

Case Study

North Dorset District Council

Transforming Development Control Services using Lean Systems Thinking

In brief:

- The Development Control service within North Dorset District Council is the largest single unit in a small council and it, therefore, acts as a key influence of the public's perception and the council's reputation.
- Whilst it had improved the speed of performance and delivery of affordable housing, it had also come under criticism for the quality of its web services, its approach to the progression of planning applications and timely enforcement, as well as its customer service. In addition to these factors, the introduction of the Localism Act required new approaches to delivering more responsive planning services.
- Alexander were selected as the preferred partner to support them and train an internal team on how to use Lean Systems Thinking methodologies to build internal capacity.
- Among the issues that were identified were the quality of applications, insufficient use of ICT systems, lack of performance management of enforcement cases and a lack of customer focus. The redesign of the above will lead to increased customer satisfaction, more effective use of resources and team working across the whole service and wider within the Council.
- As a result, around 3,500 hours of staff resource and £40k expenditure were identified as potential benefits.



Think with us ...

If you're reading this, then you're probably just like us, always curious about new ways of working.

The aim of our case studies is to promote sharing of knowledge and from it **thought leadership**. We hope this study helps you think through and explore some of the issues we now face.

Your questions and feedback are welcome.

Call us on 023 8022 5020 or email ciara.turner@alexander-ecc.com.

Development Control is the largest service remaining in-house within North Dorset District Council and, therefore, accounts for a significant portion of budget, as well as having a key influence over the public's perception of the council.

Background situation

The service has come in for criticism on its approach with progressing of applications and customer service; applicants complained about having to chase for progress and not being helped to understand the decision process. The service has been struggling to meet the local target of 77% of minor applications dealt within 56 days. A customer survey undertaken showed that only 66% thought that they were given the help and advice they needed to submit the application correctly and that only 61% felt that they were able to follow the progress of the application.

Their approach to service review

Alexander were commissioned to undertake a Lean Systems review to find and implement performance improvement opportunities. These would address the known issues and enable the move from a Development Control to a Development Management ethos through an improved understanding of process requirements and increased partnership working. These improvements needed to strike a balance between improved efficiency and a more business-like approach, whilst ensuring the quality of development and the experience of the key customers – applicants, agents and the Town and Parish Councils.

Specifically the key objectives were;

- Quicker determination of applications/cases within existing resource.
- Increased capacity through reduced avoidable contact and streamlined processes supported by an increase in the proportion of valid applications received.
- Improved customer experience and reputation of the Council, enhanced by providing a quicker, more transparent and consistent service to customers.
- Better team working and improved morale.
- To find opportunities to reduce the effort required to process planning applications whilst enabling good development and outcomes for the community.
- Reduce the impact of the current structure on the process flow.
- Identify opportunities to contribute to saving requirements of £65k to meet budget pressures.
- Work closer in partnership with local communities and developers to support good development and to enable the service to embrace the localism agenda.

Working with Alexander

A Vision was developed for the Service working with the Chief Executive, key Councillors and the Head of the Service. This described the desired future state alongside clear objectives that would shape the direction of redesign.

A core team of officers from within the service were selected and trained in Lean Systems thinking to build internal capability. Through a series of workshops, research and data gathering the team analysed the planning application, complaint (enforcement) handling and committee co-ordination processes and proposed a number of key areas for improvement.

All members of the service were kept informed of progress through weekly feedback sessions and team briefings to share the insight and findings. This helped everyone to understand what was happening and allowed them to contribute with challenges or ideas at each stage of the process.

The As Is findings

The key findings from the Analysis phase were;

1. Team structure and quality of applications made the receipt process lengthy. The application took an average of 16 days from receipt to reach the Planning Officer. 69% of applications were deemed invalid with over 2/3rds of relevant applications missing a key report or information.

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As one of the country's smallest councils, it is particularly important for us to get the maximum output from the limited resources available to us. Development Services were given a very challenging target to improve efficiency and accessibility to our customers, whilst delivering significant revenue savings. I was very impressed by the high degree of engagement, innovation and openness shown by our staff who have embraced the opportunities for service improvement the Lean review presented.

