Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Planning Research Programme

The One Stop Shop Approach to development consents

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PREFACE

by the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Obtaining the permissions needed to undertake a development can be a daunting prospect, particularly for small businesses. Even modest projects may need to comply with several sets of regulations. Developers can find themselves in the unfortunate position of obtaining, say, planning permission only to find that their plans need to be modified to meet building control requirements.

We want to see the adoption of a more integrated approach. This guide gives practical advice to councils on how to adopt a one stop shop approach to development consents. It encourages authorities to provide single points of contact throughout the development process and to give comprehensive help and advice. In this way, authorities can play a positive role in enabling good quality development to occur quickly and smoothly.

The one stop shop approach offers significant benefits to all concerned. Developers should find it easier to obtain an overall picture of what is required, saving the time and cost of abortive work. Councils should receive better quality applications which can then be processed more quickly. Other consent-giving bodies should find that potential problems are identified at the earliest possible stage.

The one stop shop approach brings together two of our key policy initiatives, modernising local government and modernising planning. I am grateful for the help of the four pilot local authorities, the London Borough of Bexley, Brighton Borough Council, Hartlepool Borough Council and Wycombe District Council, in producing this guide and am pleased that a number of other authorities have already set up one stop shops. I would encourage all councils to consider how this one stop shop approach could modernise and streamline their services.

Rt Hon John Prescott, MP

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 The one stop shop initiative

When businesses decide to expand their existing premises or move to new premises, they are likely to need a number of consents from the local council and possibly also from other bodies. These can include planning permission, listed building or conservation area consent, and approval under the building regulations. Small businesses in particular can be daunted by the process of discovering which consents they need and the complexities of obtaining them.

At the same time, local authorities have been looking for ways of improving the service which they offer their customers. They have also been concerned to ensure that those undertaking development do not waste time and effort obtaining a series of different consents which later prove to be incompatible with each other.

Early in 1996, the National Planning Forum produced a guide to *The Development Team Approach* to help local authorities provide a more co-ordinated and customer-oriented approach to development projects. The Government decided to build on this initiative by launching a number of 'one stop shop' pilot projects and using the experiences of the local authorities involved to produce a good practice guide. This document is the result.

1.2 The four pilot projects

Four pilot authorities were chosen to participate in the one stop shop pilot project: the London Borough of Bexley; Brighton Borough Council; Hartlepool Borough Council; and Wycombe District Council. The Policy Studies Institute (PSI) was commissioned to evaluate the initiative. PSI monitored the work of the pilot authorities and also investigated similar approaches taken by a group of non-pilot authorities, in order to draw on as wide a range of experience as possible.

All four pilot authorities had already adopted a one stop shop approach to some extent. The Government asked them to build on this and, as a minimum, to provide:

- a single 'one stop' point of initial advice for all the relevant approvals given by the authority and those given by non-local authority bodies (such as water companies and the Environment Agency);
- arrangements for pre-application discussions which adopted a co-ordinated approach to the project under consideration;
- a case officer to guide the applicant through the various approval processes, ensuring that these were co-ordinated in a helpful and efficient way;
- where appropriate, arrangements for liaising with other approval-giving bodies, where this was helpful in dealing with the various local authority approvals;
- arrangements, where appropriate, to co-ordinate enforcement visits by both the local authority and other relevant external agencies in relation to the design and construction of development; and
- publicity to raise awareness of the one stop shop facilities and arrangements to facilitate feedback from users.

The pilot services were to apply to all business development &endash; that is, developments of any size proposed by businesses, including the building of housing. Two of the pilot authorities developed services which encompassed householder applications as well. The pilots ran for a six month period beginning on 1 October 1996.

The project was primarily concerned with the consents capable of being given by the local authority during the planning and construction of new business development including changes from one use to another. (These consents were: planning permission, listed building consent, conservation area consent, building control approval, aspects of health and safety, and approval under the fire regulations.) The pilot authorities also provided information on the various consents given by other bodies including the availability of approved building inspectors.

A checklist of the main consents covered by the pilot projects is given in Appendix A.

1.3 The advantages of a one stop approach to development consents

Chapter 10 discusses the advantages of introducing a one stop shop approach to development consents. In summary, these are:

- potential cost savings for both developers and the local

authority through the identification of issues and problems at an early stage leading to the quicker identification of mutually acceptable solutions, a better quality of submitted applications and, in some cases, to work being discontinued on unrealistic proposals;

- greater user satisfaction due to comprehensive information and advice being more readily available from the single initial advice point and the case officer;

- a more positive image for the authority which is seen as helping to identify possible solutions to problems rather than erecting bureaucratic barriers;

- improved communication within the authority and with external bodies as the relationships between different consent regimes become better understood; and

- better relationships with developers as a result of the various consent processes becoming more integrated and streamlined.

1.4 Using this guide

It is clear from the study that there would be benefits to authorities and developers alike in a much wider adoption of the one stop shop approach to development consents. This guide aims to help local authorities to proceed down this route. It discusses the main components of a one stop shop service in the order in which a developer would be likely to encounter them:

- initial information and advice;
- pre-application discussions;
- case officers;
- development teams;
- enforcement; and
- publicity and user feedback.

Because no two local authorities are the same, no two one stop shop services will be the same. Each chapter discusses the relationship between the different components, and the factors which an authority should consider when developing a service which will meet local needs and circumstances. Appendix B explains the overall structure of the four pilot authorities into which their particular arrangements were slotted. The final chapter of the guide considers general issues for those planning and managing one stop shop services.

While the focus of the pilot projects was on developing a one stop shop approach to business development, the lessons learned are equally applicable to authorities wishing to provide this type of service to all those applying for the relevant consents.

Each chapter begins with a description of what each authority did during the pilot period in relation to the particular topic under discussion. In many cases, these arrangements existed in the same or a similar form before the pilot period and continue to the present day. Some examples are also quoted from the experiences of the non-pilot authorities contacted by PSI.

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APPENDIX A

Consents Covered by the Pilot Authorities' One Stop Shop Services

Bexley

> Bexley covered building control, planning (including listed building consent and conservation area consent) and licensing. The environmental health department was included, as was the engineering department, which was responsible for sewer management for Thames Water and for highways issues. There was close liaison with the fire authority through building control.

Brighton

> Brighton covered building control, planning, licensing and environmental health. The fire authority was the main external agency to be actively involved although other external agencies were informed of applications received which might affect them.

Hartlepool

> Hartlepool tried to cover every consent which might be required for a development. Within the local authority, the following were involved: building control, planning, engineering and waste disposal, highways, public protection (including environmental health), licensing, property services, social services, education, housing and solicitors. External agencies were: the fire authority, the police force, the Environment Agency, the water authority and the Health and Safety Executive. Economic development and City Challenge, although not involved in giving consents, were involved in discussions.

Wycombe

> Wycombe included local authority consents and the fire authority. Local authority departments involved were: development control, building control, engineering and environmental services. The police architectural liaison officer and the local group concerned with disabled people's access were consulted regularly.

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CHAPTER 10

The Benefits of a One Stop Shop Approach

10.1 Introduction

The previous sections of this guide have highlighted the advantages of particular approaches to providing a one stop shop service. Here we summarise the general benefits.

10.2 Improved efficiency and effectiveness

Most of the improvements in performance and user satisfaction described in this guide were achieved at little or no extra cost. There were set-up costs but the pilot authorities developed their services without any permanent, additional funding.

10.3 Improvement in the quality of applications

By increasing the input at the pre-application stage of a project, authorities found that submitted applications were more likely to be complete, with fewer questions and issues to be resolved during the processing of the application. For many applications, it then became easier to reach a decision within the Government's target that 80% of planning applications should be decided in eight weeks.

However, this benefit is only realised if there is adequate staffing for processing applications; diverting too many resources to the pre-application stage can limit or reverse the potential benefit.

10.4 Reduced need for enforcement action

Authorities describe a shift from enforcement to enabling. Attempts to resolve difficulties and provide information at the earlier stages of a project meant that fewer changes were needed once detailed plans were made or construction began and, ultimately, enforcement action could be avoided.

It is important to note, however, that authorities were aware that much of their enforcement action was concerned with developments which had not been through the required approval processes, so the impact of

the one stop shop would always be limited by this.

10.5 Improved communication within the authority

Improved information systems have facilitated communications between departments and functions within them. Authorities said that, as a result, officers were better informed and spent less time pursuing enquiries. The new ways of working could result in an increase in paperwork but it was often possible to absorb this because of an overall improvement in efficiency.

10.6 Culture change

Authorities report a change of culture as a result of introducing the one stop shop approach.

They stress that creating a more co-operative and customer-oriented approach to work is just as important as formal procedures in making the one stop shop work. Instilling changes of attitude was usually a gradual process and often a difficult one, but it has had a beneficial effect on working relationships, job satisfaction and service standards.

Common aspects of the culture change included:

- officers becoming more aware of the economic realities of the development industry and of the competition or potential competition with their own services by approved inspectors. As a result, they became more appreciative of the importance of high standards of customer service;
- the team approach created a sense of ownership by the team of the whole development process, rather than a personal and professional responsibility for a specific aspect of it. This led to a more determined effort to co-operate to find a solution to any problems which were identified; and
- officers became more proactive and were more prepared to make themselves more accessible to enquirers and developers.

However, the conflicting objectives of having professional officers available to provide advice and guidance to one stop shop callers, and of allowing staff time to work without interruption, remains a difficult management issue in many authorities.

10.7 Job satisfaction

A widely remarked result of the one stop shop approach has been an increase in job satisfaction for many officers. The satisfaction comes from:

- involvement in a project from its start to completion;
- the satisfaction of developers and agents which was evident when they, for example, chose to return to the authority for

another project; and

- the removal of hassle and the development of improved procedures.

10.8 Better working relationships with other agencies

Both local authorities and other agencies involved in approving developments commented on the value of a better understanding of others' work. This stemmed from the exchange of information about procedures and particular cases, which also enabled individual officers to develop a working relationship with staff in other organisations.

