

**REPORT**

# Rapid Review: Embedding Customer Care in Planning Services



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# National Planning Improvement

National Planning Improvement (NPI) was established by the Scottish Government in September 2023 and it is part of the Improvement Service. Funded by the Scottish Government, it has a remit to monitor the performance of planning authorities and provide advice to them, and other stakeholders, on how to improve.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 formalised how to measure and report on planning authorities' performance and how to support them to improve. The provisions of the Act have not yet come into force. Ahead of that the National Planning Improvement Champion has been appointed within the Improvement Service to lead this work:

- National Planning Improvement Framework – this allows us to monitor the performance of planning authorities and to provide advice to them and other stakeholders on how to improve
- National Planning Hub – working alongside Scottish Government, this supports planning authorities to identify and share good practice to tackle challenges in planning for renewable energy and housing and producing local development plans
- National Planning Improvement Champion – this involves undertaking analysis and research to provide an evidence base on planning performance and improvement that can be shared with others to inform future approaches



# Aims of the Report

A key aspect of National Planning Improvement's work is to gather evidence that will help identify the challenges facing planning authorities in terms of performance. We do this through analysis of the National Planning Improvement Framework as this provides data, intelligence and evidence on the improvements planning authorities have identified for themselves, progress being made on these and the impacts they are having. We also undertake primary research to inform our work and explore solutions for planning services. This includes 'rapid reviews' to provide a deeper understanding on solutions to key issues identified through our work.

This report presents the findings of a rapid review undertaken by the National Planning Improvement Champion to explore how to better embed customer care and a positive user experience within planning services. It sets out:

- Analysis and conclusions, based upon the research and engagement undertaken
- Good practice examples from planning services across Scotland and beyond, and from other council services that are addressing similar challenges
- Suggested actions to be taken forward by whom including:
  - How best to show the commitment to achieving high quality service standards across planning services.
  - How authorities can be supported through the National Planning Improvement Framework and National Planning Hub.
  - How customers, stakeholder users of planning services can support improvements in the customer experience.
  - How best to monitor progress.

In this context the customer is defined as service users, that is those who have had direct interaction with a planning authority through, for example, submitting a planning application, or commenting on a planning application. There can be different perceptions, needs and wants from applicants represented by agents in comparison to general public engagement through individuals submitting planning applications or objecting to proposals.



# Methodology

The rapid review was undertaken between September and December 2025 and has comprised of:

- An analysis undertaken to identify the scale of challenge, specific issues and good practice examples. Sources include:
  - [National Planning Improvement Framework](#)
  - a call for ideas undertaken by NPI asking stakeholders for their thoughts on what a high performing planning system should look like
  - other disciplines and planning practice outside of Scotland
- Initial discussions on the topic at the High Level Group on Planning Performance, HOPS Performance and Practice Subcommittee, the HOPS AGM and the High Level Group Applicant Group
- A webinar held in September with planning authorities to:
  - examine the issues that have been raised in terms of the customer experience
  - showcase examples of planning authorities undertaking innovative and interesting practice
  - explore the responses that planning services could take
  - inform future work to be taken forward that can support planning authorities
- This included discussion in facilitated groups examining what good customer care looks like, asking:
  - What are the challenges for planning services in improving the customer experience?
  - Do you know what customers want and is it achievable?
  - What can you do to improve the customer experience and what do you need from whom?
- A call for views publicised through the Improvement Service website and social media channels
- Discussions with a number of services users and stakeholders including representatives from Heads of Planning Scotland, Scottish Government, COSLA, the Royal Town Planning Institute, Homes for Scotland, Scottish



Property Federation, Scottish Renewables, Scottish Planning Consultants Forum, Key Agencies Group, Planning Aid Scotland and the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.



# Context

The planning system has a substantive role in managing the development and use of land in the long-term public interest. This report focuses on those who have a direct engagement with planning services. In this context customers are defined as service users, that is those who have had direct interaction with a planning authority through, for example, submitting a planning application, or commenting on a planning application.

Evidence is showing that, within this context, customer care and experience in planning services is not always positive. This comes at a time when the delivery of public services is evolving within a context of reduced staff, diminished resources, increasing demands, new ways of working and efficiency drives and a growing reliance on digital approaches and providing more upfront information online.

The effectiveness of planning services depends upon a range of players who are all part of the system. These include planning authorities, statutory consultees, those submitting, or commenting on, planning applications, those engaging in local development plans and national bodies who have an oversight of, or influence on how, the system works.

Given this, National Planning Improvement considered there was a need to better understand:

- The issues that are impacting on the customer experience including the drivers for approaches taken to customer care by planning authorities and the expectations of applicants and customers when interacting with planning services
- The constraints faced by planning authorities in delivering customer care and in communication
- The needs of applicants and customers in terms of their relationship with the planning authority
- What good – and bad - looks like in terms of the customer experience
- What steps can be taken by planning authorities and users of planning services to improve the customer experience

This review aimed to discuss these questions with key stakeholders to explore if there can be agreement on what good looks like in terms of the customer experience with planning services and what can be put in place to support this.



A range of sources have identified that customer care in, and the customer experience of, planning services can be a challenge.

## NPI Call for Ideas

An initial call for ideas launched by the NPI team in September 2023 asked ‘What makes a high-performing planning authority?’. The [results of this, published in February 2024](#) said that

*“Many applicants and community representatives highlight the need for a better user experience and customer care, stating that they would like planning authorities to engage more proactively and collaboratively. Communication and accessibility to planning staff are seen as particularly important, as is the need for good pre-application discussions”.*

The report also highlighted that planning authorities felt the quality of submissions for planning permission can impact on their ability to process applications quickly. This is having an impact from the start of the process given that a significant numbers of planning applications cannot be validated as they are not completed accurately or do not provide all necessary documentation.

