SOUTH THAMES GATEWAY BUILDING CONTROL JOINT COMMITTEE

27 SEPTEMBER 2011

SOUTH THAMES GATEWAY BUILDING CONTROL CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY

Report from: Janine Boughton, Head of Administration, South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership

Summary

This report seeks to inform Members of customer opinion on the level of service provided by the partnership.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 The Joint Committee needs to be advised of customer perception of service delivery and expectations.

2. Background

2.1 Obtaining feedback from customers on performance has always proved difficult with a variety of approaches tried. The survey conducted by administration took place over a one week period and endeavoured to acquire feedback on the services we provide and what we may provide in the future from all customers who contacted the service during that time.

3. Summary

3.1 Initially the survey was to take place over a two week period, however, by half way through the first week it became evident that we were reaching repeat callers. Due to the nature of our service generally we would deal with the same customers for a period of time to the conclusion of their development.

3.2 With developments taking up to and over a year to conclude the survey scheduled for six months time has been deferred to next financial year. This will enable a different group of customers to provide feedback and where customers work is still ongoing a more prolonged experience result can be obtained.

3.3 The survey was conducted by the administration team within building control in the week commencing 6 June 2011. The information was procured by telephone, face-to-face in reception and by direct mailing. A total of 383 individuals were made contact with of which 172 responded (45% response rate). Anyone who contacted the office during that week was asked to participate with the exclusion of our partner architects/designers and solicitors who were all contacted through the mail. The respondents covered the three authority areas to which we provide the building control service (Gravesham, Medway and Swale).

3.4 The survey consisted of two parts; those that had used the service before and those for which this was their first contact. This was done to speed up the time taken to carry out the survey in order not to delay our customers for too long. The first two questions on each survey were identical with the subsequent questions asking further experience specific questions.

3.5 Of the processes involved with delivering the service, communication and speed of delivery of the service were considered by all groups as important with scores reaching between 81% and 100%.

3.6 An area we have focused on since the beginning of the Partnership is that of consistency of interpretation in both plan checking and site inspection. It was pleasing, therefore, to see this scored highly amongst the professional groups.

3.7 Results from owners reflected that they are not kept well informed by their architects or agents. This is an area we feel we could improve the service for customers by engaging with the owner to explain more fully the Building Control process, ensuring this project reaches a satisfactory conclusion.

3.8 Communication is essential to the delivery of our service and the partnership scored high in this with 88% to 100% across all groups finding it extremely easy to contact the service to deal with their enquiry. The knowledge of officers is crucial in delivering a responsive and efficient service and this ability to deal effectively has been reflected in survey results with 93% to 100% considering the knowledge of officers to be good to excellent. Even though there may be differences of opinion on site 79% of developers also agreed with our commitment to better communication and sharing knowledge. We see this as an opportunity for further improvement of our site inspection service through the development of guidance sheets which could be used on site to resolve technical issues.

3.9 All groups considered the tracking of applications online was important and this was extended further with both owners and solicitors regarding the ability to search the history of properties as essential.

3.10 In order to evaluate whether we are providing fair access to our service customers were asked to complete an equality and diversity form. This was carried out specifically at the end of the main survey so as not to discourage customers from providing feedback as all attempts to acquire this information in previous reviews had resulted in abusive responses or no response at all.

3.11 The response to this part of the survey was better than expected with 128 of the 172 who responded to our building control survey completing or partly completing the Equality and Diversity Monitoring survey, a 74% response.

3.12 Our customer profile has shown that males form the largest group at 79% and that this group is aged between 35 and 64 (the middle three age bands (35-44, 45-54 and 55-64 all scored between 25% and 27%). This group mainly consists of married, white British men who hold a Christian belief. With White British making up 82% of the males surveyed, Asian or Asian British formed the next highest male group but at a low 7%.

3.13 The majority of females that contacted the service were aged between 45 and 54, white British and married. There was slight variance with regard to religion with only 65% being Christians and 24% split between Agnostic and Atheism.