10.9 User satisfaction and the relationship with developers

Authorities felt they had an improved relationship with developers, which showed in better co-operation, less confusion and fewer misunderstandings. As a result of an improved understanding of the role and work of officers, developers had more confidence in their competence. Some authorities found that developers contacted the authority at a much earlier stage in the planning of a project. The pilot authorities also thought that the one stop shop had generally enhanced the image of the authority.

The users contacted during the evaluation of the pilot noted the importance of the aspects of the service listed below.

- Any reduction in time and bureaucracy was welcome.
- The identification of any potential problems at an early stage was appreciated. This saved them from having to make changes, and incur costs, later on.
- An increase in information was generally appreciated. Most users liked written confirmation of advice they had been given. However, printed information had to be appropriate. Users were not pleased if they had to deal with information which turned out to be irrelevant to their project.
- Users noted the importance of staff being well-briefed about their particular project and of the front-line staff being well informed. The need to refer enquiries to other staff, especially the experience of being passed between a number of officers before reaching the right one, was irritating to users.
- A case officer system was valued for giving users regular and informal contact with a named officer who was familiar with their case.

10.10 The impact on development and regeneration

Authorities and developers agreed that well established, user-friendly services were a factor in developers' decisions about where to locate their projects. One stop shop services could help an authority to attract

and retain investment.

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APPENDIX B

Overall Structure of the Four Pilot Authorities

Bexley

Bexley is an outer London borough, with a population of 220,000 and an area of 23 square miles.

The Environmental Services Directorate has five departments: Committee Secretariat; Planning and Development (which includes planning and building control, forward planning, economic development and valuation); Environmental Health and Trading Standards; Engineers (which includes policy on traffic, highways and drainage); and Works and Contracts (which includes maintenance of roads and sewers).

The Directorate is located on three sites (shortly to be four), although most of the services related to development approval are located together. Each site has a reception desk.

In 1995/6, 1,450 decisions were made on planning applications.

Brighton

Brighton has a population of 148,000 and an area of 23 square miles. The former Brighton Borough Council merged with Hove Borough Council to form a unitary authority in April 1997 but the one stop shop pilot took place before the merger. The following description is therefore of the authority's structure before the unitary authority was formed.

The Environmental Services Department encompassed planning, building control and environmental health, along with: highways, refuse, conservation and design, forward planning and grounds, countryside and highway maintenance. These functions were organised into four multi-disciplinary groups: East Area, West Area, Enterprise, and Development and Support.

The Area groups were organised on a geographical basis rather than

according to functional divisions, and brought together a number of professionals. There were several teams in each Area Group. Those in West area included Building and Highway Enforcement; Environmental Health and Licensing (Programmes); Environmental Health and Licensing (Reactive) and Plans and Traffic. The set up in the East area was very similar. The teams there were made up of: Building and Highway Enforcement; Environmental Health and Licensing; Plans and Traffic; and Countryside Rangers.

The Department had a multi-functional reception area, the Information and Advice Centre, which dealt with all environmental services enquiries.

In 1995/6, 1,412 decisions were made on planning applications.

Hartlepool

Hartlepool has a population of approximately 90,000 and an area of 36 square miles. Hartlepool became a unitary authority in 1995. The new authority continues the previous policy of supporting and encouraging economic development in the area. The Borough co-operates in this with the Teesside Development Corporation.

The Department of Environment and Development contains almost all the regulatory parts of the authority, including engineering and licensing. Within the department, the urban and economic development section contains planning, building control, economic development, environmental services and landscape.

In 1995/6, 500 planning decisions were made.

Wycombe

Wycombe District Council covers an area of approximately 125 square miles and has a population of approximately 164,000.

It is largely rural and the major part of the district lies within the metropolitan green belt. Most of the countryside is also within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and many of the villages and hamlets are in designated conservation areas. The main urban areas are High Wycombe and the smaller towns of Marlow and Princes Risborough.

There is considerable pressure on the district to allow employment and housing developments, which have to be reconciled with the protection of the environment of both the countryside and the urban areas.

The Directorate of Planning, Transport and Development has the following divisions: the policy and environment unit (which includes

economic development); transport, projects and conservation; development control; and building control.

The authority made 1,856 planning decisions in 1995/6.

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CHAPTER 2

Summary

The one stop shop approach

The one stop shop approach to development projects comprises five main elements:

- a single 'one stop' point of initial advice;
- arrangements for co-ordinated pre-application discussions;
- a case officer to guide the applicant through the various approval processes and liaise with other approval-giving bodies;
- the co-ordination of appropriate enforcement visits; and
- arrangements to publicise the one stop shop services and obtain user feedback.

Initial advice

A one stop shop initial advice service needs to be:

- located so as to ensure that it is accessible to both telephone and personal callers, and in easy contact with the council departments which it serves;
- well publicised so that potential users are aware of its existence and how to contact it;
- well understood by the council's staff so that they direct enquirers to it; and
- staffed by adequately trained officers who have up to date information in relation to the queries they are likely to receive and a good understanding of when to refer enquirers elsewhere for further help.

Pre-application discussions

Arrangements for one stop shop pre-application discussions need to have:

- criteria for deciding when co-ordinated pre-application

discussions are likely to be appropriate;

- mechanisms for ensuring that the correct people are involved in such discussions from both within and, where appropriate, from outside the authority;

- opportunities for officers and outside bodies to submit comments in writing where this is more cost-effective than attendance at relevant meetings or site visits; and

- a procedure for ensuring that all those participating in pre-application discussions, including the applicant, have sufficient information to participate effectively.

Case officers

A system of one stop shop case officers needs to include the following features:

- criteria for deciding whether the case officer is to be allocated when the user first approaches the authority, when a pre-application discussion is arranged or when the first formal application is received. The criteria may vary depending on the type of development project envisaged;

- clear guidance for both officers and users on the roles the case officer is expected to undertake. These can include acting as the main point of contact for the user, co-ordinating the authority's response to the development project and liaising with external agencies; and

- a mechanism for choosing an appropriate case officer. This may depend on the nature of the application, the expertise, seniority and workload of relevant officers and the stage reached by relevant applications.

Co-ordinated enforcement

As part of their one stop shop approach to development consents, authorities should consider the scope for co-ordinating enforcement visits both within the council and with relevant external agencies.

Publicity and user feedback

In introducing one stop shop arrangements, authorities need to ensure that:

- publicity for the one stop shop service is targeted at potential users, explains the nature of the service offered and is renewed on a regular basis;

- staff within the authority and in relevant external agencies are fully aware of the one stop shop service and their role within it; and

- mechanisms are established for obtaining regular user feedback

on the service offered and for acting on the comments received.

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CHAPTER 9

General Management Issues

9.1 Introduction

Previous chapters of this guide have discussed the options for introducing different elements of a one stop shop service and the associated management issues. This chapter discusses, in brief, three general but fundamental issues which should be considered when developing a one stop shop.

9.2 Organisational change

Introducing all the elements of a one stop shop will necessitate significant changes in the way people work. Experience in many fields has shown that there can be significant obstacles to achieving these changes. Issues include boundary disputes between different professions and functions arising from changes in areas of responsibility, and concerns about the competence of general advisers to provide accurate information on subjects previously handled by specialists.

This guide has identified various advantages for staff and the organisation as a whole from introducing one stop shop arrangements and these need to be used in a positive way to overcome reservations and resistance. Member commitment will be important in achieving a successful process of change.

A number of the pilot authorities commented that one stop shop arrangements worked better if there was a wider culture of customer care throughout the council. Initial advice officers and case officers then find it easier to obtain the co-operation of other staff in providing them with help and information. One stop arrangements can also assist in creating a customer care culture. In seeking to guide applicants through the development process, the council can be seen as more enabling and less regulatory, as more willing to search for solutions rather than telling people that they cannot do what they want to do.

Pilot authorities also felt that introducing one stop shop arrangements was easier where the officers dealing with the various development-related consents had already been brigaded into a single directorate within the council.

9.3 Set-up time and costs

The sorts of organisational change described above cannot be achieved quickly. Further, they bring particular costs, especially the costs of training and of setting up information and communications systems.

Training programmes can include seminars, presentations and briefings for local authority staff and staff from other agencies. Their purpose will be to make sure that everyone who might refer users to the one stop shop or have some contact with it understands its purpose and procedures. Those involved in the core activities of the one stop shop, such as case officers or information providers, for example, will need more intensive training.

The provision of information and advice to users has already been discussed. Authorities may also need to enhance their systems for exchanging information between departments or sections and for communicating with other agencies. To be effective, these will take time and skill to develop.

However, although there may be initial costs in setting up the new arrangements, the pilot authorities see no reason why there should be net additional costs long-term. The one stop shop arrangements described in this guide are essentially a way of delivering existing services more effectively with the potential benefits identified in earlier chapters.

9.4 Selection policy and criteria

Not all cases require the same treatment or the same resources. As we have seen, it is necessary to decide which cases should receive pre-application, case officer and development team services. These criteria should be made explicit so that they are applied consistently and so that developers can understand the reasons for the decisions on these matters.

Some authorities have given users the choice of whether or not to use the one stop shop service. While this has the superficial advantage of increasing consumer choice, it has disadvantages as well:

- those who opt for the service may not be the ones who would benefit most;
- there is a danger of the one stop shop service becoming a separate strand within the department's work rather than an

integral part of it with the overall benefits of a more customer-oriented approach being lost; and

● the one stop shop may appear to offer a preferential service to some cases.

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APPENDIX C

Computerised Initial Advice in Bexley

As part of the one stop initiative, Bexley developed a computerised information system for giving initial advice and information to both personal and telephone callers. This continues to be operated by the authority and this appendix outlines what has been achieved so far.

The Bexley computer system is used by council officers to answer queries from both telephone callers and personal enquirers. The software package is licensed from Inference Corporation and uses case-based reasoning technology. Bexley have worked with Inference to develop a hierarchy of questions relating to different types of development. These lead the user to a file containing details of the relevant consents which are likely to be needed and other issues which they may need to address.

80% of Bexley's enquiries relate to just 16 types of development, and so case structures for these were developed first. Others are being added gradually. Detailed information is given about the consents dealt with by Bexley and more basic information and contact points for those dealt with by other bodies.

