

## Lean Thinking in Planning Applications

**Organisation Name:** Aberdeenshire Council (AC)

**Target Audience:** Anyone interested in **doing more with less** in the Public Sector [elected members, local authority officers, best value practitioners.....]

### Background

Aberdeenshire Council first expressed interest in the power of Lean Thinking in October 2001 after hearing about successes in the Scottish Executive using this approach. After a couple of pilot events, it asked Ross International to train a champion and facilitators to make the Council self-sufficient. This case study is about the first Kaizen Blitz [Rapid Improvement Event] to be delivered under this programme, which took place across all six planning offices of the planning service.

Aberdeenshire Council was part [CS3] of the Warwick Business School study on Lean in the public sector (see IS article: [http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=183&Itemid=233](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=183&Itemid=233)).

Immediately prior to this Lean intervention the Kaizen approach was presented to a special meeting of 40 councillors led by the Lord Provost Raymond Bisset. Once initial concerns were dealt with, they saw the potential benefits for all and have wholeheartedly supported the Kaizen effort ever since.

For a full description of the Aberdeenshire Council journey from awareness through to self-sufficiency and leadership in its field, see the case study on <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk>

### Intended outcome

The six area offices across Aberdeenshire Council dealing with the registration of planning applications all wanted to improve their level of service. They started by looking at the time it took to register applications and get them onto the Planners' desks. The number of applications was steadily increasing and they wanted to meet the increased demand with the same people.

The average time before Kaizen ranged from four to seven days with virtually none (2%) being completed in three days or less. The Management goal for the Kaizen was to have ALL applications processed in three days or less.

No goal was set but it was felt that any time saved at the front end would result in faster overall throughput times which would increase the percentage of applications processed in two months from the then level of 64%.

### **The main issues**

There were effectively six different processes in place, across the six regions, for completing the same task. The number of steps in the process varied from four to nine and the hands-on time taken to process the applications varied from 1.2 hours to 2.6 hours across the shire.

The pressure, from the piles of applications the staff were surrounded by, led to them feeling they were unable to cope with the demand. The individuals knew how to do their own job but had no understanding of the other work involved. Most of them had no idea they were involved in a process, how long it took or what could be done to improve it.

### **The approach**

A plan of attack was developed which depended on the involvement and acceptance of the people actually doing the work. In the weeks leading up to the Blitz all the regions were visited by two trainee facilitators and the Kaizen Team Leader, who was from the area being Kaizenized, in order to explain what was about to happen and ask for their input, cooperation and support. A multi-level, multifunctional team representing all the departments and all the regions involved was assembled in Inverurie for the week of the Blitz.

### **What did they do?**

The team visited all six offices across Aberdeenshire and developed a baseline for the performance of the existing processes. They:

- Drew a process map for each of the six processes;
- Identified all the blockages and areas of waste in the current processes;
- Identified areas of good practice;
- Developed a vision of an ideal process which would have four steps, take less than one hour and could process all applications within three days;

- Identified errors with incoming applications and what could be done to stop them;
- Identified problems being passed to the planners and what could be done to eliminate these.

The team was so sure that they could eliminate most of the problems that they set themselves a goal of having 50% of applications processed within one day.

### Acceptance of the new ways

On the fourth day of the Kaizen Blitz, the team shared the new process proposal with all those across Aberdeenshire who would be required to work in it and manage it. They listened and made modifications as necessary, until they had a process that everyone was happy with. They then developed a roll-out plan to introduce the new standard process across the shire.

### Results

**In spite of a record number of applications received** in Aberdeenshire during the roll out period, the offices were able to process 97% of the applications in three days [instead of 2%].

**They are now achieving 100% under three days with over 60% being processed in a day.** The individual regions across the shire have now taken ownership for measuring their own performance and doing what is required to keep it on track.

**There has been a 160% improvement in productivity in the process tackled.** The new process takes less than 40 minutes [instead of over 100] which means that significant amounts of time have been freed up to provide better services in other areas or work.

**The public are receiving their completed applications quicker.** The reduced time at the front end of the Planning process has increased the percentage of applications that are processed in two months from 64% to 75%.

### People satisfaction

One of the staff declared, pre-Kaizen, that they would be “gob-smacked” if anything could be done to improve the process... and they were!

After the final report by the Kaizen team, five months after they started the improvement journey, one of the members made the following observation:-

***“In all the years and in all the places I’ve worked this is the very first opportunity I’ve seen where the people who are on the floor doing the job have the chance to change things for the better.”***

### **Overall conclusions**

- When management involve and empower the people who do the work to improve the work the gains for all parties exceed everyone’s expectations.
- The identification and elimination of things that waste time or cause a blockage to flow will simultaneously improve all key measures.
- It is possible to do more with less. The people who now own this front end process are providing a far better service with far less manual effort in a more satisfying working environment.

### **Lesson learned**

If the process is better for all it is much easier to sustain. Who would want to go back to a worse process? When surveyed one year on to see if the new process was still being operated, the response was “What do you mean? This [new way] is just the way we do things round here.”

### **Additional information**

- The Kaizen Champion in Aberdeenshire Council is Pat Browne.
- Coaching and training of Aberdeenshire Champion and facilitators was carried out by Ross International [www.rossinternational.co.uk](http://www.rossinternational.co.uk)