3.14 Contact was received from the other all racial/ethic groups listed on Medway's Equality & Diversity Monitoring form though only between 1% and 5% overall.

4. Financial and Legal Implications

4.1 Though there are no direct financial or legal implications in this report, in order to advance the service to meet customer expectations, investment would be required in IT. A separate IT Strategy report will be presented to Joint Committee during 2011/12.

5. Risk Management

5.1 There are no risks within this report.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

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Background papers

Customer Service Survey June 2011

Appendix 1

South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership

Customer Service Survey June 2011

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1 Executive Summary

This purpose of this report is to acquire feedback from our customers on the services we provide and what we may provide in the future. Initially the survey was to take place over a two week period, however, by half way through the first week it became evident that we were getting repeat callers. Due to the nature of our service generally we would deal with the same customers for a period of time to the conclusion of their development. With developments taking up to and over a year to conclude the survey scheduled for six months time has been deferred to next financial year to enable a different group of customers to provide feedback and where customers work is still ongoing a more prolonged experience result can be obtained.

Though the partnership is delivering a good service there are areas for improvement. The contact and information that owners receive from their respective agents or builder's does not always reflect the full impact of the building control process. More informative owner packs will be developed to ensure owners are fully aware of the service we provide and the part they need to play in the successful completion of their project.

2 Methodology

The survey was conducted by the administration team within building control in the week commencing 6 June 2011. The information was procured by telephone, face-to-face in reception and by direct mailing. A total of 383 individuals were made contact with of which 172 responded (45% response rate). Anyone who contacted the office during that week was asked to participate with the exclusion of our partner architects/designers and solicitors who were all contacted through the mail. The respondents covered the three authority areas to which we provide the building control service (Gravesham, Medway and Swale).

3 Survey Results

The survey was split into two parts; those that had used the service before (Yes survey) and those for which this was their first contact (No survey) – Question 1 on the survey. This was done to speed up the time taken to carry out the survey in order not to delay our customers for too long. The first two questions on each survey are identical with the subsequent four on the Yes survey and two on the No survey asking further experience specific questions.

3.1 Q1: Have you used our service(s) before?

All respondents were asked all questions dependent on whether they had prior experience of our service or not. Of those who participated 70% had used the service before with 30% as first time customers.

3.2 Q2: What role best describes you in connection with our service?

Of those whose contact with our service was not the first occurrence; architects and builders were the greater users while when owners contact us it is generally their first experience. Overall 50% of communication is with architects/builders and 32% is direct with the owner.

Who used the service	Yes	No	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Architect	28	4	20
Builder	36	18	30
Developer	9	6	8
Owner	18	65	32
Other…	10	8	9
Base: all respondents (n=171)			

3.3 Q3: What part of the service are you looking to use?

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of services provided. Of those asked 171 chose to answer this question. Irrespective of whether they were a first time user or not the vast majority of callers were making enquiries of the building control service. Though there was a response of 1% having used our consultancy only, 5% had used it in combination with our building control service.

Service used	Yes	No	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Building Control	90	98	92

Service used	Yes	No	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Consultancy	1	0	1
Public Protection	1	0	1
Public Information	2	2	2
Building Control & Consultancy	7	0	5
Base: all respondents (n=171)			

3.4 Q4a: How did you hear of our service(s)?

For those respondents who this was their first contact with our service, 98% answered this question. Council departments and websites provide the most effective means of reaching customers with 58% of respondents utilising these means.

Information supplied by	No
% of respondents within survey	
Agent / Architect	18
STG website	6
Council website	14
Planning lists	6
Council department	38
Other	18
Base: all respondents (n=50)	

3.5 Q4b: How frequently did you make use of the service(s)?

It is not only important in knowing how often people contact the service but also knowing how often a specific group makes contact as this assists with establishing how much effect this group has on service delivery.