Bexley have found that the system delivers the following benefits:

- greater control over the information given out by individual officers helping to ensure that this is both reliable and consistent;
- a reduced need for professional officers to spend time dealing with simple enquiries;
- savings in the time needed to deal with individual enquiries;
- an improved capacity to provide all the information enquirers need at their first point of contact with the authority; and
- a greater empowerment of staff who are able to deal with a wider range of queries and to provide more information.

Bexley have found that the number of calls having to be referred on for further advice has reduced from three quarters to a third illustrating how much professional officers' time was previously spent answering routine questions. This saving is helping to

improve the overall efficiency of the planning service because officers are then freed to concentrate on more complex planning issues.

Bexley estimate that it took approximately 150 days of staff time to develop the database and to train staff to use it, over a period of several months. The largest part of the work was the development of the 'cases' and the design of the flow charts. Six staff were involved in this; two from planning, two from building control and two administration assistants.

Time was also needed to train staff to use the system. Bexley stressed that staff were already well trained in the content of most of the information they were dealing with, as a result of extensive training two years earlier, which had covered all services provided by the directorate.

Finally, on the cost side, there were the consultants' fees for developing the software.

The early reaction of staff was that the system did not speed up the response to familiar enquiries but that it was most useful for dealing with unfamiliar or more complex enquiries which would otherwise have had to be referred to a professional officer.

There was some evidence that some inexperienced users found a conversation with a professional officer more authoritative. In contrast, regular users were interested in being able to access the system themselves.
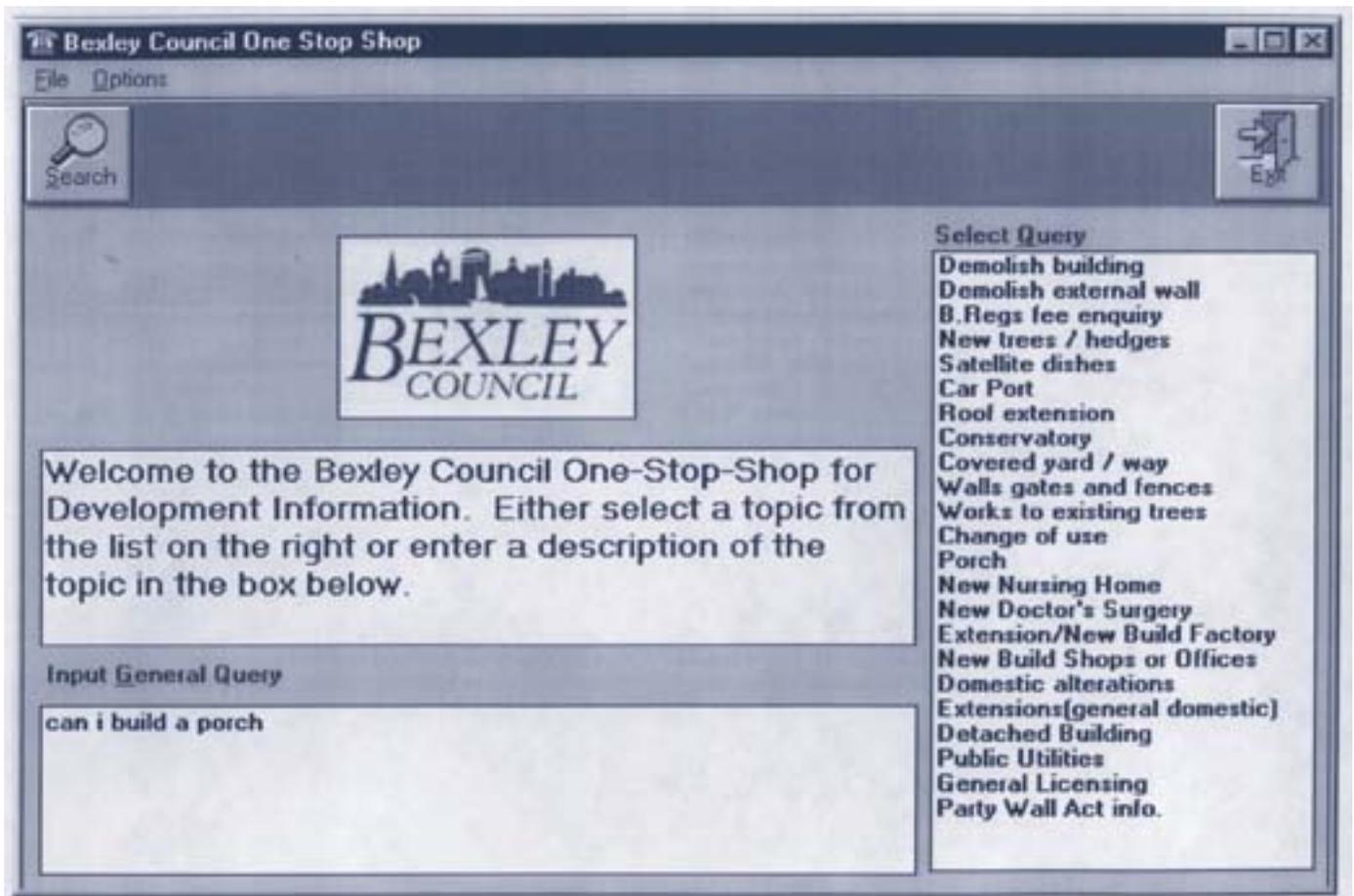
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Bexley Council One Stop Shop - [Display Action]

File Options

Title:

BEX-016 Porch Planning criteria
BEX-017 Porch Building Regulations criteria
BEX 9997 Planning application fee information

Undo Last   Close

Description: More Info

Planning will be required if:-
- the porch is over 3m in height measured from ground level
- the porch is over 3 square metres in floor area measured
  externally
- there is less than 2m between any part of the porch and a
  boundary with a highway (NB Highway includes a footpath)
- the property has restricted permitted development rights
  or an article 4 direction
(A separating door must be retained between the porch and the existing property)

Where and application is required, you will need to supply:-

	Criteria
<<Does the enquirer want a list of criteria or a definite answer>>	Criteria
What type of extension?	Porch
Will the extension encroach over the boundary of the property?	No
What is the type of dwelling?	House, Bungalow - Detached
Is it a listed building or within the curtilage (boundary) of a listed building	No
Is the enquiry concerning an extension to the dwelling?	Yes

Bexley Council One Stop Shop - [Display Action]

File Options

Title:

BEX-016 Porch Planning criteria
BEX-017 Porch Building Regulations criteria
BEX 9997 Planning application fee information

Undo Last   Close

Description: More Info

Building Regulation Approval will not be required provided
The porch,

 -is under 30 square metres (internal floor area)

 -is at ground level

 -has got safety glazing in the Critical positions
 please click on 'more info' above to see a diagram

 -has no permanent openings between the porch and
  the property

	Criteria
<<Does the enquirer want a list of criteria or a definite answer>>	Criteria
Will the extension encroach over the boundary of the property?	No
What is the type of dwelling?	House, Bungalow - Semi
Is it a listed building or within the curtilage (boundary) of a listed building	No
What type of extension?	Porch
Is the enquiry concerning an extension to the dwelling?	Yes

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A sample of the information generated by the Bexley computer system in relation to a particular query

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CHAPTER 3

Initial Information and Advice

The Provision of Initial Information and Advice by the Pilot Authorities

Bexley decided to set up a computer database to provide information about relevant consents in relation to the types of development most frequently undertaken by both businesses and householders in the borough. The database was used by staff to help personal and telephone callers to the Directorate of Environmental Services. In addition, professional staff were available to deal with non-routine enquiries. Further details about the database are given in Appendix C.

Brighton provided a custom-built reception area for enquirers. Ninety per cent of all enquiries to the Environmental Services Department were dealt with by customer service assistants or other related information staff.

Hartlepool saw its one stop shop information and advice service as an approach rather than a physical location. Reception desks in all council buildings took enquiries from visitors and telephone callers. Staff throughout the authority referred all enquiries about development to the weekly one stop shop meeting which was the vehicle for the local

authority's formal response to all enquiries. In addition, it was the policy of the Department of the Environment and Development for a planning and building control officer to be available to talk to callers to the Department's reception area at any time.

Wycombe's initial information and advice service was based at the reception desk for the Directorate of Planning, Transport and Development. Reception staff there dealt with enquiries relating to all the Directorate's services. All business enquirers with queries involving more than one type of control were referred for further advice to the one stop shop case officer.

3.1 Introduction

All local authorities receive enquiries from those thinking of undertaking development about the types of consent which they are likely to need. People may come to the council's offices with their queries or they may phone in. The pilot projects were asked to set up a single advice point providing detailed information on all the relevant consents given by the authority together with basic information and contact points for those consents given by other bodies.

The four pilot authorities chose to provide initial information and advice in quite different ways. These are described in the box opposite. Authorities thinking of providing a one stop shop initial advice and information service need to address the following issues:

- where to locate the service;
- how to ensure that potential users are aware of it and can access it;
- how to staff the service, what information to provide and how to decide when enquiries should be referred to a more specialist officer or elsewhere in the council; and
- how to maintain the quality of the advice offered.

These issues are discussed in turn below.

3.2 Deciding where to locate the information service

Authorities will generally have a physical point, such as a reception area or enquiry desk, staffed by administrative or clerical officers, where users without appointments can seek information. Some authorities have specialist information offices or shops.

Authorities will also receive enquiries by telephone. It is important that users receive a service of equivalent quality, whether they come in person or use the

phone.

A first stage in reviewing the provision of initial information is to assess the relative importance of the two channels, in terms of the volume of initial enquiries which they handle. The following factors will then need to be considered in deciding the nature of the service to be provided.

- Users' preferences. Not surprisingly, the majority of initial enquiries about business development are made by telephone. This is the usual method of making enquiries in any aspect of business and business users are unlikely to treat the local authority differently from any other organisation. They are likely to prefer the convenience and speed of the telephone even if a new shop-front advice point is opened for personal callers or the next stage in their enquiry is to visit the department.