## NPI Annual Customer and Stakeholder Survey

The results of the NPI [Annual Customer and Stakeholder Survey](#) were published in April 2025 and highlighted that there are challenges in the customer experience when engaging with planning services as evidenced by the following:

- **Communication** - 49.5% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the standard of communication whilst 50.5% were either very unsatisfied or unsatisfied
- **Information** - 54.4% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of information provided by the planning authority with 45.7% very unsatisfied or unsatisfied
- **Service** - 51.3 % of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the service offered by planning authority staff, with 48.6% finding it very unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory
- **Response times** - 45.6% of respondents found the time taken to respond to queries very satisfactory or satisfactory whereas 54.5% were very unsatisfied or unsatisfied



- **Fairness** - 55% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were treated fairly by the planning service with 45.1% saying they disagreed or strongly disagree
- **Overall satisfaction** - 46.2% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the over service provided by the planning authority and 53.8% very unsatisfied or unsatisfied

## National Planning Improvement Framework

Emerging evidence from the pilot of the [National Planning Improvement Framework](#) is telling us that many planning authorities see customer care as an area in need of improvement and one where they have identified improvement actions. Although there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, examples of improvement actions identified are:

- Better engagement with developers and agents through, for example, regular forums
- Embedding customer surveys and developing actions based on feedback received
- Developing approaches to pre-application advice and engagement
- Developing communication/ engagement strategies and training
- Improving accessibility of publicly available information, especially through websites
- Making better use of digital engagement tools

## RTPI Scotland Resourcing the Planning Service

Any examination of challenges in planning services should be contextualised within the resourcing challenges that are faced. The most recent research undertaken by RTPI Scotland, [State of the Profession 2025](#), said “Funding for planning in Scotland has decreased considerably since the financial year ending 2010. In real terms, total expenditure on planning (consisting of development management and planning policy) has decreased by 33%, while income has increased by 38%. This means that although income generated by planning services increased, this was not reflected with increased spending on them. This reduction in funding has occurred at the same time as the introduction of new processes like gate check reviews, and numerous unfunded duties”.

Given this decline in capacity, work is underway across the profession identifying solutions to respond, including steps to boost the number of people moving into



the profession, increasing planning fees and giving planning authorities discretion to charge for some services. There is also an ambition to explore new ways of working that can maximise the use of existing resources.

## **Customer Service and the Planning System Research**

In 2018, the Scottish Government commissioned Pye Tait Consulting to examine how customer service is measured and managed across the public and private sectors. The study reviewed customer service practices across 25 organisations, including planning authorities, other local government services, and private sector bodies known for customer service excellence. Fourteen interviews with Scottish planning authorities and stakeholders provided further insight into customer care strengths and challenges.

Key findings emphasised the importance of empathy, transparency, and communication in maintaining trust, particularly when customers are dissatisfied with planning outcomes. The research recognised e-planning as a major step forward in accessibility and efficiency, though resource pressures were noted as a constraint on service capacity. The study also underlined the need for consistent national measures to assess and improve customer experience across planning authorities. It said that customer care in planning depends on clear communication, realistic expectation management, and consistent service standards. Independent feedback mechanisms and benchmarking can help authorities identify strengths and areas for improvement, while continued culture change is required to embed a customer-focused mindset across the planning system.

## **Public Service Reform Strategy**

It is considered that, as a front-line service, planning should be an important contributor to, and beneficiary of, public service reform. The Scottish Government's [Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy](#), which was published in June 2025, clearly states that "Public services should be accessible, trusted, good quality and meet the needs of people across Scotland" and that this means that they need to be efficient and effective with the right-size delivery landscape; better join up services and focus on helping people; prioritise prevention; empower people and communities to shape the services that matter to them; and be fiscally sustainable.

## **Digital Strategy**

The [Digital Strategy for Scotland](#), published in November 2025, says that digital innovation can transform Scotland's public services, making them smarter, faster,

and fairer. It sets out how placing efficiency, high-quality customer service, and prevention at the core can transform the delivery of public services. It aims to achieve this by developing public sector leadership, skills and capability for digital, data and innovation; using data and technology, including AI to protect privacy, build trust, and reduce cyber risk; and delivering collaborative digital programmes and common digital solutions that improve the efficiency of public services, transform the user experience and deliver better outcomes for the people of Scotland through the delivery of person-centred and preventative services.



# What does good customer care look like?

## Engagement with Planning Authorities

The shape and scope of customer service provision in the public sector have changed in recent years resulting in a number of broader trends.

As part of the rapid review we worked with the Planning Skills Programme to hold a webinar for planning authorities on how to embed customer care into planning services. It highlighted and discussed good practice in customer care undertaken by four planning authorities in Scotland:

- [Aberdeenshire: Shaping Improvements with Our Customers: Customer Service Excellence Re-Accreditation](#)
- [North Ayrshire: Customer Driven Engagement in Planning](#)
- [North Lanarkshire: Embedding a Data-Informed Approach to Customer Service and Process Improvement](#)
- [Fife Council: Planning Application Timeline Tool](#)

A [video of the webinar](#) is available to view.

Our webinar with planning officers highlighted six key areas of constraint:

- **Customer Feedback & Perception** Points were made about low response rates to surveys making it hard to gauge satisfaction; negative public perception of planning from the outset; feedback often unrelated to planning or influenced by outcomes; misconceptions about what planning can and cannot address; and terminology used in planning communications sometimes being unclear.
- **Accessibility & Digital Experience** This highlighted the complex access routes to planning systems; limited online functionality for tracking applications or contacting officers; PDF forms still being widely used due to lack of IT capacity; variance in digital literacy; inconsistencies in contact details and appointment systems; and a lack of a clear timelines for application progress.
- **Legislative & Process Complexity** This touched on changing legislation and policy contexts often being difficult to comprehend, especially for communities; the complexity of planning processes; that there are often

unique geographies; and the need for multiple assessments required, that often need specialist input.

- **Staffing & Resources Planning** officers highlighted staff shortages and difficulty attracting new planners; high workloads and limited capacity to provide detailed advice; and reduced technical support that can delay website and system improvements.
- **Expectations** It was pointed out that customers may expect outcomes that aren't achievable given constraints; that planning officers had frustration with responses that don't align with their desired outcomes; a need for better communication about what planning can realistically deliver; and self-imposed barriers and inconsistent practices across authorities.
- **Corporate Compliance** Planning services can often have limited control over things that can impact on the provision of services such as procurement of IT and customer facing systems, the shape and content of websites, communication strategies and their implementation, and, the office estate which can impact on public accessibility to staff.

However, there was a recognition by planning officers of customer needs including more meaningful conversations, feedback and engagement, clarity in communication that provides certainty and predictability, even when outcomes aren't favourable; transparency in decision-making; quick responses and turnaround times; face-to-face engagement and access to specific case officers; simpler processes and guidance; and a welcoming, can-do approach.

Suggestions from planning officers on how to improve the customer experience included:

- Review and simplify validation requirements to reduce unnecessary information requests.
- Improve internal consistency and clarity to support a smoother customer journey.
- Use plain language, provide regular updates, and set realistic expectations.
- Enhance guidance by compiling and simplifying existing resources.
- Ensure websites are clear, consistent, and easy to navigate.
- Create step-by-step guides, especially for validation standards.
- Avoid replacing one complex process with another.
- Avoid building unrealistic stakeholder expectations during consultations.



- Make portals more user-friendly and intuitive.
- Provide simple and accessible information from the start of the process.
- Capture and reuse previous research to inform improvements.

To take this forward it was considered that that support was required, including:

- organisational buy-in to support digital transformation tools.
- consistency in national processes and systems.
- uniform systems and national digital solutions.
- additional resources to address low staffing levels to reduce pressure and improve responsiveness.
- knowledge sharing across authorities to identify and adopt best practices.

