

Development Management Quarterly Measures Report

3rd Quarter October - December 2009

Introduction:

The purpose of development management is to 'Say yes to good development'. This quarter there has been a focus on looking at some of reasons behind some applications being delayed in the system, the types of enquiry coming into the reception and trying to reduce the instance of applicants/agents ringing in to check where the application is in the process or why an officer came to site unannounced.

The leading measure 'End to End (E2E) times for all planning applications' has lengthened slightly from 50.5 to 53 days during this quarter, although this is a predictable variation given the closure of the offices for 10 days over Christmas. Workloads also rose during this period as agents always seem to clear their desks for the holiday, rising from 504 last quarter to 579 this quarter. As usual a number of large scale applications arrived in the run up to Christmas, including the a number of large residential schemes submitted in Exmouth and Sidmouth as well as two foodstores applications in Ottery St Mary.

There has been a commensurate reduction in customer satisfaction linked to the common causes of the variation in times taken to process applications – the complex and expensive supporting documentation needed to support some categories of application these days, delays from consultees responding and of course the overall time taken this quarter.

In E2E times the following is a summary of performance set against the previous quarters

All applications

A mean (or predictable average) of 53 days (October-December 09) compared to the previous quarters:

- 50.5 days (July-September 09)
- 48.8 days (Apr-Jun 09)
- 57.2 (Jan-March 09)

Minor applications

A mean of 59.5 days (October-December 09) compared to:

- 53.5 days (July-September 09)
- 55.5 (Apr-Jun 09)
- 69.3 (Jan-March 09)

Other applications

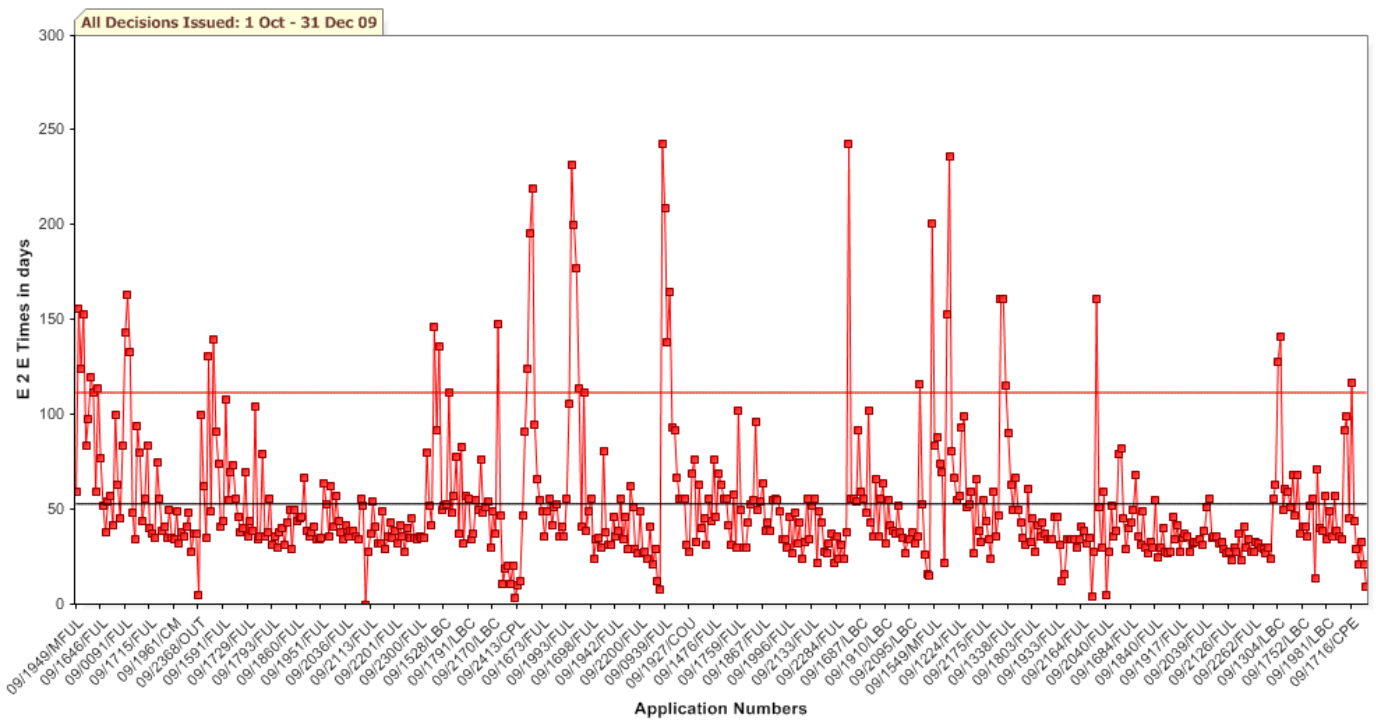
A mean of 48.5 days (October-December 09) compared to:

- 45.3 days (July-September 09)
- 48.8 (Apr-Jun 09)
- 48.4 (Jan-March 09)

Leading Measures

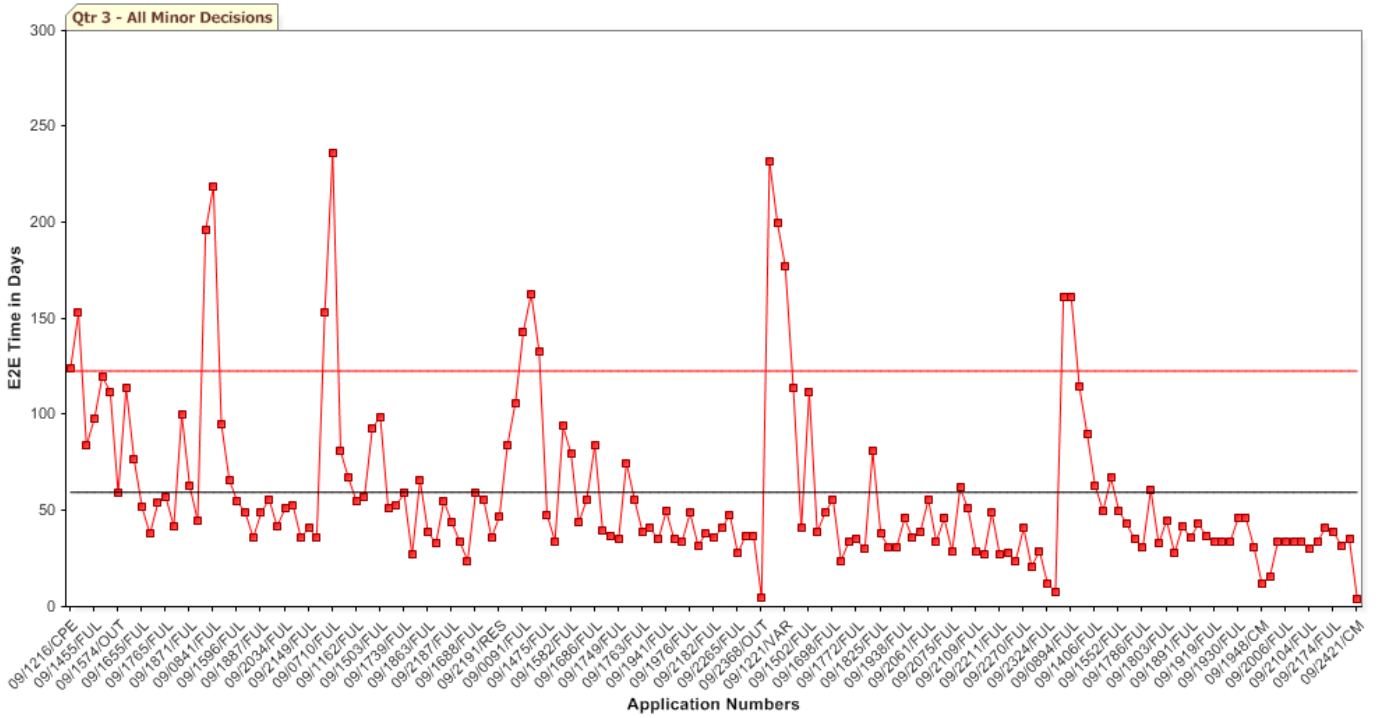
E2E Times in the 5 Work streams

Planning applications - (i) All decisions (major, minor and other) Oct - Dec 09



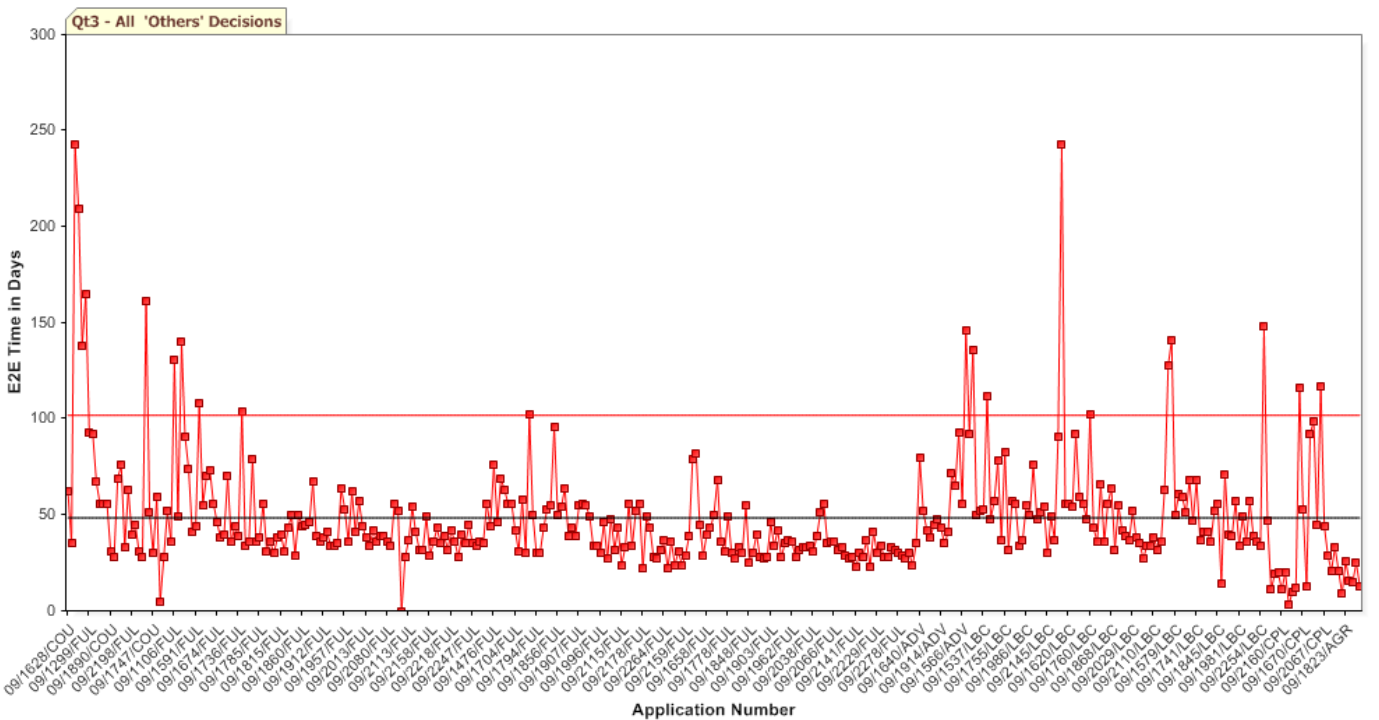
Mean 53 days

(ii) Minor Applications Oct - Dec 09



Mean 59.5 days

(iii) Other Applications Oct – Dec 09



Mean 48.5 days

Analysis

There is a clear issue here relating to the performance in the minor category of planning applications. At this stage however it is impossible to know whether this is just a blip in performance related to the Christmas closure or whether this is the beginning of a trend. The managers will be monitoring this closely.