Frequency / Group	Once	1 per month	>1 per month	Once in 2 months	Twice year	Other
	% of respondents within survey					
Architect	1	5	11	3	2	6
Builder	3	5	6	4	5	10
Developer	2	1	2	1	2	3
Owner	7	3	2	1	3	3
Other…	0	1	3	2	3	1
Base: all respondents (n=116)						

3.6 Q5a: Looking at the contact you have just experienced, how would you rate the following:

Respondents were asked whether they had used the service before, those that had not were asked to comment on their initial experience. There was a 96% overall satisfaction where respondents found contact Good to Excellent, with over 98% finding contacting the service Good to Excellent and their requests dealt with professionally with good subject knowledge.

Contact Experience	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good	Excellent
	% of respondents within survey				
Ease of contacting	0	2	12	25	61
Responsiveness to enquiry	2	0	8	24	66
Professionalism dealing with you	0	2	4	25	69
Subject knowledge	2	0	8	30	60
Level of satisfaction	2	2	10	18	68

Contact Experience	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good	Excellent
	% of respondents within survey				
Base: all respondents (n=from 48 to 51)					

3.7 Q5b: Looking at your past experience of our service(s), how would you rate the following:

Respondents who had used the service before were asked to rate their experience from a list of service delivery topics. 97% of respondents felt contacting staff was Good to Excellent and were happy with their knowledge and response. Of the respondents who had experience of the plan checking service 94% felt is was Good to Excellent.

Contact Experience	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good	Excellent
	% of respondents within survey				
Ease of contacting	1	2	14	33	50
Responsiveness to enquiry	0	3	10	41	46
Professionalism dealing with you	2	2	8	30	58
Knowledge of officers	0	1	11	37	51
Speed of plan checking	2	4	12	32	50
Satisfaction with site inspections	0	2	17	39	42
Consistent interpretation	0	4	17	39	40
Level of satisfaction	1	2	10	40	47
Base: all respondents (n=from 81 to 118)					

3.8 Q6: How important are the following characteristics when seeking a service provider?

Communication and Speed of delivery featured as the most important with 100% of respondents rating it as Important to Essential. 90% felt that Price was Important to Essential. Impartiality of the service was rated extremely high with 97% respondents rating it as Important to Essential. Price was considered important when determining service provider with 81% of Architects and Owners and 100% of Developers rating this Important to Essential.

Service provider	Not Very	Moderate	Important	Very Important	Essential
	% of respondents within survey				
Responsiveness / speed of delivery	0	0	11	39	50
Communication	0	0	7	33	60
Technical support	0	2	10	35	53
Knowledge of officers	0	0	7	28	65
Price	4	6	41	28	21
Impartial service	0	3	16	35	46
Base: all respondents (n=109)					

3.9 Q7: Looking to the future how would you rate the importance of these services?

To look to deliver parts of the service differently respondents were asked as to how beneficial these changes would be for them. 70% of respondents felt tracking application online was Important to Essential and 72% felt the same importance with searching building histories. Upgrades in IT are essential in enabling the delivery of these services to meet the requirements of customers in times.

Future services	Not Very	Moderate	Important	Very Important	Essential
	% of respondents within survey				
Online tracking of applications	16	14	17	29	24
Online building history searches	12	16	17	31	24
Return of Approved Drawings in electronic format	27	19	12	26	16
Technical guidance sheets	7	9	17	39	28
Base: all respondents (n=from 97 to 110)					

3.10 Q8: Looking at site inspections only, how would you rate your experience?

Site inspections form a large part of the work carried out within the service whether this is for developments being constructed, unauthorised works, demolitions or dangerous structures. Of those that had dealings with site inspections 97% - 98% felt the service given was Good to Excellent in all categories. This is a key area of work which customers rely heavily on to ensure satisfactory outcomes for their development.