Many planning officials pointed out that their time can often be taken up in dealing with people who don't have a good understanding of how the planning system works or who raise issues that are not about planning. Given this, there could and should be ways of providing this information or dealing with these queries upfront and proactively. It was felt that there may well be national solutions to common issues, such as permitted development queries, which could be addressed through the national planning hub or digital portal. This would free up local officer time for value-added engagement.

Planning officials also felt that the upcoming councillor training was an opportunity to define the role of planning and clarify what is, and is not, within planning's remit. The need to ensure that MSPs and MPs were well informed on planning was also pointed out.

It was highlighted that any information, training or resources should cover the totality of the planning system and the role and responsibilities of players beyond planning authorities such as the Energy Consents Unit, the Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals and Scottish Government, who are also decision-making bodies, as this can cause confusion among service users.

## **Engagement with Service Users and Stakeholders**

Our engagement with service users told us that they wanted planning services to be delivered in a way that provided better responsiveness, clarity and transparency, accessibility, consistency, and positivity.

## Responsiveness

A key issue identified was the difficulty in engaging directly with planning officers. Whilst recognising and appreciating capacity within planning authorities, applicants felt that more could be done to share expertise across them and there was a need, as a customer focused service, to provide a better engagement experience in term of times taken to respond to queries and on the quality of advice given.

The importance of consultees getting back to case officers timeously was emphasised and some agents said that there should be set timescales that should be adhered to and where there could be an automatic assumption if no advice was given within that period.

Developers and agents pointed out that many authorities only undertook pre-application engagement when there was a live planning application whilst there was often a need for less formal conversations and strategic discussion. However, a number of authorities were praised for their commitment and approach to pre-application advice.

In terms of responses from agencies there was a view that, although it can take a long time to receive advice, generally what comes back is well considered and thorough. However, many applicants felt that they were 'in the dark' on contacting internal consultees with local authorities and it was often difficult to source contact details to allow them to get in touch directly.

Applicants felt that good project management was key to processing planning applications. However, it was generally considered that processing agreements did not always add great value to this as they often added bureaucracy in their establishment rather than streamlining and speeding up the process. It was also often felt that they presented challenges in terms of flexibility and responsiveness for applicants.

## Clarity and Transparency

A challenge identified by many on the industry side was the difficulty in keeping track of progress being made with planning applications. Many felt that this was compounded by issues in gaining access case officers and the 'clunkiness' of the e-development portal.

They highlighted challenges in terms of communication with a general view that planning service webpages were not easy to navigate nor provided clear information and advice. However, it was recognised that planning services had



a number of audiences who may require different things. There were calls for clearer FAQs on the specific circumstances of the authority and more consistency in language on basics across planning authorities. There was a feeling of variability in being able to find, for example, local development plans on authority websites.

## **Accessibility**

Applicants told us that the quality communication varies across planning authorities but that it was increasingly difficult to call case officers as often no telephone number was provided. Suggestions to support more clarity for applicants included:

- named case officer / contact point for all applications
- officers having a direct dial or work mobile on correspondence
- a staffed duty line, where it is possible to clarify issues with an officer
- clear standards on replying to calls and emails
- the provision of basic levels of advice, beyond generic materials on the web, which is site specific but not full pre-application advice
- standards on the level of detail offered by pre-application advice
- setting expectations about site visits, where these can help to clarify issues
- automated email responses that provided a clear timescale for response
- the introduction, or reintroduction, of planning help desks and duty planner giving free advice.

There were calls for better information on how planning authorities work through the provision of organisational charts and contact details on websites that allowed applicants to better understand the chain of command.

They also were of the view that planning officer email signatures should provide their contact details and work pattern.

The potential of data and digital in supporting planning services was highlighted. Specific suggestions included having interactive Local Development Plans rather than PDFs; digital mapping showing allocations on maps; the need for redevelopment of e-development website; and providing training on digital for planning officers and space to think.

Navigating the e-development portal was seen to be often very difficult for communities and there is a need for this to be more user friendly.

## **Tone**

Industry bodies called for an approach that emphasised trust on both sides and were aware of the need for Chief Planning Officers to manage their resources in a way that ensured they weren't overwhelmed. This required good communication on both sides and it was recognised there was a need for them to be good customers.

Applicants appreciated the resource issue faced by planning services and asked if there were ways in which their workload could be lessened through less demanding processes and assessment, process streamlining, revised schemes of delegation or increased permitted development rights.

There was a call for planning authority officers to be supported in developing their 'soft skills', especially as they can be entrenched and bogged down in processing applications. This could look at training on project management, listening, facilitation, negotiation, customer care and communication. It was felt that this could help grow confidence in younger planners, who could also be supported through mentoring, and give them the authority to work on their own initiative.

Many on the applicant side also called for leadership that embedded a more 'can do' approach in authorities.

## **Consistency**

Points were made regarding consistency across planning services in terms of information available, approaches taken, levels of engagement and interpretation of policy.

It was suggested that there could be better sharing of experiences across planning authorities and between the different players involved in the system. Positive examples were given of forums and roundtable discussions that brought together planning consultants and planning officials to look at specific issues and discuss solutions to these which had led to piloting new approaches.

Joint CPD had already taken place between architects and planning officials, and it was asked if this could be built upon in the future.



## Engagement with Communities and the Public

Communities and third sector organisations are also important customers for planning services and there calls for them to have more accessibility to information and advice when required. It was pointed out that Planning Aid Scotland already play a valuable role in this in answering around 800 enquiries a year and that many planning authorities already signpost communities to their work.

There were calls for individual members of the public and community groups to be able talk to planners to answer queries and for better information on websites. This needed to be easy to access and understand. It was felt that there could be better explanations that can allow the general public to gain a better understanding of how the system works, what it covers (and what it doesn't) and the envisaged timescales for different tasks undertaken by planning services. There was a feeling that the public needed to be provided with a better understanding on what constituted a material consideration.

Points were made about the language used in correspondence from planning authorities, with concerns that the technical and jargon-based nature of this often made it difficult for lay persons to understand what is being said. There were calls for less legalistic language to be used where possible and for the introduction of easy-to-read guides or explainers. More consistency in language across planning authorities was highlighted.

It was felt that planning officers can be often be entrenched and bogged down in processing applications and it would be useful to provide them with access to training that allowed them to develop their approaches to project management to support the application process and softer skills such as communications, listening and facilitation, and, on digital for planning.

There were similar calls to those made by applicant agents on the need to have more transparency within the planning application process and, as part of this, the redevelopment of e-development planning website is priority. It was pointed out that there was a lack of consistency on whether objections were included on the e-development system.

The potential of moving towards interactive LDPs for each council was also seen as helpful, along with a general need to move away from PDFs and move towards user-friendly digital mapping.

