate intelligent dialogue rather than rely on the Civic Society?
- Customer complained about car park clothing donation station that was overflowing. Told to phone a different number. Even if Council contracts out a service you're still responsible and should deal with the issue.

Strategy and policy

- Lack of direction - What's the vision for Cheltenham in 2025?
- Concerns about scale of residential developments
- Council needs to be clear about what it will and will not do – policy is sometimes vague or not communicated clearly.
- Policies / rules sometimes unclear or inconsistent - e.g. dogs on Honeybourne line - should they always be on leads or just on leads near the open Children's play area? Signs are inconsistent. Ditto bikes and skateboards in Gardens.
- Allotment policy could be communicated more clearly and there is weak enforcement.
- Planning rules in conservation areas are too strict. Rules require window frames to be wooden rather than PVC, making replacement unaffordable, so windows are not replaced making the area less attractive.
- Quality of modern building materials being approved is an issue - poor longevity. Regency style facades need repair after three years.
- Disabled people have to pay for parking in Beechwood shopping centre – unfair.

- You sometimes get different opinions from different building control officers on same build. Need consistency.
- Inconsistency over what's required for similar applications - level of information, quality of drawings required etc.
- Planning officers imposing own taste on applications - residential developments lacking character - very 'anywheresville'. Officers should encourage a more 'Cheltenham' style of development.
- Council is overly stringent with its planning application requirements for minor works. A landlord needing to install plastic down pipes to a large number of properties had to submit an application for each property. Now that planning rules have been relaxed, this shouldn't be necessary and would save time and enable more money to be invested in property rather than administration.
- Want more frequent rubbish collections and effective enforcement of overflowing bins to improve town centre environment.
- Cheltenham's tree population shrinking because of Glos Highways reluctance to plant new trees (maintenance costs).

Lack of resources

- Too few planning officers - not managing to meet peoples' expectations with fewer resources.
- Not enough staff to cope with the extra work resulting from the upturn in the economy – could hold back economic growth.
- Difficult to get hold of the planning officer that you need to speak to - especially part time workers, not sure when they're available. Particular officer gets assigned to each case, if they're not in, you're stuck. Job share would be better so that someone with knowledge of case / access to details is always available
- Concern about hidden cost of night time economy - Cheltenham is a regional hub for night life, coach loads of visitors arrive, are we sufficiently resourced to cope?
- Loss of staff with specialist skills (e.g. ecology, biodiversity). Staff without expertise are unable to fully consider technical reports submitted. This is frustrating for partner organisations and can affect the quality of decision making.
- Feedback on planning applications is too slow so takes longer to reach a decision. This holds back economic growth.

Envirocrime / environmental issues – increase in these problems linked to lack of resources

- Dog mess
- Dogs barking
- Vandalism
- Crime and disorder
- Litter
- Stray dogs
- Abandoned vehicles
- Noisy parties / music
- Fly tipping

- Side waste
- Sea gulls – picking up litter from rubbish bags left overnight
- Non compliance
- Concern about travellers having extra privileges - leaving litter behind with no penalty.
- Vandalism in gardens: flower heads scattered, litter problems.
- Concern that the council does not effectively monitor contractors and users of premises to prevent damage / nuisance behaviour etc.
- Chewing gum on pavements
- Overhanging trees and shrubs obstructing pavements and highways.
- Not enough focus on protecting assets - Jenner Gardens was badly damaged and had issues with anti-social behaviour. Prevention would be cheaper than cure! Could we extend CCTV? Improve lighting?
- Leaves blocking drains is a safety concern - especially around Pittville Circus. Makes pavement / road slippery.
- Parking on pavements makes life difficult for pedestrians, especially those with mobility problems.
- Poor condition of pavements and roads.
- People are not controlling their dogs in public, walking them off the lead... Dogs then interfere with guide dogs.

Monitoring

- Lack of monitoring of conditions for late night pubs and clubs - people making a lot of noise in public, disorderly behaviour makes people feel unsafe.

Enforcement

- Feeling that the Council needs to take a tougher line on non-compliance. E.g. private landlords with overhanging trees and shrubs – we should say resolve this in four weeks, else we'll do the work ourselves and invoice you afterwards.
- Council needs stronger enforcement, more visible presence. It's too dangerous for the community to intervene - for example someone was using a disposable BBQ in one of the parks which damages the lawn - a lady who intervened was verbally abused.
- Conditions placed on applications are not enforced (e.g. type of materials, size of changes to properties). The Council needs to back up what it says with action. Architects can draw what they like but if builders don't do what's written then this should be enforced.