Site inspections	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good	Excellent
	% of respondents within survey				
Carried out on date requested	0	1	7	38	54
Clear guidance given	1	1	6	39	53
Consistent interpretation	1	2	13	38	46
Working with customer to find solution	1	1	7	42	49
Base: all respondents (n=from 90 to 93)					

4 Equality and Diversity

In order to evaluate whether we are providing fair access to our service following the customer service survey anyone who contact the service or was sent a questionnaire were also asked whether they would answer monitoring questions. Of the 172 who responded to our building control survey 128 (74%) completed or partly completed the Equality and Diversity Monitoring survey.

4.1 Q10: What is your gender?

Of the 128 respondents who agreed to take part in this section of the survey answered this question. Males formed the largest group with 79% of contact being from them.

4.2 Q11: Which category best suits your age range?

The majority of our contacts fell between 45 – 54 age range.

Age range	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65 or above	No answer
	% of respondents within survey						
Male	1	5	25	27	26	13	3
Female	4	8	19	57	12	0	0
Overall	2	6	24	33	23	10	2
Base: all respondents (n=127)							

4.3 Q12: Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person / or enquiring on behalf of a disabled person?

The main enquiries were related to non-disabled works with an overall of 92% responding as No.

Disabled enquiry	Yes	No	No answer
	% of respondents within survey		
Male	3	93	4
Female	7	93	0
Overall	4	93	3

Disabled enquiry	Yes	No	No answer
	% of respondents within survey		
Base: all respondents (n=127)			

4.4 Q13: Please choose one option only (the one that best describes your status)

The majority of respondents contacting the service overall and for male and females separately were Married or in a Civil Partnership.

Marital / Civil Partnership status	Male	Female	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Married or in civil partnership	71	59	69
Divorced or dissolved civil partnership	7	11	8
Separated, but still legally married or in a civil partnership	4	0	3
Widow or widower	3	0	2
Surviving partner from a civil partnership	2	0	2
Living with someone	4	23	8
Single	5	7	5
Prefer not to answer	4	0	3
Base: all respondents (n=128)			

4.5 Q14: Please choose one option only (the one that best describes your racial/ethnic origin)

Though White British at 84% was the largest group which contacted our service during the survey, 14% covered a variety of other groups.

Race and ethnicity	Male	Female	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
White British	82	89	84
Multi-Ethnic	5	0	1
White Irish	1	0	1
White & Black African	1	0	1
Any other White background	1	3	2
Asian or Asian British	7	4	5
Indian	2	0	4
Caribbean	0	4	1
Any other Ethnic background	1	0	1
Base: all respondents (n=128)			

4.6 Q15a: Do you belong to a particular religion or hold a particular belief?

The majority of respondents were comfortable in answering this question with only 12% not comfortable in answering.

Belief	Yes	No	No answer
	% of respondents within survey		
Male	51	34	15
Female	52	48	0
Overall	52	37	12
Base: all respondents (n=128			

4.7 Q15b: If Yes to Q15a, which option best describes your religion or belief?

Of the eleven options available only seven where indicated by respondents. Christianity was the largest group at 70% overall.

Belief	Male	Female	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Agnostic	10	12	10
Hindu	0	0	0
Atheism	8	12	9
Sikh	9	6	9
Muslim	2	0	1
Christianity (all denominations)	71	65	70
Other religion / belief	0	5	1
Base: all respondents (n=79)			