# Actions and Recommendations

In light of the evidence we have explored, the engagement we have had with planning authorities and stakeholders and the good practice we have identified, we set out a number of actions and recommendations below. These are aimed at a range of players in planning including authorities, Heads of Planning Scotland, Scottish Government and service users.

Given current concerns across planning authorities and from their service users about the lack of resources available, these recommendations do not look to add more duties, but rather to make better use of the resources in place and explore different ways of working that can enhance the effectiveness of the services and, therefore, the customer experience. They are generally based upon examples of where it has been done already across organisations of different scales and working in different circumstances. This aims to demonstrate what can be undertaken and to show the opportunities to explore how planning authorities can benefit from shared approaches, experiences and services.

The actions and recommendations are set out for the short-, medium- and longer-term. We envisage that short term actions can be completed quickly and certainly within a year, medium term actions within 2 years and longer-term actions within a 3-year period.

## For Planning authorities

### Short term

There are a number of things we feel that planning authorities can do in the short term to support their approaches to customer care.

**Planning authorities should strive to provide more transparency and clarity on how their service works and on progress being made with specific planning applications, the local development plan, enforcement cases etc.**

### Planning Officer Contact

Planning services, as public services, should be able to provide service users with a key contact, especially in handling planning applications. Planning applicants should however recognise that planning officers will be dealing with a number of cases at the same time and so will need to prioritise their interactions with



applicants. Contact details should be provided including telephone number where available, email address and working patterns.

There are examples of planning authorities who aim to provide face to face contact as often as they can. For example, [North Ayrshire Council's](#) planning service reviewed how customers interact with planning and development processes, identifying opportunities to make engagement more proactive, accessible, and meaningful. The focus shifted from relying on formal surveys or consultations to maintaining continuous, customer-driven contact that improves understanding and experience. Data was shared across Council departments to build a fuller picture of local needs, while customer contact was front-loaded through same-day call-backs and live phone lines. The service offered free pre-application advice to encourage early engagement, and discretionary charges were removed to eliminate barriers. Processes were streamlined to ensure applications were determined within statutory timescales. Officer availability was maintained through hybrid working and the Planning Microsoft Teams Group, enabling staff to support personal callers and direct communication.

A useful example of a planning service providing information on its structure and key responsibilities is the [Glasgow City Council organisational chart](#) which sits on its website.

## **Accessible Information**

Websites and web pages have become the key place to find out about what planning services do, how they undertake their work and what customers need to do as part of the process. They are the key source of information, advice and resources for applicants and other stakeholders in the planning system. The increasing reliance upon them means that they need to be easily accessible, easy to read, easy to use and easy to navigate. [Midlothian Council's planning webpages](#) were highlighted as an example of good practice that others should examine.

There is also an opportunity to provide a consistent narrative across planning services through agreeing standard boilerplate wording that can be used in all websites to describe what planning services do and how. There is a possible role for Heads of Planning Scotland to take co-ordinate this.

## **Service Charters**

Service charters that set out agreed service standards for the planning service's interaction with its customers can help set out what should be expected of planning services and its service users. The [City of Edinburgh Council's Planning Customer Service Charter](#) explains what the Council's Planning service does

and what its customers can expect from them. It sets out what customers can expect when contacting the service and then provides more specific standards linked to planning policy, development management, and planning enforcement. The charter is useful in both establishing the timescales for communication and framing customer expectations. The council also has a [Planning and Local Review Fees Charter](#) which provides clarity on planning fees, payment of fees and calculation of fees.

There is an opportunity to set out consistent standards if this is agreed across planning services. This would help to provide services users who work over a number of authorities. Good customer service depends on staff understanding and consistently applying processes. Inconsistencies between officers can lead to complaints, so training and embedding customer care principles within the organisational culture are essential. There is a need for training and cultural change to ensure service charters are meaningful and impactful.

Again, there is a possible role for Heads of Planning Scotland to co-ordinate this.

### **Transparent Reporting**

Processing planning applications can be complex, and it can be easy to lose track of at what stage a particular application is at. There is a need for more transparency to allow customers to track progress. This can be organised as a self-service that applicants can access at a time that suits them. There are some examples of this that are in place. The [Fife Council Planning Application Timeline](#) Tool aims to provide the service's customers with more information about their planning application while reducing the need to contact the service and case officers directly. The tool also includes a link so customers can contact planning services directly using an online form which is also used for customer enquiries. This allows the service to collate all enquiries together but also to monitor its responses.

The [Highland Council Interactive Energy Projects map](#) sits on its website and is designed to enhance public access to information on major energy-related developments across Highland. The map is updated weekly using data extracted from the Development Management Case Recording System. The tool visualises a range of planning applications—including pre-applications, scoping/screening requests, full applications, and Section 36/ 37 Electricity Act submissions—covering electricity generation, transmission, storage, conversion, and usage. Users can filter and explore different project types individually or in combination. A dedicated resource supports its ongoing development and maintenance.



**Planning services should seek to respond to improvements identified through stakeholder engagement, the National Planning Improvement Framework and annual customer and stakeholder survey regarding service user needs.**

This can be done by:

### **Direct Service User Engagement**

Since the pandemic there has been a recognised need amongst most planning authorities to establish or re-establish regular forums with locally based developers, agents and community bodies. There is a recognition that this can bring added value in building relationships, updating on progress with initiatives, sharing information, providing opportunities for feedback and co-designing solutions. We understand the value that planning agents, consultants and developers attach to these as a mean of keeping informed and engaged with the work of the planning service. A number of planning agents highlighted to us the Glasgow City Council agents' forum was well run and impactful, especially in the way it was used to identify common challenges and to jointly discuss and codesign responses to them.

### **Customer Feedback**

Planning authorities should embed customer feedback they receive into improvement action planning. A good example of where this has been done is the Fife Council Working with and Learning from our Customers programme which undertook analysis of customer survey feedback 01 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 and comparison to the previous financial year.

This involved the service inviting its customers to take part in the online survey to embed continuous improvement in its services based on the valuable insights provided by customers. When comparing the survey results from the previous financial year there is an increase in the number of satisfied customers and a decrease in the number of dissatisfied customers, however detailed analysis highlighted the need for improvement in communication, clearer guidance and application processing timescales. The survey is well established and is effective in gathering feedback from customers of Planning Services to highlight key improvements that are required, but the survey needs to be improved upon by implementing ways for customers to select key themes where issues lie to allow better analysis of the data. The feedback shows that the Service is improving each year, and that excellent customer care is provided, but more work is needed to fully understand the issues that are impacting the customer's experience. The specific actions and outcomes from the survey have helped to inform specific

improvements for the year ahead and these are set out under the improvements related to the National Planning Improvement Framework.