Cllr David Walsh,
Cabinet Member & Portfolio
Holder for Development

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Staff bought into making changes with real gusto and designed a greatly improved structure and process. Alexander were highly valued by all for their quiet challenges and for keeping the work on track. It was essential for the change to be led by the Manager of the service and that happened really well.

Liz Goodall,
Chief Executive

The willingness of our staff to identify areas for improvement as well as ways to make significant savings, despite the implications for their own posts, was most impressive. I think it reflects well upon Alexander that we are now delivering concurrent major changes to structure, staffing, web services, EDM as well as securing a new back officer supplier all in a positive and progressive manner.

John Hammond,
Development Services
Manager

2. Customer Services are not effectively used. 41% of calls forwarded to the Planning Service could have been answered by the Customer Services team. This created a constant distraction to officers processing applications and contributed to delays.
3. Committee process requires significant resource. As well as the report writing, it took over an hour to prepare everything for one application to go to committee. Many decisions were deferred for a site visit due to contextual information about the development not being available.
4. Excessive consultation costs time & money. Consultees are not able to make responses online which creates additional effort for all involved; and several methods of advertising are used for most proposals, well above statutory requirements, which increases costs significantly.
5. ICT systems are not utilised effectively. Duplication of IT systems and work-arounds created frustration and inefficient working practices and consultees were not encouraged to respond electronically.
6. Focus was on target deadlines and not on customer service. A third of decision notices issued were on the very last day before the 56-day deadline. This created unbalanced workloads and backlogs at the end of the process.

The team presented their findings back to the Programme Board who were extremely impressed by the extent and detail of the analysis their work had achieved and the bravery of the team in the level of honesty in this self-evaluation.

The team then went to work on the redesign of the future processes, identifying the enablers that would be required, including performance indicators and the characteristics of a new structure needed to support the changes. A Cost/Benefit Model and outline implementation plan was developed to allow the team to make the changes and help the Head of Service manage the benefit realisation. Design principles were also established to help tailor the solution and ensure it addressed the problems identified. These included;

- Dealing with matters at 1st point of contact
- No silos – team working across the whole service and wider within the council
- Exploiting technology more fully
- Establishing electronic as the preferred channel of communications and information storage linked through to GIS
- Clearly defined processes, with structured milestones and gateways.
- To manage and share information better and more consistently.

Benefits of redesign

The project team presented back their proposals for the redesigned service and, once again, this was very well received by the Programme Board. The main features of the redesigned system are;

- Controlled point of access for customers via internet to increase self-service and the use of the Contact Centre to benefit customers. This reduces demand on Development Management service.
- Common 'receipt centre' within service for triaging all incoming work i.e., applications and enforcement complaints.
- Integration of planning & enforcement teams to enhance sharing of knowledge leading to swifter outcomes.
- Allocate work so as to better utilise skills/experience to enhance staff development and ensure the most complex matters are the prime focus for the most experienced officers.
- Completing implementation of electronic document management system and embedding it within the new receipt centre roles.
- Visual presentation of performance information and structured weeks with regular

Both teams rose to the significant challenge and through the hard work and real honesty of their effort were able to discover quite radical changes to how they deliver the service which they may not have achieved otherwise.

Alun Davies,
Senior Consultant, Alexander

During their engagement, Stuart and Alun developed trust amongst colleagues and a tangible team spirit. Confidence amongst individuals improved and a “can do” approach was fostered. Culminating in a full programme of system and department redesign.

A few months on; there has been a notable cultural shift away from a defensive and protective attitude to a more collaborative and open way of working. The Development Management Team is sharing the lessons learned with colleagues and showing other departments the way forward.

Cllr Deborah Croney,
Leader of North Dorset
District Council

proactive team meetings.