- Geography. An authority which covers a large area, particularly one with no single focal point, may not have a location which would be convenient for all potential users. Economies of scale may rule out having more than one advice point, although computer-based systems or sharing offices with other local authority services may help overcome this problem.

- The availability of suitable premises. An information service which aims to attract personal callers has to be in a convenient and accessible location for its intended users (high street, town centre etc). It also has to be easily accessible from the street. The ideal is a highly visible shop-front. Having to navigate one's way through the security checks of a local authority office building to an office inside can be a deterrent to users.

- Proximity to other relevant staff. Any advice point should be physically close to the departments whose work and responsibilities it deals with. This allows information to be exchanged easily between the service and the specialist staff in the departments. It also creates a sense of ownership.

- The overall volume of enquiries received. The size of the local authority, the characteristics of the area and the policy of the authority towards encouraging development will influence the number of enquiries received. In some areas, this may not be large enough to make a dedicated information service, with its own premises and staff, a viable proposition. Alternatively, it may only be cost effective if developed as a joint venture with other local authority departments or directorates. This option means the training of the staff has to be more extensive, as they will be required to cover a wider range of enquiries.

The management of telephone and personal enquirers needs care as visitors will find it irritating to be kept waiting or, worse, interrupted while a telephone call is answered. It may be worth having different staff dealing with the two types of enquiry, particularly at busy times. Having a single queue served by a

number of staff will also avoid the frustration of enquirers having to wait a considerable time behind those with particularly long and complex queries.

3.3 Enabling users to access the information service

Development-related enquiries may come into an authority at various points. For example, a person enquiring about setting up a residential or nursing home may contact the social services department. While personal callers are likely to arrive at a limited number of locations, telephone calls may be received by officers across the whole authority. Arrangements therefore need to be made to ensure that all relevant staff know how and when to refer callers to the one stop shop service.

For telephone enquiries, the ideal is for staff to have one number to which they can refer callers. This number should then be answered by staff who can answer the question themselves or provide immediate access to designated information providers. The more complicated the arrangements, the more likely users are to get lost in the system. This is a major cause of dissatisfaction among users.

The pilot authorities held training and briefing sessions for all staff who might receive enquiries. The training concentrated on enabling staff to recognise a relevant enquiry and to understand the objectives and role of the information service. Hartlepool produced an information pack to explain the whole of its one stop shop approach to staff and used this in seminars for staff in each department.

The message needs to be reinforced at regular intervals with written reminders and through regular liaison between departments. A well-established culture of taking an authority-wide approach to customer service makes it easier to introduce these co-operative arrangements between departments.

3.4 Running the information service
Staffing

The staff in any one stop shop initial advice service will be dealing primarily with enquiries relating to planning, building control and aspects of health and safety. They will need some familiarity with these topics and authorities may wish to appoint staff who have previously worked in the relevant council departments. How much detailed knowledge they will need, and therefore what grade they will need to be and what training they will require, will depend on precisely how the service is organised.

In the pilot authorities, reception desks and information services were staffed by administrative staff, typically at scale 3 or 4 on the national scales. The number of staff obviously depends on the size of the authority and the volume of development. Brighton's information and advice centre, for example, had four full-time equivalent staff to deal with enquiries to the Environmental Services Department, which included: planning, building control,

environmental health, refuse, conservation and design, forward planning, grounds maintenance, countryside rangers, highway maintenance and parking. Wycombe had one full-time equivalent staff member in the reception area for the Planning, Transport and Development Directorate.

Staff training is usually given on the job. Staff are trained to understand the role of each service, but not the details of how they operate. The emphasis is on enabling staff to identify the consents which may be necessary. Administrative staff are instructed not to give advice on the decisions which might be made on particular cases, and to check the accuracy of the information they are giving even when the enquiry is apparently simple and familiar. Bexley's computer database was designed for use by staff with little or no knowledge of the consent regimes it covered.

Deciding what information to provide

Authorities should provide enquirers with detailed information about the relevant consents dealt with by the authority together with basic information and contact points in relation to consents given by other bodies. Advice should also be provided about the one stop shop service itself, including referral arrangements and eligibility criteria, where appropriate.

In addition, authorities should provide full information about the availability of approved inspectors as an alternative to their own building control service for securing building regulations approval both at the initial advice stage and when a case officer is allocated.

Information about the local authority's own services should include the standards of service which may be expected by the user and how to make complaints. Authorities may also wish to provide advice about other sources of help which may be of interest (eg the availability of financial assistance for businesses).

External bodies are generally anxious to deal with queries about their consent regimes themselves in case incorrect information is given out. Material made available by local authorities about such consents should include: the role of the particular agency; when it needs to be involved; its basic procedures; and who to contact.

Many enquirers will find it helpful to be able to take away a booklet or some other written information relating to their query. The pilot authorities produced leaflets describing the procedures used, under their one stop shop arrangements, to deal with the approval of developments. The authorities also produced a wide range of literature on matters to do with development and the environment.

Some authorities have decided not to make very much literature available on a self help basis.

Brighton preferred to hand the relevant leaflets to users, as a back up to oral information. In this way, staff could establish exactly what information people needed and users were not confused by information irrelevant to their particular problem. Hartlepool also provided a limited range of printed information as it preferred users to approach staff for information.

Bexley developed a computer system to answer questions on the consents needed for various types of development. Full details are in [Appendix B](). They are hoping to develop this system so that it will produce a letter containing relevant information for the enquirer to take away and partially-completed application forms.

All information should be dated. It is then important to check on a regular basis whether it is still up to date. External bodies should be asked to tell the authority of any relevant changes as these occur. Some regular contact with them should also be maintained in case they forget to do so. One advantage of the computerised advice system set up by Bexley is that, as changes are made to the database, the new information is available immediately to everyone using the system.

Referring enquiries elsewhere

Authorities should aim to deliver an initial information and advice service which:

- is comprehensive, providing, through one point of access by the user, information and advice about all the legislation, regulations and procedures which govern the approval of a development;
- is able to assist users with different degrees of experience, from the person considering a business development for the first time to experienced agents and other professionals; and
- is able to deal with enquiries which are, to the authority at least, straightforward and routine and, to some extent, with the complex and unusual.

Providing for straightforward enquiries to be dealt with by a dedicated advice service can allow a more effective use to be made of specialist planners and building control officers by relieving them of this more routine work. It is possible to equip administrative staff to answer a fairly high level of enquiries &endash; Bexley's computerised system set out to do just that. However, there will come a point when an enquirer needs to be referred to a more specialist officer. This will include those with more complex or unusual enquiries. A useful approach is to distinguish between factual questions of procedure and legislation (dealt with by administrative staff) and matters of policy and judgement (dealt with by professional staff).

Each authority will need to decide where the boundaries lie, to make these explicit and to make arrangements for access to professional advice for both staff and users. Drawing these boundaries will involve reviewing the volume and type of enquiries received, and achieving an acceptable balance between having professional staff available to answer enquiries, and ensuring they have uninterrupted time for other work. The usual arrangement is to have a duty rota of officers who can be called on to give advice to enquirers. Some authorities ensure this service is available throughout office hours while others offer more limited access.

The precise referral arrangements will also depend on how the authority decides to organise the remainder of its one stop shop service.

3.5 Quality assurance

Quality assurance techniques which can be applied to the information service are familiar from elsewhere. They include setting performance targets for elements of the service such as speed of response to enquiries and the frequency of updating. These targets and performance against them should be publicised. Spot checks, 'mystery shopping' and the audit of a sample of enquiries or files are also used in other information services.

One of the advantages of Bexley's computerised information service is that different enquirers should receive the same, standard answer to the same query. Providing written guidance material and booklets has the same advantage of ensuring that standard, validated information is given out.

The other mechanism for ensuring quality is staff training. This needs to address the content of the information being handled, provide skills in asking questions to elicit relevant facts and give an understanding of the circumstances in which an enquiry needs to be referred for more specialist advice.
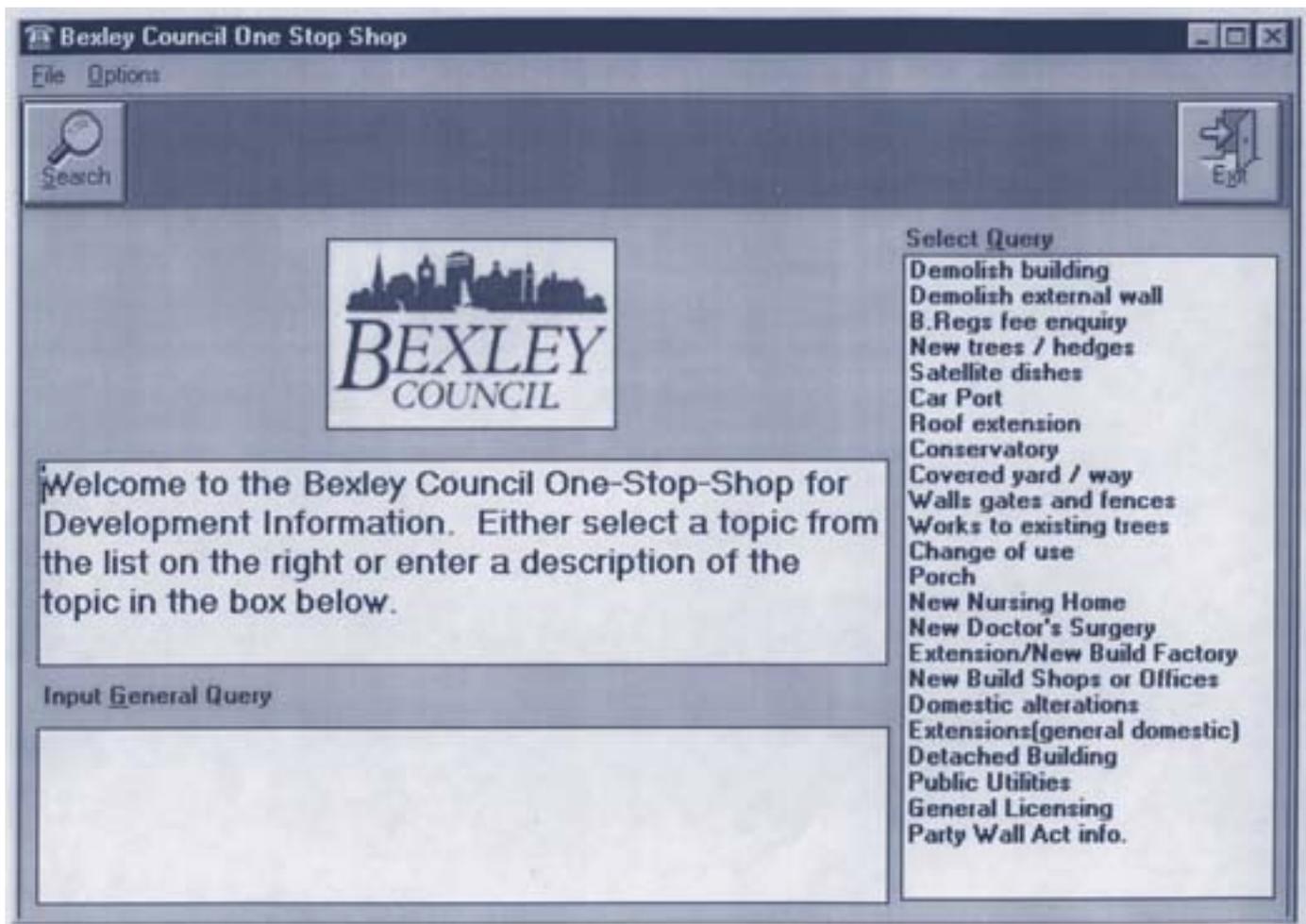
Bexley developed a computer system to answer questions on the consents needed for various types of development.