The [national planning customer and stakeholder survey](#) is undertaken by National Planning Improvement Team and is an important means of gathering views on from users on the service they have received. Each authority is provided with a breakdown of the results from their area that should be used to identify areas for improvement. Planning authorities should therefore fully commit to promoting this to their customers and acting on the feedback received.

## Learning from Data

We believe that there is much to learn from approaches to data-informed transformation designed to improve consistency, transparency, and responsiveness. [North Lanarkshire Council's Embedding a Data-Informed Approach to Customer Service](#) process aimed to shift from a reactive service to a proactive one, using live data and clear, standardised processes to enhance both staff confidence and customer experience. The e-planning service identified inconsistent processes across teams, overloaded mailboxes, and limited real-time performance insight, which made it difficult to ensure efficiency and consistency. To address this, a full process review was undertaken through staff working groups, leading to the creation of standardised workflows, templates, and a comprehensive process map to guide case handling. Technology within the Uniform system was optimised, supported by a full suite of Enterprise workforce tasks, while validation targets were added to the Customer Charter to strengthen accountability. Internal consultee access and monitoring tools were introduced to track response times, and technicians were upskilled to process householder applications. Power BI dashboards now provide live data on workloads, bottlenecks, and trends, enabling proactive management and continuous improvement in performance and customer service. The Planning Service now benefits from standardised processes, improved data visibility, and stronger overall performance. Streamlined workflows and templates have reduced duplication and administrative burden, freeing capacity for planning and customer-facing work. Staff confidence and consistency have increased, while customers experience clearer communication, faster validation, and greater transparency. Key lessons learned were:

1. Good customer care and efficient processes must evolve together; one cannot succeed without the other.
2. Embedding technology effectively depends on well-informed and engaged staff who understand its purpose and value.
3. Real-time data empowers teams to manage workloads proactively and make evidence-based decisions.



4. Consistency and clarity build both staff confidence and public trust. Cultural change takes time, and staff must feel supported throughout transitions in process and practice.

### **Learning from Complaints**

A number of planning authorities already have arrangements in place to ensure that they learn from any complaints that they receive about customer care, or if there are lessons to be learned from cases that have been upheld by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. This is incorporated into the National Planning Improvement Framework. There are examples of ways of formalising this approach. Annex 1 contains details of the approach taken by New Zealand's Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) that highlights how a structured, organisation-wide approach to handling feedback can transform customer care. ACC moved from a reactive, inconsistent complaints process to an integrated system where all concerns are formally recorded, categorised, and analysed. Staff were trained to manage complaints with empathy and professionalism, and clear escalation pathways ensured unresolved issues were addressed. This shift enabled ACC to identify patterns in feedback, target systemic improvements, and foster a culture of learning rather than mere compliance. The result was greater transparency, more consistent service, and improved trust between customers and the organisation. This approach can be directly transferable to planning authorities, where embedding robust feedback mechanisms and acting on customer concerns can drive continuous improvement, enhance fairness, and build confidence in planning services.

**Planning Services should aim to be proactive in their communications and in providing advice**

### **Planning Advice**

Planning authorities should consider how best to ensure that applicants and communities are able to access information and advice. Currently there are a range of approaches being taken to this based upon the circumstances in each authority. Some offer direct planning officer expertise through duty officers or a phone or email rotas, but this can depend on working patterns, whether they have a dedicated reception, and what digital tools are available to them. There may be no 'one size fits all' approach to this but authorities need to ensure that they have appropriate mechanisms in place that are responsive to customer queries. This should be allied to improved information on websites and FAQs support for planners who may be on a rota.

## Pre- application advice

Many planning services offer pre-application advice, and it is often found to be very valuable to applicants and developers. However, a range of different models are used, each dependent upon the circumstances of that particular authority. Applicants can find this confusing and there has been feedback from them about the added value provided, especially if the service is charged for. The positive experiences that have been highlighted generally involve in person meetings that are bespoke to the proposal, that bring together all players who will be contributing to the evidence base to inform the decision and that provide certainty and predictability to allow the applicant to be clear on what they need to do if they are looking to secure planning permission. Positive examples include those taking place in West Lothian Council which took place on site, and which considered the development layout and the practical pre-application advice provided by Aberdeenshire Council's service.

There was a mixed picture on the value of processing agreements from both planning authorities and applicants, though it was considered that they may be appropriate in specific cases.

Some innovative approaches to providing upfront advice have been taken forward by some authorities including [Shetland Island Developing Joint Pre-Application for Fish Farming](#), [Orkney Islands Engaging Island Communities in Marine Planning](#) and the Highland Council Integrated Housing Delivery Service. This service was launched in March 2025 and allows applicants with proposals for 10 or more homes to participate in a roundtable discussion to address any challenges or delays that might be experienced. Since launch nine applicants have requested meetings

**Planning services should work to build confidence in their staff at all levels so that they feel empowered and equipped to provide clear professional opinion**

## Staff Confidence

An issue that has been raised through this work and from the evidence gathered from the NPIF was a lack of confidence among some planning officers in giving their professional opinion to provide applicants with clarity on the merits of proposed schemes and/or the steps that may need to be taken to make it more acceptable to the authority. This is an area that was raised as part of the NPIF process in a number of authorities and is one that NPI has prioritised as an issue



that it will examine through exploring how to better build confidence in planning officers across planning departments and the influence and potential of culture, leadership and management training, relationship management skills and community engagement.

## **Staff Training**

It is not clear how many planning authorities provide training on customer care for the staff, and we believe that this should be explored. There may a role for the National Planning Hub to explore how it could support this across authorities.

**Planning authorities should look to have clear and consistent relationships with their key dependency organisations to provide more certainty to applicants and communities on progress being made on planning applications.**

The challenge of planning services receiving timely advice and opinion from statutory consultees has been raised by both authorities and applicants, though there is recognition of the resourcing issues that they face. We are conscious that there is a concurrent review underway through a Key Agency rapid audit being undertaken by Scottish Government. This may present some valuable ideas and so we suggest that it should feed its findings into the work of NPI to explore whether and how this can be embedded into our work on customer care.

That said, there are examples of work being taken forward on this including the Aberdeenshire Council's statutory consultants' protocols and the [NatureScot Informed Decisions Platform](#) which is an interesting approach to help applicants understand whether or not they are required to consult them. It uses AI to triage those cases that its staff will deal with based on certain criteria and will confirm where there is no need to consult them.

**Planning services should continue to share and learn from good practice.**

Approaches to customer care and improving the customer experience need to be continually developed and improved. Given this there is an ongoing need for planning services to keep abreast of what others are doing to ensure that they learn lesson from elsewhere. Given this, planning services should continue to

provide case studies on customer care (and other planning issues) through the National Planning Improvement Framework case studies survey. This provides a template to share examples of good practice. The new Improvement Leads Network being introduced by NPI may also be a useful way of bringing authorities to come together to jointly tackle the challenges they face, including customer care. Authorities should also make best use of their peer review partners established through the NPIF.