A recent analysis of the common causes of variation in time taken to process planning applications revealed the following:

- Seeking amended drawings late in the process
- Being sent unsolicited amended plans by agents tracking consultee replies
- Applications which require referral to the Government office, which has a further 21 days to make a decision
- Applications requiring S106 agreements to be drawn up
- Applications sometimes not including all necessary information at the beginning of the process
- Applications needing to go to Committee but missing deadlines, sometimes because of late comments received from consultees and Ward Members long after the normal 21 days has elapsed

Actions Taken

- Teams reminded of the need to seek any necessary amended plans or additional information as early as possible.
- Agents Forum held and advice given about not submitting unsolicited amendments as we may not require them, but to await any request from us. Also given guidance on what supporting documentation must be supplied with different types of application.
- Development Management Committee has adopted a limited timetable of 3 days at the end of the process for otherwise delegated applications, to allow for Ward Members to seek a call-in to committee from the Chairman or to withdraw their original comments, having seen a draft report.
- A limited experiment is being undertaken with unopposed Householder category applications being signed off by the team and not a manager. This followed an assessment of the most common wording mistakes on decisions notices and some training by managers. This new initiative will be monitored closely.

Further Actions Planned

- Working with consultees to speed up response times on applications
- Working with the Legal team to speed up S106 agreement preparation
- Writing to applicants who are delaying the S106 agreement process to seek resolutions.

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Pre Application Enquiries

The average time taken in this quarter was 20.3 days, the previous Quarter being 15.7 days.

Analysis and action taken

The number of enquiries this quarter has dropped from 329 to 253. It has been the case that all teams have seen an increase however in the number of complex pre app enquiries on very large development sites for example Pinhoe at Exeter and Cloakham Lawns at Axminster to name just two.

However, despite the reduction in overall numbers involved, there has been a clear drop in processing times. This is partly due to one team receiving more than the other two and getting behind. The same team also had to deal with a large scale affordable housing scheme and this was given priority.

The Executive Board resolved in December that pre application charges would be introduced on the 1st February 2010 in order to help finance an enhancement of the service. The effect of the charging regime will be monitored to see it's potential effect upon the number of pre applications we then receive, the use of the free go applications following a refusal, the refusal rate itself and the quality of new planning applications, assuming some agents/applicants will not now seek advice and guidance on what is likely to be acceptable development and what documentation, plans and other information is required to allow an application to progress.

Permitted Development Enquiries Oct - Dec 09

These took 6.2 days during this quarter, up from 3.5 days on the previous quarter.

Analysis and Actions Taken

The number of PD enquiries has reduced from 448 to 367 this quarter. There has been a drop in performance in this area but this is mostly due to staff absences through December. Three technical officers usually deal with these. However teams will be reminded that permitted development enquiries are also part of the teams' work and should not be left undone during any periods when the technical officers are away for any reason.

The average time of 6.2 days is however still very good to answer, especially as the enquiries are sometimes technical questions which need detailed research and investigation. Again, this will be monitored to ensure there is an improvement next quarter.

Minor Amendments

The average E2E time for the quarter remains at 1 day.

Actions Taken

None needed at this time.

Conditions Discharge

The average E2E time for this quarter is 18.4 days, an increase on the previous quarter of 12.5 days.

Analysis and Actions Taken

There have been some major application condition discharges that have extended the overall E2E time.

This work stream will be closely monitored to ensure there is an improvement in performance in the future.

Value & Preventable Demand Survey

The survey took place during 7 – 11 Dec 09

	Qtr 2 Value Demand	Qtr 3 Value Demand	Qtr 2 Preventable Demand	Qtr 3 Preventable Demand
Telephone	62.8%	51%	37.2%	49%
Post	90.3%	76%	9.6%	24%
Email	69.7%	95%	30.3%	5%
Front Desk	65%	68%	35%	32%

Analysis and Actions Taken

Telephone: Top 3 preventable demands:

1. Can you give me an update on my/clients application – 51 (11%) Calls. This figure is down 0.9% on the last quarter. We will do further analysis on who gets what type of call during this quarter
2. Reference a previous enquiry – 30 calls (6.5%)
3. Requesting information on a neighbour's application. 25 Calls (5.4%)

It is hoped that the additional functionality on our new website will reduce all types of call both from agents and neighbours as applications can now be tracked on the website. Agents will now be able to see clearly what comments have been received and can receive a personal alert when anything new has been scanned.