4.8 Q16: Please choose one option which best describes your sexuality

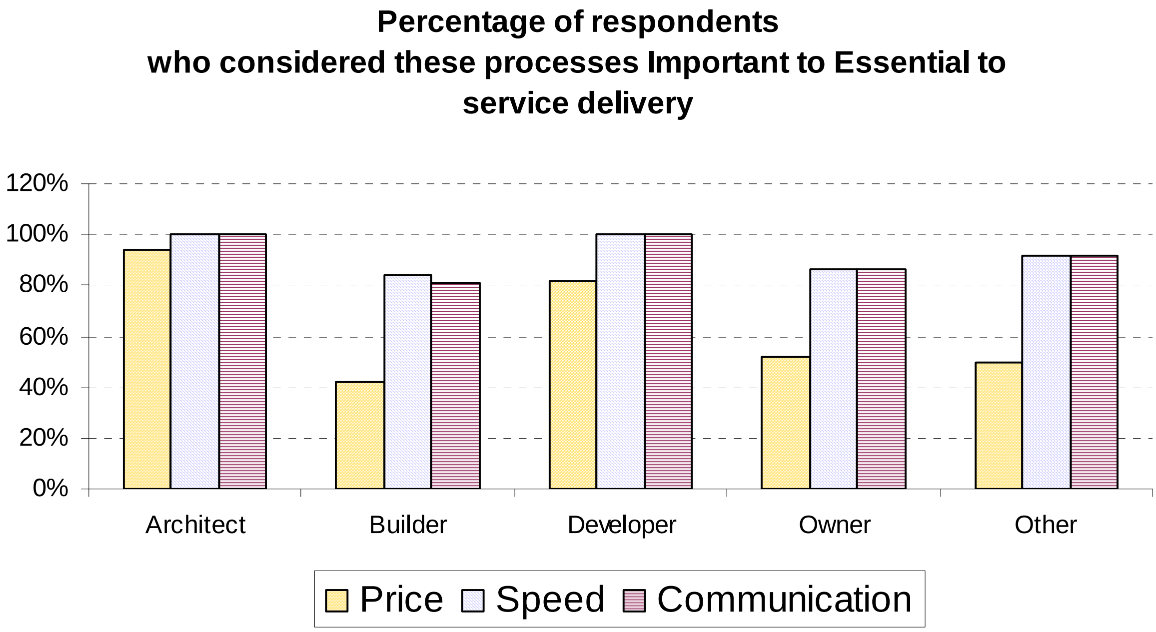
Of the 118 respondents who chose to answer this question none selected any other category other than Heterosexual / Straight.

Belief	Male	Female	Overall
	% of respondents within survey		
Bisexual	0	0	0
Gay woman / Lesbian	0	0	0
Gay man	0	0	0
Heterosexual / Straight	82	100	86
Prefer not to answer	18	0	14
Base: all respondents (n=118)			

5 Summary of Findings

5.1 Processes required for service delivery

Though builders formed the largest contact group only 42% considered price important to essential compared to 94% of architects who formed the second highest contact group. Both speed of delivery and communication were considered important by all groups of respondents with scores between 81% and 100%.

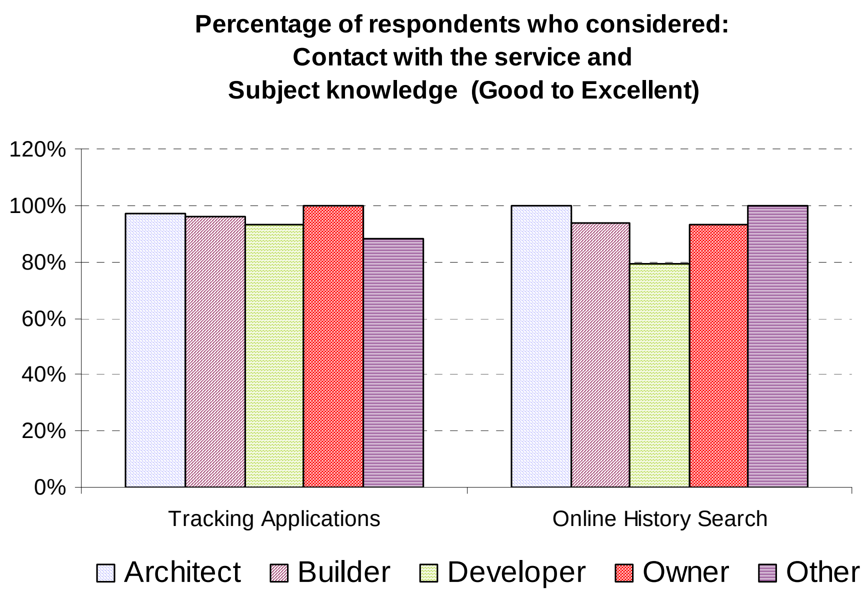


5.2 Service Delivery

89% of architects considered the quality of plan checking and consistent interpretation was Good to Excellent. Owners responses caused some concern as they seem to display a poor level of service, however, on investigation with the respondents it was revealed that their comments reflected the combined impact of all those concerned in the project and a lack of understanding of the process meant that they could not directly comment on specific functions.