Planning services should also continue to contribute to, and participate in, the Planning Skills programme webinar series.

## Medium Term

There are a number of things we feel that planning authorities can do in the medium term to support their approaches to customer care.

**Planning services should embed customer care into, and to inform, their mainstream work.**

This can be done through:

### External accreditation systems

The value of using external accreditation or quality system has been demonstrated by a number of planning services. Aberdeenshire Council's Development Management team, within the Planning and Economy Service, is accredited to the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard, a nationally recognised UK Government benchmark for high-quality public service delivery. The CSE framework assesses organisations, focusing on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism, staff attitude, and customer insight. Accreditation provides both an independent validation of performance and a continuous improvement framework that embeds customer focus at every level. The process involves an annual external audit, where assessors review evidence, speak to staff across different roles, and engage directly with customers and stakeholders. This ongoing cycle of assessment, reflection, and action ensures that staff and customers remain central to service development and decision-making. It involves:

- using customer experience to improve service delivery and customer journeys;



- demonstrating a strong commitment to customer-focused recruitment, training, and development;
- benchmarking against other organisations to drive improvement;
- learning from feedback and complaints to improve processes and publicise action taken.

West Lothian Council has process that aligns to the [EFQM](#) process and that is embedded into their work and reporting on progress made against an agreed number of Key Performance Indicators which support customer care. EFQM is a globally recognised management framework that supports organisations in managing change and improving performance.

**Planning authorities should explore how to develop communication and engagement strategies for their service that allow them to better explain what they do, how they do it, how people can engage with them and what impact they are having.**

It is clear from the evidence that we have gathered that planning services would benefit from support to develop and deliver stakeholder engagement and communication strategies. Being clear on what your messages are, who your audiences are, what channels or means of communication are most appropriate to each of these have not always been central to planning service activity. Communication and engagement strategies will often require help and input from communication professions whilst there can be challenges in taking bespoke and flexible approaches to communications if this is managed and controlled corporately. However, several planning authorities have taken creative approaches to this that should be considered by others.

For example, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park have often taken innovative and creative approaches to explaining what planning is, how it impacts on communities and how they can engage. They currently provide useful and accessible [information on their website on the Local Development Plan](#) process and valuable [FAQs on Local Place Plans](#). This proactive approach aims to ensure that communities are informed and knowledgeable in advance of engagement with the authority.

The City of Edinburgh Council has a [Planning Edinburgh blog](#) that provides updates on their work with recent posts covering City Plan 2040 Engagement,

New Code of Conduct for Responsible Construction and New Planning Guidance whilst it also contains links to useful resources for service users and communities including [quick guides to planning](#), [planning guidance for householders](#), [planning guidance for business](#). The service also has a [Planning Edinburgh Instagram](#) account.

## Long term

The short and medium terms actions and recommendations are important ways of making a difference to customer care in planning services. However, it is considered that truly transformational change will come through making best use of data and digital based applications to provide efficiencies in the planning services, to make them more transparent, to enhance engagement, to support reporting and to make them more accessible. Given this, we believe that there is a need to explore how the business needs of planning service customer care can be supported by such platforms.

We are pleased to see that Heads of Planning Scotland have established a [short life working group on digital planning](#) and are working with the Improvement Service Spatial Information Service and Scottish Government in taking this forward. This should look to explore what approaches to planning authority customer needs can be enhanced and how. There are a wealth of good practice examples that can be learned from. We set out some of these in Annex 1.

## For Heads of Planning Scotland

HOPS has a key role in taking forward initiatives that can support more consistent and efficient approaches to supporting customer care.

### **HOPS can support more effective approaches to validation of planning applications**

Issues still exist at the starting point for processing planning applications. Large proportions of planning applications are not being validated by planning authorities as they are seen not have the necessary elements required. It is clear that there remains a need for agreement on what is required and in therefore ensuring consistency in what is needed for the validation of planning applications. There are calls from planning authorities for legislative change to support the enforcement of updated validation standards, ensuring clear expectations for applicants and planning authorities.



In the meantime, it is considered that the current HOPS national guidance on validation should be reviewed, and further promotion of the document takes place. Industry bodies should work with HOPS and Scottish Government to do this and then to promote the validation guidance and the importance of providing the information required.

We believe that there could be a role for AI based intelligence to support a more efficient and effective means of taking forward validation in the medium term. This could be particularly useful with regard to requests for further information on planning applications.

The Validation Customer Care and Good Practice case from Ireland's Office of the Planning Regulator (see Annex 1) highlights how the validation process is a key interaction point for applicants, reflecting the quality of guidance, communication, and collaboration between planning authorities and service users. Authorities that provide proactive support, such as online and in-person checking services, clear documentation checklists, and well-trained staff, see higher rates of valid applications on first submission and reduced delays. Collaboration with agents and applicants, including workshops and targeted communication, further improves consistency and mutual understanding.

There is also an opportunity for HOPS to explore possible joint CPD on validation with key stakeholders.

### **HOPS can support data and digitally based approaches to enhancing customer care**

#### **National approaches to common issues**

HOPS, working with NPI and Scottish Government, should look to explore where there could be national solutions to common issues. This could include communications and resources that explain and respond to permitted development queries, which could be addressed through the national planning hub or a digital portal.

#### **Horizon scanning**

We welcome the establishment of the HOPs Digital Planning Short-Life Working Group in acting as a single point of contact between HOPS and the Scottish Government Digital Consents team. We hope that it can provide a focus to take forward the replacement for e-development, the Apply service and a key

ambition of this should be to improve the user experience of the service. We also believe the working groups has an important role on explore how data and digital based approaches can support ambitions on customer care within planning services.

### **Data consistency**

The working group has also led to Improvement Service Spatial Information Service, Aberdeenshire Council, Highland Council and Fife Council exploring the ongoing challenges around effectively monitoring information coming through the Scottish planning system so it can be used to meet existing and emerging reporting needs. Key to this is looking for a way forward on standardisation of data. There is a collaborative commitment to explore opportunities for standardisation in energy developments in terms of development type, and to consider the creation of application sub-types to ensure that all elements of an application are easily searchable and reportable. This is particularly relevant when you consider the complexities of tracking energy applications that may involve multiple types of generation, storage and infrastructure. This pilot can help to support increased transparency in planning processed so should be continued and built upon.

### **HOPS can support consistency in service standards**

As discussed above there is an opportunity to set out consistent standards if this is agreed across planning services. This would help to provide services users who work over a number of authorities. Heads of Planning Scotland can help to co-ordinate this.