- Meaningful KPIs designed to drive service improvements aligned with customer expectations.
- Consultation – enabling committees to make more decisions at first hearing by conducting timely site visits, improving the contextual information provided.
- Town & Parish Councils are now part of the process through proactive engagement by Senior Officers, encouraging triage of complaints and a learning programme to help them focus on key considerations.

The Board was mindful of the personal impact of many of the changes; communication of the changes was managed carefully so that the opportunities identified would not expose the team to criticism.

Implementation and realisation of benefits

To enable the benefits to be realised, a combination of process and ICT improvements as well as a restructure identifying a reduced number of posts, were suggested. These aligned the right amount and type of resource to support the redesigned processes in the best way, creating a sustainable platform in terms of both performance and budget.

A detailed implementation plan was developed and a small steering group was established to coordinate activity and help resolve problems. The Programme Board continued to maintain executive control, help prioritise activities and advise on stakeholder engagement.

Formal consultation involving staff, unions and HR was then planned to ensure a fair and transparent transition to the new working structure. The senior service managers used the structure design principles that the project had established to create the required structure with and the business case developed using this logic as its basis.

Other ideas continued to emerge from the project team; an accreditation scheme was established which would be used to help promote local agents that could consistently provide the required standard of applications. As a result, the Council don't have to rework applications, it's free positive marketing for agents who can reach the standard, and customers' applications can be processed more quickly and receive a better service.

Summary of efficiencies

In total around 3,500 hours of staff resource and £40k expenditure were identified as potential benefits enabling the savings target to be easily achieved. 3 posts were deleted to enable realisation of the benefits; 2 administrators and an enforcement officer equivalent to around 15% of the establishment.

- Improved quality of applications <500 hours
- Customer Service support enhancement <300 hours
- Risk based approach to consultation >£9k
- Risk based approach to site visits approx. 200 hours
- Move to establish a paperless office >600 hours plus >£18k
- Planning Officer investigating complaints against recent decisions approx. 600 hours
- Improved use of Support Officers including triage of complaints and registration <400 hours
- Improved sharing of knowledge for condition monitoring <240 hours

Alexander is an independent change management consultancy that specialises in strategy alignment, performance management and improvement.

For further information, please contact Ciara on 023 8022 5520 or email ciara.turner@alexander-ecc.com.

Alexander People - what we believe

Alexander people are business people who are passionate about public services. We take what's good from the private sector and shape it to meet the demands and challenges of public service. So when we look at the world and see what's wrong, our instinct is not to complain about it, it's to do something about it. This means that, when we look at our own company, we don't just look at its performance as a business; we look at the difference we make to changing public services and society for the better.

The people who manage and deliver public services today face huge challenges. They deserve someone to think with and people who can help to do the things they haven't the capacity to do themselves.

That's why we **engage** and connect with the people at all levels in public services who face these challenges.

Then we help them **challenge** the way things are.

So that they can deliver real **change** for the better.

That's what we do: **Engage. Challenge. Change.**

There's a belief that, without a profit motive, there isn't enough to drive public services to be better. We say that the stakes couldn't be higher. For people who work in and with public services, if we fail, society fails. **We believe this is the most powerful driver there is.**

We work with...

Alexander works with people & organisations in the public sector, including:

- District Councils
- Unitary Authorities
- County Councils
- Housing Associations
- Police Services
- Health Services

If you'd like to talk about how we can help you, call us on 023 8022 5520.

Alexander People - what we do

Knowing where to go and how to get there

- Strategic & organisational review and diagnosis
- Shared vision
- Transformation strategy
- Transformation blueprint
- Stakeholder engagement
- Change readiness
- Communications

Delivering customer value with less resources

- Lean Systems Thinking
- Service transformation, design and improvement
- Shared services
- Function and service reviews
- Options appraisals and business case development

Enabling change to happen

- Programme and project management
- Change Management and benefits realisation
- Building capacity to change
- Skills and knowledge transfer

Making change sustainable

- Leadership development
- Management development
- Continuous improvement strategy and culture
- Skills and knowledge transfer

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