



Watford Borough Council

Building Control Service Review

Summary of Recommendations

Key recommendations

Operational efficiency

- A strategic decision needs to be taken on the future delivery of the Building Control service. This will have a bearing on which of the following recommendations are acted on and which organisation makes the changes or investment
- Upgrade the current Idox system to:
 - ◆ Facilitate improved management reporting and performance monitoring
 - ◆ Electronic working
 - ◆ Accept electronic applications from the Authority's website
 - ◆ Improve efficiencies in document production
- Investigate options to work electronically, reducing duplications
- Adopt a more rigorous management approach to team discipline and consistency
- Adopt the numerous identified process improvement recommendations contained within the report
- Establish a telephone application and payment system
- Increase the scale of fees in line with neighbouring Authorities

Business Performance

- Review a number of central recharge allocation figures, to establish if they accurately reflect the usage of the service by the Building Control department
- Publish a new Building Control website, with appropriate branding to the new service establishment
- Review standard letters with appropriate branding focusing on the needs and motivations of different user groups
- Establish a database of repeat professional clients and potential clients
- Investigate Initial Notices submitted to Watford to populate above
- Establish a programme of customer communication and events
- Develop better working relationship with other departments within the Authority to exploit potential business opportunities
- Consider providing complimentary services
- Host a free of charge LABC Marketing & Business Development workshop

The Team

Recommendations

- Set clear management structure with associated roles, responsibilities, authority and targets
- Consistency and discipline need to be mandated to ensure the smooth running of the service and protect the Council from possible criticism or litigation.
- Management need to address the isolated performance & discipline issues.
- Consider the skills and qualification mix of the team

Improving operational efficiencies

Performance levels

Conclusion

- There is very little accurate performance data available to either monitor or develop work activities. In particular very little meaningful use is made of the computerised back office system.
- It is considered there is capacity for some of the team to undertake more inspections and that greater use is made of the LABC risk assessment tool to assist in determining proper inspection regimes. This should be undertaken for all applications with particular focus on smaller projects to ensure they receive appropriate levels of inspection that reflects the type of work being dealt with. This would then ensure the authority meets its legal and statutory duties under the recently introduced Building Regulations on risk assessed inspections.
- Team members are carrying out significantly less inspections a day than could be expected. A more realistic expectation would be 8-10 rather than the 5-7 the consultants have determined are currently undertaken. In addition there is no management performance reporting system in place to monitor this.
- The LABC Inspection Service Plan guidance document can be used to assess typical numbers of inspections needed to ensure best use is made of available resources.
- To undertake a meaningful analysis of tasks carried out by the team it is crucial that comprehensive and detailed time recording sheets are used. They must provide an accurate apportionment split of time between building regulation charge earning work and other work. The system should also be capable breaking down time into measurable parts for the various categories of work in both groups. This will then enable accurate assessments of actual work and hence costs versus fee income for each type of work to be carried out.
- The administration resource is slightly lower than regional average and there would appear to be some serious anomalies in the productivity and accuracy of work actually carried out within the team. We understand the current manager spends some of his time supporting the senior administrator.
- A disproportionate amount of time is spent administering the search requests which can't be justified against industry norms / comparison with other staff.

Systems and processes

Actions

- Develop a suite of computerised monitoring reports that track the process and pre-approval stages for each application.