### **HOPS can help develop a common web narrative on planning**

There is a possible role for Heads of Planning Scotland to co-ordinate the development of a consistent narrative across planning services that can be used in all websites to describe what planning services do and how.

### **For service users**

In the context of this report the customer is defined as service users, that is those who have had direct interaction with a planning authority through, for example,



submitting a planning application, or commenting on a planning application. They also have an important and influential role to play in supporting more effective and efficient planning services. Given this they can help support more efficiency and effectiveness in planning services in a number of ways:

### **Applicants should provide quality information**

Applicants should ensure that the quality of applications submitted are good and provide the right type and quality of information that will be needed for the planning authority to assess the proposal. This applies at the validation stage and throughout the planning application assessment process.

### **Applicants should be responsive**

Applicants should seek to respond timeously and properly to planning authorities requests for information.

### **Service users can support efforts to provide clarity on validation**

Service users – and in particular industry representative bodies such as Homes for Scotland, Scottish Property Federation, Scottish Planning Consultants Forum and Scottish Renewables - can support work aimed at taking forward clear national guidance on validation through working with HOPS and Scottish Government to agree and promote it.

### **Service users should provide constructive feedback**

Service users should participate in opportunities to provide feedback on their experiences. These may include, for example, the national planning customer and stakeholder survey, local customer surveys, peer collaborative review workshops organised through the NPIF, and stakeholder forums organised by planning services

Service users should not have unrealistic expectations on the level of engagement and speed of response from planning authorities, bearing in mind resourcing issue and workloads. Engagement with planning services should be used to establish what is feasible by whom. Good planning services rely on planning authorities, applicants, communities and service users so there is a responsibility to engage effectively and to balance expectations, recognising that not all parties can be satisfied due to the inherently contentious nature of planning decisions.

Service users should not abuse planning officers but rather work constructively with them to broker solutions and ways forward.

## Scottish Government

Scottish Government can support efforts to more enhanced customer care in planning services.

### Scottish Government can support data and digitally based approaches to enhancing customer care

The Scottish Government Digital Consents team is currently developing the proposed replacement for e-development with the Apply service. Phase One will replace e-development, improving the user experience of the service and setting the foundation for continuous iterative improvements to Apply in future phases. Phases Two and Three will focus on collaboration and further enhancements to Apply, meeting the needs of planning authorities and applicants alike. This work will also introduce new, previously unavailable, aspects to the service such as “application screening” and “pre-application services”. We believe that there are opportunities through this work to provide more transparency on planning system processes and on the status of applications that are in the system.

Scottish Government, working with HOPS and NPI, should look to explore where there could be national solutions to common issues. This could include communications and resources that explain and respond to permitted development queries, which could be addressed through the national planning hub or a digital portal.



**Scottish Government can support efforts to provide clarity on validation**

Scottish Government can support ambitions set out above in taking forward clear national guidance on validation through working with industry bodies and HOPS to agree and promote it.

**Scottish Government can continue to support approaches to improving customer care**

The National Planning Hub should have an important role to play in supporting planning authorities to implement areas of good practice outlined through providing expertise to enable the development and implementation of communication strategies, to support training on customer care, and to identify, share and implement good practice.

# Monitoring and Delivery

## National Planning Improvement

In taking forward the recommendations and actions set out above, National Planning Improvement will:

- work with planning authorities through the NPIF to ensure that challenges in customer care and relevant improvement actions are identified.
- play a critical friend role to planning authorities in monitoring progress on the improvement actions and identifying additional ones.
- build the evidence base through undertaking the annual national planning authority customer and stakeholder survey and use this to track trends, identify challenges and explore responses to them.
- work with planning authorities to identify where more in depth work is required to develop responses to challenges. This may, for example be taken forward through the newly formed Improvement Leads Network.

## National Planning Hub

We are of the view that the National Planning Hub could have an important role to play in supporting planning authorities to implement areas of good practice outlined through:

- providing expertise to enable the development and implementation of communication strategies.
- providing support training on customer care
- identifying, share and supporting the implementation of good practice.

## National Planning Skills Commitment

Sharing good practice can also be taken forward through CPD providers including the Improvement Service Planning Skills programme, Royal Town Planning Institute, Royal Incorporation of Architects and events organised through the National Planning Skills Commitment. This should:

- explore joint CPD bringing together planning services and its users.



## Heads of Planning Scotland

Heads of Planning Scotland should look to:

- embed customer care into its work and the work of its members. The HOPS Performance and Practice subcommittee can provide a focus for that in providing a space for planning authorities to identify challenges, issues and solutions.

## High Level Group on Planning Performance

The High Level Group on Planning Performance should:

- take an oversight role and monitor progress being made against the recommendations and actions in this report and the impact they are having more broadly on customer satisfaction.



# Annex 1: Selected Good Practice Case Studies

**Organisation:** Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)

**Case Study Title:** Learning from Complaints

**Source:** New Zealand Ministry of Business

**Year Published:** 2014

**Thematic Category:** Customer Feedback and Resolution

## Context

The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) is New Zealand's publicly funded insurance organisation, responsible for supporting people injured in accidents. An internal review found that the organisation's approach to handling complaints was inconsistent and under-recorded. Many customer concerns were not formally captured, and complainants often reported dissatisfaction with how their issues were managed. The Office of the Auditor-General highlighted that ACC lacked a comprehensive understanding of the customer experience during the complaints process, as well as the reasons why some individuals chose not to complain at all. The system at the time was reactive and administrative, rather than being structured to learn from feedback or build customer trust.

## What Happened

In response to the findings, ACC developed and implemented an integrated complaints management system designed to improve consistency, transparency, and learning. The new framework required all complaints and enquiries to be formally recorded and categorised so that no customer concern would be overlooked. Staff across service teams were trained to manage complaints with empathy and professionalism, supported by clear escalation pathways for unresolved issues. The organisation also introduced data analysis capability to identify patterns and trends within complaints, allowing recurring issues to inform wider service improvement. This system placed equal emphasis on resolution and learning, positioning customer feedback as a key driver of service quality rather than a procedural burden.

## Areas of Collaboration

The transformation involved collaboration across multiple areas within ACC, including frontline service teams, complaints handling staff, policy advisors, and organisational learning specialists. The approach was guided by insights from the Office of the Auditor-General and aligned with good practice principles



developed through the Government Centre for Dispute Resolution. Improved internal communication between departments enabled feedback to flow more effectively, ensuring that learning from customer experiences reached decision-makers who could act on it.

## Overall Results

The new complaints management framework created a single, reliable mechanism for recording and resolving customer issues. It strengthened accountability across service teams and led to more consistent handling of customer feedback. The increased transparency enabled ACC to identify systemic weaknesses and implement targeted improvements in both policy and service delivery. Staff reported greater confidence in dealing with complaints, while customers experienced clearer communication and fairer treatment. Although the case study does not provide quantitative data, the overall impact was a shift from a compliance-driven model to one focused on responsiveness, empathy, and continuous improvement.