3.6 The advantages of a one stop shop information service

A dedicated one stop shop initial advice and information service has the following advantages:

- users have easier access to information about the different consent regimes operated by the local authority and about controls exercised by other agencies;

- it can provide a good shop window for the authority;

- the administrative workers who staff the information service gain greater job satisfaction from providing a more comprehensive service to the public;

- planning, building control and other professional staff are released to do more complex work;

- it is more cost-effective to use trained administrative staff to provide basic information and advice than using professional staff for this function; and

- monitoring and quality assurance of information provision is easier to manage if the service is delivered by a small number of specialist staff.

The following considerations will need to be borne in mind, however:

- the service will have running costs in addition to staff time: premises, information materials, management input and the costs of collecting and updating information on a wide range of non-local authority functions;
- staff will need to receive appropriate training both initially and as consent regimes change; and
- some users will still need access to other staff as administrative staff will not be able to provide advice on matters which require professional expertise and judgement.

> Prior to the introduction of the one stop shop advice service in Wycombe, it was sometimes difficult for someone wishing to set up a business in, say, their council house to find out about all the consents needed. Officers contacted did not always know about all the consents needed. The one stop shop service provided business enquirers with a single advice point, the economic development officer, who understood the various consent regimes and who to contact within the authority. This ensured that the enquirer received all the relevant information. Economic benefits of new businesses were then delivered more quickly and smoothly to the local community.

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CHAPTER 4

Pre-Application Discussions

Pre-Application Discussions in the Pilot Authorities

Bexley expected to hold pre-application discussions of some sort on all proposals for major developments. The form of these discussions was a matter for the judgement of the officer who first received the approach about the proposed development. Discussions might take the form of informal consultations within the authority or more formal meetings with the developer, perhaps on site.

Brighton took a similar approach, holding pre-application discussions whenever the officer taking the lead on the proposal decided that this was warranted by the size, complexity or controversy of the development, or known problems with the site.

In Hartlepool, a case officer was assigned to each application (business and household) at the pre-application stage. All enquiries were discussed at a weekly meeting of authority officers and external agencies. A letter of pre-application advice was then sent to each potential applicant. Hartlepool also held pre-application meetings with the developer, often on site, to resolve any potential problems at an early stage. (Further details of

Hartlepool's approach are given in [Appendix D](...)).

Wycombe was prepared to hold pre-application discussions for any sizeable development where it would be helpful to influence the proposal before a full application was submitted. Half the proposals using the one stop shop service during the pilot period required pre-application meetings on site, in which the developer took part. These meetings were arranged by the one stop shop co-ordinator, Wycombe's economic development officer. None of these meetings involved other agencies but both development control and building control were represented.

4.1 Introduction

For simpler types of development, firms and individuals may be able to move straight from the initial advice stage described in the last chapter to applications for the relevant consents which they will need. However, pre-application discussions between the developer and council officers are likely to be helpful where more complex issues are involved. Such discussions can be used to draw the developer's attention to all the relevant regulations and local authority policies and to identify features of the proposed development which would or would not be acceptable. Their value is enhanced when they encompass those regimes operated by other agencies.

The one stop shop project was concerned primarily with business developments where more than one consent was likely to be needed. In these cases, the pilot projects were asked to set up arrangements for pre-application discussions which adopted a co-ordinated approach to the project under consideration. The approaches taken are outlined in the box opposite.

Authorities thinking of providing co-ordinated pre-application discussions across a range of consent regimes need to address the following issues:

- which applications to apply the arrangements to;
- who to involve in the discussions and how to organise them; and
- how to ensure that they are effective.

These issues are discussed in turn below.

4.2 Deciding which applications warrant pre-application discussions

Local authorities offering pre-application discussions will need a mechanism for identifying when these are appropriate. Where the staff in the initial advice service decide that a query should be referred for more specialist help, this should be one of the options considered. Potential applicants may also approach council officers directly to request pre-application discussions and officers will need guidance to enable them to decide when this is appropriate.

One stop shop pre-application discussions will be appropriate where a development is likely to need more than one type of approval. Generally, this will mean two or more approvals from the local authority. Authorities need to consider whether they also wish to offer discussions between themselves, the potential applicant and other bodies where external consents may be relevant. Where approved inspectors are to be used for building control approval, authorities should invite them to participate in any pre-application discussions where this is likely to be helpful to the applicant.

A key focus in one stop shop pre-application discussions is resolving potential conflicts between different consent regimes. Such discussions can save both officers and developers from abortive work and expenditure even where the development appears relatively straightforward.

> A garage owner in Wycombe applied to make changes to his premises before the one stop shop service was introduced. The permission granted involved him in considerable expenditure which he had not anticipated. When the one stop shop was announced, he contacted Wycombe's case officer who arranged a site visit involving all the various council officers concerned. This enabled a new solution to be devised which was acceptable to the council and affordable to the garage owner.

The one stop shop pilot projects focused on business development. Authorities will wish to consider whether to offer co-ordinated discussions to other types of applicant such as householders who may need both planning permission and building control approval for work to their homes.

4.3 Selecting who should be involved in pre-application discussions

The purpose of pre-application discussions is essentially threefold:

- to understand what the developer wishes to achieve and the extent to which different options may be acceptable to him or her;
- to identify any modifications which may be necessary for the development to obtain all the necessary consents; and
- to identify potential problems at the earliest possible stage so that abortive work can be avoided.

These objectives will determine to a considerable extent who needs to be involved in the discussions.

The potential applicant will be a crucial player. However, he will not necessarily need to be involved in all the pre-application discussions. The authority may choose to consult within (and possibly also outside) the authority about relevant consents and then to come back to the applicant on the outcome. This was essentially the approach adopted by Hartlepool, which followed its officers' meeting with further meetings with the developer if necessary.

The advantage of the approach used in Hartlepool is that officers can consider a wide range of potential applications at one time and raise any concerns or issues about each application in a single meeting. All these concerns can then be fed back to the applicant by the case officer. One disadvantage is that the applicant is not present if detailed questions arise about his requirements or his willingness to modify his plans.

In other authorities, pre-application discussions are generally organised on a case by case basis. They do not necessarily involve meetings. The officer taking the lead on the enquiry may simply consult colleagues. This can be a more effective use of staff time for certain types of application than bringing officers together for more formal meetings.

The aim of internal discussions is to establish requirements or resolve any potential conflicts between consent regimes before responding to the developer. They provide an opportunity to resolve any contradictions between council policies without exposing them to the developer.

An additional or alternative approach is to hold a meeting involving both the applicant and relevant local authority officers. This approach is relatively staff intensive and the authority may feel it is justified only where more complex applications are involved. Such meetings may be held on site in order to devise practical solutions more easily. They enable the resolution of any difficulties to become an interactive

process with the developer.

If the case officer is to be appointed at this stage (see next chapter), he or she might then act as the main contact with the potential applicant and liaise with other council officers (and possibly also other external bodies) as necessary. This will provide continuity between the pre-application and post-application stages.

For large and complex projects, development teams may be formed at the pre-application stage (see Chapter 6). The team is likely to stay in existence throughout the life of the project.

> Hounslow sets up a development team as quickly as possible when it is first approached about the possibility of a large and complex development, such as a superstore or factory. Meetings are arranged the day the enquiry is received, to take place within a few days. They involve a range of local authority functions, with other agencies called in later. For large projects, there might be three pre-application meetings.

> Wakefield may have a pre-meeting with the developer on a one-to-one basis to explore his/her ideas in detail and to identify which other functions and agencies might be involved. This meeting is also an opportunity for the developer to have early access to information held by the authority, such as old maps and plans. For example, on one project, it was discovered that long ago there had been a pond on a development site and this had important implications for the design and cost of the building's foundations.

> The Forest of Dean aims to have a one stage pre-application process. Its approach is to have one meeting at which they can both establish the nature of the project and have all the necessary expertise available. All the relevant expertise is expected to be available for meetings which are convened when a prospective developer visits the reception area to make initial enquiries.

Within the authority, the relevant officers for a particular application will depend very much on the nature of the application. It is important that some mechanism exists for identifying all the relevant consents at the pre-application stage. There may be scope for using the expertise of the initial advice service to ensure that nothing is missed.

The authority will also have to decide whether it is going to contact and possibly meet with external consent-giving bodies either jointly with the applicant or on his behalf. Clearly, such contacts will involve additional expense for the authority which will need to consider the extent to which there are commensurate benefits.