Town centre

- Access for disabled to shops an issue
- Council needs to better regulate / support 'chuggers', homeless and beggars.
- Rubbish and recycling collection is too inflexible in the town centre. Huge bins in town centre look ugly.

Housing

- Quality of housing: vacant properties with overgrown gardens causes the area to look run down.
- Concerns about scale of residential developments

Highways

- People get lost trying to navigate the one way road system
- Cycling on pavements poses safety hazard.

Planning / building control issues

- Inconsistency in planning conditions – different level of conditions imposed for different applicants (for similar applications).
- Concerns regarding the quality of decision making at the planning committee.
- Building control officers not reading documents.
- Officer advice is inconsistent - when a new officer picks up a case, they seem to be unaware of the advice given by a previous colleague.
- Previous planning determinations (e.g. inspectors conditions) are sometimes not given due weight when re-applications are made.
- Planning committee are unwilling to oppose officer recommendation to approve for fear of cost of appeal and inquiry.
- Planning committee members often not present at inquiries.
- Disagree with planners taste for 'modern era flat roofed' designs, and timber strip cladding which when not well maintained, reduces quality of environment.
- Too much emphasis by planners on economic gain as opposed to environmental and social benefits.

Technology

- Public access website is often unavailable / very slow - worse still, Council's own officers are often unaware that the system is down. Planning is often time sensitive so this is frustrating.
- Planning portal is not updated often enough with progress of planning applications
- Online measuring tool is inconsistent.
- Website information is out of date.

Practical issues

- Issues with keys for accessing allotment sites. Combination locks would be better.
- Sometimes see three or more teams coming to the same area - lack of joined up working appears wasteful.

Projects / initiatives

- Council doesn't always follow through on what it starts e.g. PACT initiative.
- Important for Council to engage with existing community / stakeholder groups when a project begins. Good to align resources and objectives.
- Difficulty of finding a single lead officer for community schemes which require cross-disciplinary input e.g. redeveloping a community car park. Difficult to coordinate effort between parking, townscape, sustainability, recycling, economic regeneration, highways officers etc. Difficult to get officer group to liaise effectively with traders, councillors, developers. Council should be flexible and able to set up a project team. Finding out

information for the project is also difficult e.g. how much money does the car park generate?

Compliments

- The remembrance beds in Imperial Gardens involved many elements of the community and civic pride, and was a big success.
- The public protection team did a great job in resolving an issue with noise and litter from a local pub.
- Improved street scene on Bath Road following successful tree planting project, funded by community pride, supported by Trees officer, the nursery and local traders.
- Good partnership working on Bath road utility box project. Boxes will be decorated to improve street scene - cooperation between Glos Highways, BT, Virgin, planning committee, local artist, community and traders. A lot can be achieved with a little funding and effective partnership working.
- Things are generally working well and customers recognised that the council was doing what it could with diminishing resources.

What are the top issues that the Council needs to address?

Issue	Number of votes
Need better monitoring and enforcement of licenced premises, building / development etc.	29
Envirocrime / environmental issues	28
Better communication – who is responsible for what; more joined up approach within division; clear statement of council policies; progress on major schemes; better ways of communicating with people with visual / hearing impairments	17
More reliable technology, better information and services online	15
Better response times on enquiries / applications	10
Better consistency – what’s required of applicants / decision making / officer advice.	5
Better performance / knowledge / expertise at planning committee	5
Need a clear long term vision for the town	3
Planning policy is too stringent	1
Improved approach to project work, following through	1

Which member outcomes are most important to you?

Number	Outcome	Number of votes
1	Main focus on protecting and enhancing Cheltenham’s environmental quality and historic character	17
2	Sustain Cheltenham’s vibrant economy	12

Number	Outcome	Number of votes
3	Want to see a strong enforcement ethos to safeguard the environment	11
4	Access to information and advice; in person preferred	6
5	Joining up inspection / enforcement teams wherever possible	3
6	Better control over private rented sector accommodation and reducing numbers of tenants living in unsuitable / unsafe private rented housing	3
7	Helping older people to live in safe, warm and suitable homes	2
8	Manage the night-time economy to balance economic, health and safety agendas.	2

Next steps

The information gathered in this exercise is now being passed onto the Systems Thinking team to help them identify and prioritise processes for improvement. The team will be working on process improvements over the next six to seven months, and proposals for improvements to the division's structure will follow.