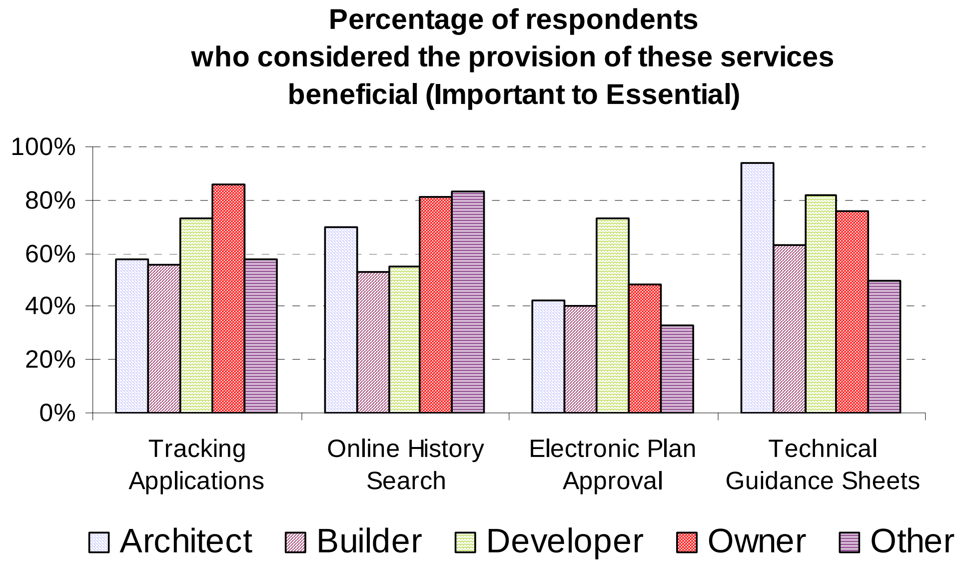
5.3 Experience of the service

Communication is essential to the delivery of the service and the partnership scored high in this with 88% to 100% across all groups finding it extremely easy to contact the partnership. The knowledge of all officers is crucial in delivering a responsive and efficient service and this ability to deal effectively has been reflected in the survey with 93% to 100% considering this to be Good to Excellent.



5.4 Provision of Future Services

Looking to the future for service delivery, all groups felt that tracking applications online was important, particularly owners with 86% scoring this high. Owners and others (eg solicitors) also felt that online property history searches were essential. Technical guidance sheets were considered important by all groups.



6 Conclusions

Though this service only provides a snapshot of the opinion, it is clear that the partnership is providing a good service but there are distinct areas for improvement and recognition of what the customer believes is most important.

While is universally agreed that price plays a big part in how customers choose their service provider from the results of the survey it is not the most important. Communication and speed of delivery are felt by all groups of respondents as the key qualities with them scoring between 81% to 100% on this question.

Though architects and developers felt the plan checking service provided was good, the other groups of respondents (including owners) believed the service they experienced was less than good with only 20% to 44% scoring this as good to excellent. Experience of site inspections clearly is different for owners than for the other groups of respondents as 67% felt the service experience was less than good. A similar response was also shown on consistent interpretation with 70% of owners feeling this was poor.

Looking to future delivery of the service all respondent groups felt that tracking their applications online, searching the history of properties online and provision of technical guidance sheets for problem resolution or legislative changes were all important. Developers were the only group who felt receiving their approved drawings back in electronic format would be beneficial with the other groups scoring less than 50%.