4.4 Ensuring the effectiveness of pre-application discussions

As with other aspects of the one stop shop approach, it is helpful to have some mechanism for obtaining feedback on the authority's pre-application arrangements from both users and officers (including those in external agencies). The following issues arose from feedback during the pilot projects:

- where potential applicants are invited to meetings with officers, they need to understand who is at the meeting and their roles within the council;
- authorities need to be sensitive to issues of confidentiality. Potential users should be clear to whom information is going to be given and why. A one stop shop approach should not be imposed on an unwilling applicant; and
- where meetings are held, those present need to be properly briefed about the case either in advance or at the meeting. It may be more effective for some of those with an interest to submit written comments rather than attending in person.

4.5 The advantages of one stop shop pre-application discussions

Pre-application discussions can deliver benefits to both the authority and the potential applicant, including:

- better quality applications which are more straightforward and quicker to process;
- the resolution of potential problems in the relationship between different consent regimes and the avoidance of possible public objections to the proposal;
- the better design of buildings which may be more in keeping with their surroundings;
- savings in time and money for the developer by avoiding the need to change plans at an advanced stage, and for the authority by avoiding the need to process such changes;
- good quality information at an early stage for all parties,

enabling issues and problems to be addressed sooner rather than later;

- a more responsive service delivery by the local authority; and
- improved understanding and working relationships between different agencies.

The following considerations will need to be borne in mind, however:

- in deciding on their approach to pre-application discussions, authorities will need to seek a balance between the gains and the costs, both for themselves and for potential applicants. The gains can be assessed, but are difficult to quantify. It would be possible for an authority to cost the staff time involved.

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APPENDIX D

Hartlepool's Overall Approach

Weekly meetings

In Hartlepool, the pilot involved assigning a case officer to each application (business and household) at the pre-application stage, discussing all enquiries at a weekly meeting of authority officers and external agencies, and sending a letter of pre-application advice to each user. The meeting also discussed applications and enforcement action.

The overall purpose was to provide a full pre-application service which could identify the consents required and advise an enquirer how to apply for those consents. The meeting was also the main vehicle for exchanging information between those involved in providing development-related approvals.

The agenda for the weekly meeting was constructed from the details of enquiries registered on a database at the time of the enquiry. The agenda was circulated two days prior to the meeting and included the location of the proposed development and a very brief description of the nature of the application. Comments could be made in writing, by telephone or by participation in the meeting.

Meetings lasted about two hours and were attended by an average of about twelve people from within the authority and by two or three from external agencies. The external agencies involved in the process included: Cleveland Fire Authority, Cleveland Police, Northumbrian Water, the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive.

During the six months of the pilot, a total of 247 applications and 231 pre-application enquiries were discussed at the meetings. About half of these concerned business developments.

During the same period, 67 referrals were received from other departments, including economic development, solicitors, City Challenge, social services and archaeology.

During the meeting, each project was discussed and information collated on the approvals needed, obvious problems and approval timetables. After the meeting, the case officer provided written feedback to the user, summarising the discussion.

The impact

The aim was to improve the quality of applications, prevent any which would have no hope of success and persuade applicants not to include unacceptable requirements. The system was also intended to make communication more efficient and to help to avoid time-consuming disagreements which could sometimes emerge in the later stages of a project.

In the early stages of the pilot, reservations were expressed about the time which could be spent in meetings and whether this would duplicate the formal process of comment and consultation. However, most of those involved felt that their involvement in the weekly meeting was sustainable and that it was a more efficient way of working. All appreciated the meeting being chaired efficiently - this was an essential feature.

It was hoped that external agencies would refer more cases for discussion than they in fact did. The intention has been for the meeting to be a forum for discussing proposals contributed by any of the participants, not just development control or building control. However, for external agencies, the main benefit of the meetings was to gather information and to develop closer relationships with the authority, not to refer proposals for discussion.

Developers found that identifying problems at an early stage saved them from having to make changes and therefore to spend money later on.

The only real difficulty encountered during the pilot was the increased workload for planning officers. The Development Control officers who were most clearly involved reported spending up to an average of four or five hours extra per week confirming the outcome of the weekly meeting to all applicants in writing. The users interviewed would generally have preferred to have had a telephone call letting them know the outcome of the meeting as soon as possible rather than a letter. Experienced users, in particular, felt this would be adequate. Hartlepool have since changed their procedures to allow for more telephone confirmation.

An unexpected result of the new pre-application service was the use made of it by agents and architects to obtain early information on the likely chances of success of developments about which they had

formed only preliminary ideas. These speculative approaches created extra work for the authority with, in some cases, no positive outcome.

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CHAPTER 5

Case Officers

Provision of a Case Officer by the Pilot Authorities

In Bexley, case officers were allocated at the pre-application stage if discussions were required at that point. Senior officers acted as case officers at this stage for the most complex projects, as their greater expertise was necessary for dealing with questions of policy and principle. For more straightforward applications, more junior staff, including planning assistants, took on the role once an application had been received.

All applications to Brighton were allocated a named contact person. In addition, a one stop shop case officer was assigned to all applications where the applicant had opted to use the one stop shop service. It was then the responsibility of the case officer to provide the one stop service by establishing and maintaining contact with all relevant internal functions and external agencies on behalf of the applicant. The case officer acted as both the initial point of contact and as a problem solver for the applicant, once the application had been received.

Hartlepool's one stop shop service encompassed all enquiries and applications, and they were all assigned a case officer. The

role of the case officer was then tailored to the needs of the case. The standard task was to write to each enquirer or applicant, following the weekly meeting at which all enquiries and applications were discussed. This letter summarised the outcome of discussion at the meeting. During the six month pilot, about 300 business enquiries and applications received this service.

The case officer role was extended for complex projects. 27 business enquiries and applications received during the pilot period required the case officer to organise meetings with external agencies, in addition to the routine weekly meeting. Cases typically required one or two meetings.

In Wycombe, the council's economic development officer acted as the co-ordinator for the one stop shop service. His role was to act as a point of contact for the applicant and to co-ordinate the authority's response. Half the cases handled by the case officer required him to set up meetings.

5.1 Introduction

Businesses and others undertaking new development can find it confusing when they have to deal with different council officers in relation to the different consents which they need. On occasion, they may be unsure about who to contact or may receive conflicting messages from those they speak to. The pilot authorities were therefore asked to offer all business applicants requiring more than one approval a case officer to guide them through the various consent processes and to ensure that these were co-ordinated in a helpful and efficient way. The case officer was asked to liaise with other approval-giving bodies where this was appropriate.

Many authorities already operate a case officer system. The Planning Charter Standards booklet, published jointly by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Welsh Office and the National Planning Forum, recommends that, once the council has registered a planning application, the confirmation letter should, 'name the person who will be looking after your case (the case officer) who will be able to tell you about the progress of your application.' The pilot projects took this approach one stage further by providing a case

officer who would act as a single contact point for business applicants in relation to the various different approvals.

The arrangements for providing a case officer in the pilot authorities are described in the box opposite. Authorities thinking of providing case officers need to address the following issues:

- at what point should case officers be allocated;
- what roles should they undertake;
- who should be allocated to this function;
- what training should they receive; and
- to whom should they be assigned.

These issues are discussed in turn below.

5.2 Deciding when to allocate the case officer

The case officer may be allocated to the case when the user first approaches the authority, in setting up pre-application discussions or when the first application is received.

The usual approach is to allocate case officers once formal applications have been submitted.

In this way, the authority avoids committing staff resources to informal enquiries which may not lead to concrete proposals. However, case officers are often allocated at the pre-application stage where meetings or extensive discussions are required. This provides continuity between the advice given at the pre-application stage and during the application process.

Hartlepool chose to allocate case officers to all enquirers at the point of first contact between the developer and the authority. All users then had the benefit of a named contact from the beginning of their projects. This seemed to be particularly useful for inexperienced users, such as small businesses.

5.3 The role of case officers

The broad purpose of a case officer system is to improve communication between the authority and the user, and to improve the co-ordination within the authority and possibly also with external agencies. The exact functions of the case officer will vary between authorities and between cases to reflect the different needs of particular developments.

The types of role which a case officer may undertake are as follows.

To act as the named point of contact within the authority for the user

Here, the officer is the first port of call for all enquiries which the developer may have. He or she should be able to provide information about the different consents needed, the order in which these should be obtained, likely decision dates and sources of detailed advice about individual consents. Authorities will need to decide the extent to which case officers take on the role of obtaining information for the applicant as opposed to providing him with contact points, and also where co-ordinated post-application meetings would be helpful.

To co-ordinate the authority's response to the application

The role here may include tracking the progress of the application, pressing for action where there are delays and arranging meetings (including Development Team meetings where a team is set up). The case officer will also need to try and ensure that the different consents obtained by the applicant relate to each other in the most effective way. The case officer will therefore need an overview of the different consents likely to be required and a clear understanding of what the developer is seeking to achieve.

To liaise with other agencies on the developer's behalf

Authorities will need to consider when such liaison offers significant benefits both to the processing of relevant applications and to the applicant. For example, on-site meetings between different agencies and the applicant can be helpful in arriving at practical solutions which meet all parties' needs.

> Brighton found that a key lesson of their one stop shop arrangements was the benefit of notifying external agencies at an early stage. Agencies were sent brief details of each application on a weekly basis. Potential problems could then be identified quickly and before resources had been spent meeting the applicant and processing the application.

It is important that case officers take positive steps to maintain their role as a provider of information and as an honest broker. They should not lose their neutrality and start to become an advocate for the developer. Once a case officer appears to be acting for the developer, the wider public, including objectors to particular schemes, are likely to lose confidence in the whole one stop shop approach.

5.4 Selecting case officers

Authorities will need to decide on the specialisms and seniority of

officers to be appointed as case officers.

For the most complex developments, the case officer may be one of the council's senior staff. Such projects are also likely to need more attention at the pre-application stage and to be allocated a case officer then. At this stage, the expertise and authority of senior staff will be needed to deal with questions of council policy and to establish basic principles. It may then be possible for cases to be handed to more junior staff, such as planning assistants, once the application has been received.