With neighbour queries we are also looking to produce a protocol on how applications are dealt with. This can be then be linked via the initial neighbour consultation letter to reduce the number of calls. We have also recently produced a draft leaflet explaining how the committee system works which once published should help to reduce the number of phone calls and post committee complaints.

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Post: Preventable demand 25% - The volume of letters has reduced very slightly to 112. This is due to the number of invalid applications and EDDC requesting additional information. We are working with the Planning Portal to reduce the number of invalid applications by promoting online submissions. Agents have also been reminded at the recent Agents Forum as to the main reasons for invalidity.

Email: Preventable demand reduced from 24.9% to 5% - majority of emails (online representations) go directly onto the accessible part of the data system.

Capability of Point of Transaction Survey

The survey took place between: 7 - 11 Dec 2009 - (Previous Survey in July in brackets)

	Phone Calls %		Post %		Email %	
One Stop	(77.9)	76	(99)	99	(93.1)	97
Pass back	(6.4)	1	0	1	(1)	1
Pass on	(10.3)	21	(1)	0	(5.7)	1
Pull down	(4.25)	1	0	0	0	0
Call back	(1)	1	0	0	0	1

Analysis

76% of all calls are dealt with at first point of contact. The balance seems about right, as calls passed back are for more detailed information.

Actions Taken

- Additional training for the CSC staff, enabling them to have greater knowledge of where to find information on the system. This was carried out before Christmas and will be offered to all new CSC staff on a rolling basis.
- We have recently identified a 'waste' problem with applicants ringing in after finding a planning officer's calling card saying that a visit had taken place. There seemed to be an assumption that the card necessitated the call to have a chat about their application. Consequently the details on the calling have been changed to say that an officer had called but no further action was required. We have highlighted how applications can be tracked via our website instead.
- Spoken to Agents at the Agents Forum in November informing them of the additional functionality of the website and asked us not to contact on day 23.

Reception Desk Survey

A survey was carried out of all incoming Development Management enquiries at the Reception Desk at Knowle. Setting aside those callers who simply went direct either to the computer screens to browse the website or went to look at the Part 1 register (ie the paper copies of new applications); there were only 16 callers during the two weeks surveyed. This is a significant reduction on the findings during the initial 'check'

The two most common enquires were:

- Can I see the planning officer's planning file, and
- Can I have planning advice

The now very accessible website appears to be effectively siphoning away the need for direct contact and only those seeking detailed or very specific advice now make contact.

Lagging Measures:

Applicant Satisfaction Survey

The survey carried out for this quarter showed a return of 90% satisfaction, with 83% scoring the service 8 or above. This is a 7% decrease on the previous quarter both in general terms and for those scoring more than 8 out of 10. The total number of applicants contacted was 77

Analysis and actions taken

A selection of comments on what was important to customers

- Speed and preferably an approval
- Being able to check progress on the internet
- To be kept informed
- Value of pre app advice
- Helpful attitude of planning and other officers
- Application considered fairly
- A correct legal decision
- Availability of planning officers to discuss problems

Some issues raised by customers

- Didn't appreciate process was so complicated
- Took too long sometimes
- On a few occasions advice changed as to whether or not planning permission needed
- Some issues with tree advice taking too long
- Some survey work required is very expensive e.g. Bat surveys

The results of the survey will be passed to staff to keep them aware of customers' needs. Clearly the top answers coming out of the survey continue to be communication, speed of processing, being given an approval and being dealt with fairly. It is also clear that the time and resource invested in the Council's planning web site is starting to pay dividends.

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Staff Morale

Staff continue to be motivated and happy to work the new system of a team approach. The Issues Log is being actively used as a report and check mechanism for the system. All staff continue to be involved in Systems meetings which are run on a rota basis every few weeks. They have the opportunity to feed through problems and issues and be a part of the solution.

However the budget problems have resulted in one planning support post not be refilled. The implications will be monitored and work such as solicitor's enquires, will be given a lower priority.