- Train all team members to check applications electronically and provide adequate sized PC screens for this purpose. The current process is time consuming, expensive and wasteful.
- Delegate administrative officer to undertake validation process. This will then remove the need for the file to be left with the manager or principal for double checking every application.
- It is suggested surveyors should receive update training on basic structural engineering principles to give them greater confidence in determining what projects need checking by a specialist engineer. Wider use should also be made of the current computerised checking programme thus mitigating the need to employ the consultant surveyor for a full day each week.
- Put in place a control mechanism for plan checking by surveyors that is linked to skills and expertise.
- Ensure all surveyors type their own amendment letters; this will 'free up' the admin team to deal with other tasks. Ensure all letters are produced from templates within Idox to prevent the need to link all letters to case files.
- Establish a comprehensive coding system for standard building regulation amendment clauses and link this to Idox to enable efficient production of customer correspondence. This will save officer time in the typing of letters and also have the additional benefit of providing a more consistent customer experience.
- Consider designing a management reporting process that identifies the different types of applications received and sets targets for responses dependant on the importance of that group to the service.
- Develop a suite of standard decision clauses for use by all surveyors that can be embedded into Idox to enable a more efficient process to be adopted.
- Building Control Manager to periodically carry out a quality control check rather than looking at all applications and the signature of the approving officer to be embedded in the appropriate correspondence templates.
- Address issues of poor reproduction of decision documents.
- Develop management reports and an office protocol to ensure inspections have been carried out and inspection records entered into the Idox system in a timely fashion.
- Investigate feasibility of electronic dictation systems that can enable direct input of site inspection records into Idox system.
- Investigate development of a code system for the majority of inspection scenarios found.

- A report needs generating that cross matches inspection requests to inspections recorded, or not, in the Idox system. This report can also serve the same purpose as the one mentioned above for ensuring inspection requests are actually carried out.
- To streamline the completion stage the manager should look at all case files immediately after the surveyor has completed the project. An entry onto the validation sheet can certify this has been done. The file is then given to admin for production of documents and posting. The manager's signature can be embedded onto the appropriate correspondence.
- Instigate training and processes that enable building control support staff to create enquiries to applications in telephone enquiry calls.

Recommendations

- Consider addressing all the actions listed above.
- Update Idox system to allow better functionality of the system and accurate management reporting information.
- One or two individuals in the team to undergo in-depth training to act as a training and knowledge resource for the Idox system.
- Establish a telephone application and payment system, to convert enquiries into formal applications/orders secured by the Local Authority.
- Management to address issues of under performance.

Budgets, finance and charges

Recommendations

- Review IT, HR and Customer Services central recharges, to ascertain if they accurately reflect the usage of the service by the Building Control department.
- Revise charging scheme in line with the Charges Regulations 2010 and neighbouring Authorities' charges.
- Conduct further investigation to analyse major line items on the budget, to see where savings can be made.

Marketing and business development

Recommendations

- Senior management to issue guidance that in-house Building Control services should be used wherever possible.
- Arrange a FOC LABC Marketing & Business Development workshop to help review and update marketing and business development activity.
- Analyse Initial Notices to ascertain which project / potential customers are not using Watford's Building Control service.
- Update the Authority's website, letter head and customer literature to reflect the current service establishment.
- Publish a direct dial number for the Building Control department on the Authorities website and literature.
- Include a tag line on the bottom of all planning emails, along the lines of "Your project is likely to require Building Regulation approval. Our experienced Building Control team will be happy to help with any queries. Please contact ...".
- Review standard letters, forms and notifications to make them more customer focused and differentiate between user groups.
- Establish a database of repeat professional clients to enable a regular pattern of communications and promotions, especially those not currently using the Local Authority Service.
- Establish a programme of customer events, including:-
 - Agents forums
 - Technical updates
 - Builders breakfasts (potentially allied with a local builders merchant)
- Enter projects into the LABC Building Excellence Awards to increase awareness of the Local Authority Building Control Service and help promote design and build quality.
- Arrange a meeting with the local shopping centre management team and LABC representative.
- Include direct dial and mobile numbers on surveying team's business cards, or encourage surveyors to give out mobile numbers to key clients.
- Consider the removal of fee schedules for all but the smallest works from the website if it is considered the competition are using this information to win work.

- Consider developing free hard copy guidance documents from LABC's publishing partner Ten Alps.
- Work with Watford Council's internal communications team to promote the service via PR and placing stories in local media.

Commercial opportunities

Recommendations

- Establish closer working relations with internal client departments to identify and exploit potential opportunities.
- Establish a Council's preference to use its own internal BC service on its own projects.
- Engage with major local and regional clients to offer a Fire Risk Assessment service.