Case officers may be drawn from any discipline. However, it is common for them to come from either building control or development control, as these are the two most commonly required consents. They will then be able to provide detailed advice on their own consent regime as well as liaising with other officers within the council such as environmental health officers.

A variation is to switch the case officer role from a development control to a building control officer once construction begins. At this point, the lead agent on the developer's side is likely to switch from the architect to the builder or the construction company. In many ways, it makes sense to change the authority's contact person at that stage as well. While maintaining the same officer throughout has the advantage of providing continuity, changing to a building control officer provides more direct contact with relevant expertise and professional knowledge in the later stages of a project.

While these are the most common arrangements, some authorities have experimented with completely different approaches. In Wycombe, the co-ordinator for all one stop shop cases was an officer in the Economic Development Unit (EDU). The original intention had been for planning officers and building control officers to be case officers, switching from one to the other as the project developed. These plans changed when the authority realised that business applicants might find the EDU a more appropriate point of contact because the staff spoke their language, could offer assistance and advice on grants, relocation and business opportunities and could also provide continuity throughout a development.

The approach used by Wycombe has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the economic development officer was able to provide a service which was seen to be neutral and outside any particular professional interests. He could also provide advice about other business development opportunities and was someone with whom businesses, as opposed to architects or developers, were likely to be in contact. The disadvantages were that he needed initial

training in the various consent regimes, almost always had to seek the information required by the applicant from elsewhere and was taken away from his normal work by this additional task. His role was to put the applicant in touch with the relevant part of the authority, rather than to provide information directly.

A further consideration in selecting the case officer is availability. From the user's point of view, the benefits of the case officer system are lost if the case officer is difficult to contact and nobody else is able to help.

Finally, where a development brief has been prepared for a site, the authority will need to consider whether the officer in charge of that process should continue as the case officer when applications are submitted in response to the brief.

5.5 Training case officers

The case officer needs to be able to take an overview of the project, recognising when other professions and agencies need to be involved, and knowing who to contact. He or she may need to pass information on from them to the user. Customer service, communication and co-ordination skills are also required.

The amount and type of training will depend on the officer's professional background and experience. An economic development officer will need more training about approvals and consents than a development control or building control officer. In broad terms, case officers need knowledge of the functions of other professions and agencies, and an understanding of the limits of their role. Not only will this equip them for the job but it will reassure other specialist staff who will be concerned about the possibility of wrong advice being given to users.

In Wycombe, the economic development officer appointed as one stop shop co-ordinator had no experience of regulatory functions. Before the pilot started, he spent time with each service to gain an understanding of its role.

5.6 Deciding which projects should have a case officer

In deciding when to offer a case officer, authorities will wish to consider the following issues.

The nature of the consents likely to be needed

A case officer in the planning department may be able to deal with developments which require, for example, planning permission and listed building consent or conservation area consent. However, a one stop shop case officer may be helpful where both planning permission

and building control approval are necessary or where these consents need to be combined with others within the authority.

The complexity of the application

Wherever the detail of one consent is likely to affect the detail of another, there are likely to be benefits in having one officer with an overview of the development.

The nature of the applicant

Those least familiar with obtaining development-related consents, such as small businesses, are most likely to benefit from having access to a case officer.

In the pilot schemes, Brighton and Wycombe left the decision about having a one stop shop case officer to the user. In Wycombe, the support of the one stop shop co-ordinator was offered at the pre-application stage. Twenty per cent of business enquirers who were offered this service agreed to have their details forwarded to him and almost all of these took up the offer. In Brighton, the service was offered to all who made applications for business developments during the pilot and about a quarter accepted. Both new and experienced users felt there were benefits in having a case officer.

Those who did not offer users a choice saw the one stop shop procedures as the standard process for dealing with enquiries and applications. Each project then received the approach which its size and complexity seemed to demand. In Hartlepool, all business enquirers and applicants received a one stop shop service. Regular users of the Council's development services, including agents and architects, said that, had they been given a choice, they might have opted out because of fears that the additional service would create delay and complications. Instead, they found a number of benefits, particularly in the feedback given on their enquiries at an early stage.

Authorities which offered an optional service felt that it was inappropriate to impose a new approach on users, particularly agents, who might have reasons for preferring the established methods. There was also a practical concern that providing a one stop shop service to all users would be too expensive. Neither of these concerns appears to have been borne out in practice. Agents and other experienced users found the approach to be of benefit, providing the authority was sufficiently flexible in its response and did not impose rigid requirements. Authorities were also able to develop mechanisms which had relatively little impact on resource requirements and brought benefits to both the authority and the users.

5.7 The advantages of one stop shop case officers

Appointing case officers to oversee the approvals process on behalf of an individual applicant can deliver benefits to both the authority and the applicant. The advantages for the user may include:

- a simpler mechanism for obtaining information from the authority;
- better information about the progress of the various approvals and any further input which the applicant needs to make; and
- a better quality of decision-making with potential conflicts and information needs identified at an earlier stage.

The authority should benefit from:

- better relations with applicants;
- job satisfaction for the case officer, derived from seeing a project through from beginning to end and from providing a service appreciated by users;
- improved working relationships with other agencies, as a result of increased contact and awareness;
- staff development, through increased understanding of other functions within and outside the authority; and
- possibly, faster and more informed decision-making processes at all stages.

However, two important considerations should be borne in mind. First, authorities need to be careful to ensure that the case officer is not seen as a barrier between the applicant and the expert officers whom he may need to consult. There will be circumstances where direct contact between the applicant and an officer other than the case officer is the most efficient way of proceeding. Secondly, authorities need to be sensitive to the potential concerns of agents that case officers may take over the co-ordinating role which they play.

In Brighton, the average time from receipt of the application to a decision was less for projects receiving the case officer service than for those outside the one stop shop which did not have a case officer. The periods were 9 weeks for those with a case officer, and 11 weeks for those without. Both groups contained roughly equal proportions of minor and major applications. The difference is attributed to the roles of the case officer in co-ordination and communication.

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CHAPTER 6

Development Teams

6.1 Introduction

The phrase 'Development Team Approach' is often used to describe the co-ordinated services offered by local authorities and other agencies to developers and, as such, is an alternative term for the type of one stop shop services described in this good practice guide. The term, 'Development Team' tends to have a narrower meaning and is used to describe a project team established for a particular development.

The pilot project did not include any specific requirements for the setting up of development teams. However, since many authorities use this approach, the following observations may be helpful.

A development team is:

- a group of officers who come together to work on a particular development;
- a formal but temporary arrangement, lasting for part or the whole period of development;
- distinct from the one-off meetings which may be called by a case officer; and
- a feature of many authorities' one stop shop services.

6.2 The purpose of a development team

The functions of a development team include:

- clarifying the authority's policy on the planned development;
- ensuring that the authority takes a unified and consistent approach including informing relevant councillors about the planned development and its implications for the area;
- resolving any potential conflicts between consent regimes; and
- co-ordinating the work of different parts of the authority and other agencies in a cost-effective way.

6.3 Deciding which projects should have a development team

Development teams are used infrequently. This approach is reserved for the most complex projects which are likely to require discussion and co-ordination over a significant period.

> Bexley, for example, had 10 development teams in existence over a six month period. During the same period, the authority received over 350 applications for business development.

> Wycombe cites the example of a team brought together to work on the development of a large housing estate in an area with historic buildings. The team involved development control and conservation working together throughout the project. Highways and the water authority were also involved. Meetings were held when necessary rather than to a regular schedule. Officers attended only those meetings which needed their particular input.

6.4 Deciding when the development team should be established

For the largest and most complex projects, there are advantages in setting up the team during the pre-application stage. Many of the policy issues can be settled at this stage and possible conflicts between consent regimes addressed.

> Hounslow sets up a development team as quickly as possible when it receives enquiries that appear to require one. An example might be a proposal for a superstore or factory. Meetings are arranged the day the enquiry is received, to take place within a few days. They involve a range of local authority functions, with other agencies called in later.

6.5 Selecting the members of the development team

Teams may involve members of external agencies and, where engaged, approved inspectors as well as officers of the authority. It is likely that these representatives of outside bodies will be invited to particular meetings, rather than be full members of the team.

Where large and expensive developments are being planned, the developers and their representatives may expect to see senior staff in the team. However, their involvement may need to be limited because of the cost of their time and the demands upon it.

The objective is to find a team approach which:

- includes staff who are sufficiently senior to make the required decisions;
- has the people it needs, when they are needed; and
- does not waste time by involving people when they are not needed

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CHAPTER 7

Co-ordinated Enforcement

> ## Co-ordinated Enforcement Visits in the Pilot Authorities
>
> In Bexley, Brighton and Hartlepool, planning officers and building control officers on site visits noted any possible contraventions of regulations in each other's areas of expertise and informed their colleagues, who would then visit.
>
> In Bexley, joint visits were sometimes made by building control officers and the fire authority to check on compliance within their overlapping areas of responsibility. The two agencies also liaised over contraventions and possible enforcements.
>
> In Hartlepool, all instances of possible forthcoming enforcements were reported to the weekly one stop shop meeting. This enabled the authority to come to a corporate view about what action, if any, was needed. Hartlepool found that this approach sometimes avoided the need for enforcement by removing confusion or contradictions between the advice given by different parts of the authority, such as social services and development control.

7.1 Introduction

The business community has expressed concern about the amount of companies' senior management time which can be taken up when different enforcement authorities pay separate visits to a business. These officers may ask similar questions and be shown similar parts of the premises. Businesses have suggested that it would be more efficient for everyone if these visits were co-ordinated. The pilot authorities were therefore asked to make arrangements to co-ordinate appropriate enforcement visits by both the local authority and other relevant external agencies relating to the design and construction of development.

The steps taken by the pilot authorities towards co-ordinating enforcement are described in the box opposite. Although the pilot authorities accepted that co-ordinated enforcement was a good idea in theory, in practice they found it difficult to take more than the limited steps described. The main reasons for this are that:

- officers are unable to check things outside their own remit. To do so would require extensive training and specialist knowledge. Authorities feared that proceeding without this knowledge would damage the authority's credibility and the relationship with developers; and
- the legislation and regulations which govern the different regimes operate to different timescales. There are different time limits for enforcement action. This can make it impractical to organise joint visits.