Other workload pressures may result from the potential deployment of staff to other areas of work such as LDF work. Again this will need to be monitored in terms of those staff who continue with the applications core business.

All staff still enjoy training opportunities through their professional bodies as well as other in house courses that are run. Other training events are planned for the year ahead such as design tours of the for both planning officers and Members.

The part time Senior Planning officer in the Eastern Team has just left the Authority on an extended period of Sabbatical leave not returning until October 2010. This will have implications for the remaining members of staff in the team. Additional workload demands are inevitable. The converse however is that planning officers in the team generally will be getting more and more involved in complex and potentially controversial applications which can only be of benefit to them in terms of their wider experience.

Budgets

Any monies received from the new pre application charging system will be monitored against an anticipated budget estimate of £150'000 and balanced against any adverse impact (as described above).

In terms of planning fees, despite a downturn in the number of applications received (2439 in 2009 compared to 2861 in 2008) the fee income is ahead of the predicted income budget. By the end of December 2009 (month 9 in the financial year), the fee income received is more than £140,000 greater than the expected income for this point in the year. This is due mostly to the number of high fee paying applications increasing. Costs are also reducing as the number of free applications is now significantly down – as reported last quarter. This may of course change with the introduction of the charging regime.

Staffing costs are also 'in credit' by the sum of £41,000 primarily through not filling vacant posts and with staff being absent on authorised leave.

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Consultant fees have also been cut back significantly. Officers now rarely use our agricultural consultant and will only use specialist consultants such as retail specialists when absolutely necessary. However the planning fees are designed to cover these costs.

National Indicator Returns

N157 a, b, c:

Type	DCLG Target	Quarter 2 Jul - Sep	Quarter 3 Oct - Dec
Major applications	60% in 13 weeks	52.17%	48.48%
Minor applications	65% in 8 weeks	71.32%	69.93%
Other applications	80% in 8 weeks	81.97%	80.98%

These statistics show a very crude representation of performance and do not accurately reflect all the work stream activity. They focus only on certain categories of planning application and give a retrospective three month average.

The Development Manager attends the South West Development Managers Best Practice Group on a quarterly basis. It is evident from those meetings that many other Devon and South West Authorities still pay great attention to National Indicator targets rather than taking any extra time necessary to achieve a positive result for the customer.

BVPI 204 Appeals Allowed:

Target	Quarter 2 Jul - Sep	Quarter 3 Oct - Dec
Local	27.3%	14.3%

The number of appeals has dropped over this period and so has the number of appeals which are upheld. The systems thinking process allows more negotiation with applicants and reduces the number refused, (2009 figure: only 6.7%), this has a knock on effect to appeals and resubmissions. This is also not a reflection on what some commentators have said that 'anything goes'. Applications heading for a refusal are now more closely scrutinised in advance by the appeals team. In addition officers now look for an approval with amended plans rather than a quicker refusal to meet targets. The reduction in the number of refusals is more a factor of the new way of working rather than a drop in standards.

Future Projects

- Consider the results of a capacity exercise undertaken to provide evidence of how long typical work stream elements are taking and what resources may be needed
- Undertake an evaluation of added value on planning applications to try and identify where planners have added value to the outcome.
- Undertake a review of Section 106 agreements which are outstanding
- Commence a review of Section 106 procedures and protocols as well as looking at standard templates again.

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- Undertake a review of standard planning conditions taking on board the recent publication of central government who intend to provide LPAs this year with new standard conditions.
- Undertake a further review of standard letters particularly in the light of the council's decisions to change to a standard font size of Arial 12 pt. This will have implications for many of the 80 standard letters employed by the planning service.
- We will look deeper at the preventable demand, and break the calls down to individual areas, CSC, Planning Teams and Enforcement, to see if there are any areas we can improve on.
- Having updated our 'Planning online' section of the website in Nov 09, we will review how it is working and look at upgrading the Development Management section. The planning website as a whole received 70,000+ hits in the last quarter and is by far the most used page (excluding the front page) of the EDDC website. We need to make sure that this is a user friendly source of information.