7.2 The benefits of a co-ordinated approach

The arrangements whereby building control and planning officers note any possible contraventions of each other's requirements are helpful in making efficient use of the time spent on site visits. Joint visits between agencies which have closely related interests, such as building control and the fire authority, can also be helpful as it is often easier to explore and resolve problems together on site.

Hartlepool has developed a mechanism for discussing possible enforcement actions across the whole authority. Some external agencies are also party to these discussions. This helps the authority to come to a corporate view about the need for enforcement, rather than pursuing separate approaches.

There will be situations where it is more appropriate to take enforcement action under one consent regime than under another. Co-ordinating the enforcement process can avoid inappropriate and, in some cases, complex and costly action being taken by officers unaware of other potentially more straightforward options which may be available to them.

7.3 The general impact of the one stop shop approach on enforcement

The pilot authorities put the emphasis on improving the earlier stages of the process and believe that this is likely to reduce the time and money spent on enforcement. Attempts to resolve difficulties and provide information at the early stages of a project can mean that fewer changes are needed once detailed plans are made or construction begun and that, ultimately, the need for enforcement action can be avoided altogether.

Authorities were aware, however, that much of their enforcement action was concerned with developments which had not obtained the required approval. The one stop shop approach cannot solve the problem of people failing to apply for, or even to ask about, the relevant consents. Authorities also noted that most enforcement action was concerned with householder development which in some cases fell outside the one stop shop pilot projects.

A one stop shop approach is also likely to reduce the scope for people to be given conflicting information by different parts of an authority and for a referral to the ombudsman to be made as a result. This will result in savings in officer time which would otherwise have been spent on such an ombudsman enquiry.

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CHAPTER 8

Publicity and User Feedback

Publicity for the Four Pilot One Stop Shops

Bexley publicised the pilot through articles in the authority's magazine for residents. They also produced a leaflet for enquirers. The one stop shop service, and especially the computer database of information about consents, was publicised to developers, agents and businesses through the local Business Partnership and the Considerate Builders Scheme.

Brighton advertised the one stop shop service in the authority's newspaper and other council publications. They also issued a local press release. A one stop shop leaflet was sent to developers, architects and agents. Seminars at which external agencies and authority staff informed each other about their work were part of the preparation for the service. Brighton routinely mentioned its information and advice centre in standard letters to the public.

Hartlepool made a leaflet about the one stop shop approach available at all local authority offices and through some other agencies, such as Business Link.

Wycombe sent a leaflet about the one stop shop pilot service to all businesses in the district. There was also a presentation to the

> Business Connect Club, a forum for liaison between business and the authority. The one stop shop was also mentioned in other publications produced by the Directorate of Planning, Transport and Development.

8.1 Introduction

The chapters so far have considered the individual elements which the pilot authorities included in their one stop shop approach to development-related approvals. This chapter looks at two aspects of the service as a whole, publicity and user feedback. The pilot authorities were asked to undertake publicity to raise awareness of the one stop shop facilities which they were providing and to introduce arrangements to facilitate feedback from users.

8.2 Publicising the one stop shop services

The ways in which the four pilot authorities publicised their one stop shop services are described in the box opposite. Authorities wanting to publicise their one stop shop service need to consider the following issues:

- the most appropriate mechanisms for reaching potential users of the one stop shop;
- the kind of information to include in their publicity material; and
- how frequently to issue new publicity material.

These issues are addressed in turn below.

8.3 Publicity mechanisms

The choice of publicity methods will be determined by the target audience and the message to be conveyed. In two pilot authorities, Wycombe and Brighton, the one stop shop service was announced as a new and optional service. They publicised this widely to potential users in the business community. Bexley and Hartlepool, in contrast, saw their one stop shop as an overall approach to be applied to all applications. As a change in internal procedures, this was thought to require less initial publicity. However, potential applicants who approached the authority needed to be given information about how the new arrangements would operate.

In deciding how to publicise their one stop shop service, authorities need to identify the main potential users of their service. Business users may be reached through business networks, partnerships, established programmes of seminars and forums, and chambers of commerce. Some authorities have also used direct mail to businesses.

Leaflets available in council offices and public places such as libraries as well as coverage in local newspapers may well be the best way to reach the wider public, if the one stop shop service also applies to them.

Authorities need to ensure that the council's own officers and relevant staff in external consent-giving bodies are aware of the one stop shop and how it affects the way they do their work. If they need to refer callers to a single advice point, staff need to have ready access to the relevant phone number (see Chapter 3 on Initial Information and Advice).

> In Wycombe, information about the one stop shop arrangements was cascaded down to staff via a series of management meetings. It was discussed by the Council's Heads of Directorate at their Chief Officer Group meeting, within the Planning Directorate at Directorate Management Team meetings, at Divisional Manager level and at team meetings held by assistant managers with their staff. The case officer attended the various team meetings to provide information directly to the more junior staff who were generally the first port of call for enquiries. Individual one stop shop cases were also discussed at the team meetings to ensure a fully co-ordinated approach.

Councillors will have been involved in deciding to set up the one stop shop service. They should also be sent information about the arrangements introduced. This will enable them to direct their constituents to the correct enquiry points and also help the councillors themselves to obtain information more readily.

8.4 Deciding which information to include in publicity material

Depending on the service they offer, authorities will wish to consider including the following information in their publicity material:

- who can use the one stop shop service;
- what facilities it offers to users and where and how to gain access to these;
- how the one stop shop service operates and what to expect;
- what the objectives of the service are, whether there are specific quality targets and how to complain if things go wrong.

Obtaining User Feedback in the Pilot Authorities

Bexley issued a customer questionnaire with every building control decision which was sent out and published the results in the Bexley Magazine and through a building control newsletter.

Brighton provided evaluation forms to users of its information and advice centre to be completed on the spot or sent back by freepost. It also organised a telephone survey of a small sample of applicants, half of whom had used the one stop shop. The survey also included a number of staff from external agencies involved in giving consents.

Hartlepool had several in-built feedback mechanisms for service users and a sample of one stop shop users was interviewed directly in relation to this initiative.

Wycombe discussed the one stop shop with its existing customer panels for planning and building control. The ten members of each panel were regular users of the services.

They were influential, for example, in the decision to locate the one stop shop co-ordinator in the economic development unit. Wycombe also included the one stop shop in its programme of lunchtime and early evening seminars held to explain forthcoming changes in legislation or services. This provided another opportunity for feedback.

8.5 Updating and reissuing publicity material

Authorities will need to consider how to remind potential users of the one stop shop service of its existence on a regular basis. Publicity is not a one-off event. As with all information, those who receive it are only likely to absorb or remember it if it seems to be relevant to them at the time. New publicity will also need to be given if new services are added or contact details change.

8.6 User feedback in the pilot authorities

Steps taken by the pilot authorities to obtain user feedback on their one stop shop services are described in the box opposite. Authorities wanting to obtain user feedback on their one stop shop service need to address the following issues:

- what feedback mechanisms to use; and
- the importance of acting on feedback.

8.7 Feedback mechanisms

Authorities need simple but formal and reliable methods of obtaining feedback from users. Informal methods may be useful in identifying possible areas of concern but are inadequate on their own. There is a danger of relying on anecdotes and impressions which are unlikely to give the full picture or to cover all types of users.

Relying on complaints systems to highlight problems is also not enough. Regular users may be reluctant to complain about a service which they think is unsatisfactory, because they know they will be working with the officers concerned again in the future. The views of those who are content with the service will also not be picked up.

What is needed therefore are more formal consultation exercises. If these are well designed and carried out, they can provide surprising insights into the delivery of the service, from the users' point of view. They can include questionnaires and meetings. Questionnaires are more effective when sent as a matter of routine at particular stages in projects so that the developer has recent experience on which to comment. Surveys tend to receive a much lower response.

Telephone surveys and meetings can explore views in more depth. Over time, a panel can develop a dialogue with the authority. Panel members' commitment will be secured if they see the authority acting on the discussions.

Whatever method is used, steps must be taken to assure respondents of confidentiality. Where this is not possible, regular users will need reassurance that the authority will not be unhelpful at their next contact if they make critical comments.

> Hounslow issues a questionnaire to users of building control whenever a job is completed. This covers aspects of the service such as ease of contact, helpfulness, speed of dealing with enquiries, response time on applications, site visits, fees and value for money. Hounslow also gives the site owner a comment card after the final inspection.

Doncaster has an annual meeting with local developers and agents to review the year and the service provided by the local authority. Technical workshops provide developers with information and are also a source of feedback. In mid 1996, the service started sending questionnaires to users at two stages in the process. When users request application forms, they are asked about how they approached the authority, the advice they received, how useful it was, their knowledge of the pre-application service and whether they use an agent. When they receive the notice of decision, they are asked about the quality of the service they received.

Knowsley has a permanent site development management team which is responsible for providing a user-friendly, comprehensive and co-ordinated service to developers from the feasibility stage to completion of a project. The team was set up as a direct result of discussions with developers, who told the authority that they found it frustrating and time consuming to deal with so many officers in different disciplines. Knowsley decided that to attract and keep development in the borough, it had to provide a co-ordinated service and continuity of contact.

In deciding what questions to ask users, authorities need to be aware that different users will have different requirements and priorities. Authorities need to understand this if they are to maximise user satisfaction.

Authorities may also need to give thought to the timing of surveys. Brighton issued its one stop shop questionnaire just after the council had undergone a major reorganisation to become a unitary authority. Respondents then focused on the impact of reorganisation rather than the effectiveness of the pilot one stop shop arrangements.

Regular consultation will enable the authority to monitor trends in user satisfaction and to assess the impact of any changes it has made.

Authorities also need to consider the role of their own staff in providing feedback. For example, the staff running the initial advice

service will have views on what further information the authority could make available and the difficulties which the public are experiencing in understanding particular controls.

8.8 Acting on feedback

Users will become cynical if they are asked to comment on services and nothing appears to change as a result. Authorities may wish to analyse the outcome of user feedback in a report to the relevant council committee and to identify actions to be taken as a result. These might then be explained in future publicity material.

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