## Lessons Learned

The ACC experience demonstrates that handling feedback and complaints effectively requires more than process changes; it demands a cultural shift in how organisations perceive customer voice. By capturing all feedback, analysing it systematically, and linking it directly to service improvement, organisations can transform complaints into a valuable learning resource. Investing in staff capability and establishing clear communication pathways ensures customers feel heard and respected. Most importantly, understanding and acting on feedback builds trust, enabling sustained improvement in both customer satisfaction and organisational performance.



**Organisation:** London Borough of Hackney

**Case Study Title:** Digital Planning Service

**Source:** Open Digital Planning Programme

**Year Published:** 2023

**Thematic Category:** Service Design and Improvement

## Context

Following a cyber-attack in 2020 that severely disrupted planning services, Hackney Council used the opportunity to redesign its digital planning system from a customer first perspective. The goal was to rebuild public trust and deliver a more transparent, accessible and consistent experience for applicants and residents engaging with the planning process.

## What Happened

Hackney joined the Department for Levelling Up, Housing Communities Open Digital Planning (ODP) programme. Working with partners including Southwark Council and Unboxed, Hackney co-designed new digital tools for submitting and tracking applications, as well as improved online content for pre-application guidance. User-research workshops identified barriers for applicants, such as unclear forms and inconsistent feedback, and informed simplified, visual layouts. The new tools integrated digital mapping, automated validation checks and plain-English instructions to improve completion accuracy.

## Areas of Collaboration

The project involved Hackney's planning and digital teams, central government, Open Digital Planning partners and service users, including architects, developers, and householders. Regular user-testing and open-source collaboration across local authorities ensured iterative improvement.

## Overall Results

The redesigned services reduced incomplete submissions, increased first-time validation rates, and improved user satisfaction scores recorded through in-service feedback. Officers reported reduced time spent clarifying missing information, and users highlighted clearer guidance and faster confirmation of progress.

## Lessons Learned

Embedding user-research and open design principles into planning services can simultaneously rebuild trust and streamline internal processes. Transparency, plain language and real-time tracking are key drivers of customer confidence and perceived fairness in the planning system.



**Organisation:** Office of the Planning Regulator (Ireland)

**Case Study Title:** Validation Customer Care and Good Practice

**Source:** Office of the Planning Regulator

**Year Published:** 2023

**Thematic Category:** Frameworks, Standards and Legislation

## Context

The validation stage is a critical customer interaction point within Ireland's planning process. The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) identifies validation quality as a key indicator of customer care, reflecting the effectiveness of guidance, communication, and collaboration between applicants and planning authorities.

## What Happened

The OPR reviewed validation practices across planning authorities to identify approaches that minimise invalid applications and improve customer experience. Findings emphasised that authorities can enhance validation by providing proactive and accessible support, such as online and counter-based checking services, clear documentation checklists, and well-trained staff. Continuous monitoring of validation performance and prompt handling of complaints were also recognised as essential elements of good customer service.

## Areas of Collaboration

Collaboration occurs between planning authorities, agents, and applicants, each with shared responsibility for ensuring applications are complete and compliant. Authorities can work with agents through validation workshops and targeted communication, particularly where repeated issues are identified. This partnership model supports mutual understanding and improves overall service consistency.

## Overall Results

Authorities adopting proactive, customer-centred validation processes experience higher rates of valid applications on first submission, reduced administrative delays, and greater public confidence. The approach also supports transparency by ensuring that application information is accurate and accessible from the outset.

## Lessons Learned

Good customer care in validation relies on clear guidance, consistent communication, and mutual accountability between applicants and authorities. Investment in staff training and proactive engagement with agents enhances efficiency and trust. A collaborative approach to validation promotes clarity, accessibility, and fairness within the planning process.



**Organisation:** City of Reykjavik (Iceland)

**Case Study Title:** Better Reykjavik Digital Platform for Collaborative Urban Planning

**Source:** Observatory of Public Sector Innovation

**Year Published:** 2019

**Thematic Category:** Engagement and Communication

## Context

Better Reykjavik is an online participation platform jointly developed by the Citizens Foundation and the City of Reykjavik to connect citizens and local government, improve trust, and strengthen policymaking. Work on the open-source platform began in 2008, following Iceland's financial crisis, and it was formally launched in May 2010. Initially created as a civic response to low confidence in politics, it quickly evolved into an official municipal tool for public engagement, policy crowdsourcing and participatory budgeting.

## What Happened

The platform allows citizens to submit original ideas and solutions to local urban challenges, debate them using a structured system of arguments 'for' and 'against', and prioritise proposals through up and down voting. The debate system replaces traditional comment threads to encourage reasoned discussion and reduce polarisation. Better Reykjavik integrates multimedia submissions, machine translation, and artificial intelligence tools that recommend ideas, detect toxic content, and automate classification.

## Areas of Collaboration

Better Reykjavik is jointly managed by the Citizens Foundation and the City of Reykjavik. The collaboration involves municipal staff, community groups, and residents who participate in proposing, debating and voting on ideas. District committees and the project management team evaluate submissions for feasibility, while AI-assisted moderation supports administrators by identifying and classifying content

## Overall Results

More than 70,000 residents, around one third of Reykjavik's population, have engaged with the platform since launch. Approximately 450 ideas have been processed through agenda setting, and 700 projects implemented through participatory budgeting. The initiative has visibly improved urban spaces across all districts, while creating a continuous dialogue between citizens and the city administration. Better Reykjavik has been internationally recognised as a pioneering model for participatory democracy and transparent local governance.



## Lessons Learned

Digital tools can embed customer care principles in planning and policymaking by giving residents accessible, continuous channels for input and feedback. Better Reykjavik demonstrates how openness, traceability and structured debate improve the quality of engagement and trust between citizens and public authorities. The success of the platform also highlights the importance of combining technical innovation, such as AI moderation and multimedia input, with inclusive design that encourages respectful and reasoned participation.



**Organisation:** City Council of Barcelona

**Case Study Title:** Decidim Barcelona's Participatory Budgeting Platform

**Source:** Observatory of Citizen Participation (OIDP)

**Year Published:** 2023

**Thematic Category:** Digital Experience and Access

## Context

The City of Barcelona introduced a participatory budgeting process for the period 2020–2023, enabling citizens to influence how part of the municipal budget would be spent across all districts. The process was implemented through Decidim, Barcelona's first digital democracy platform, developed by the City Council to promote open, transparent and traceable public decision-making. Decidim, meaning "we decide" in Catalan, was built as an open-source digital infrastructure to support public participation in city planning and budgeting decisions.

## What Happened

Between February 2020 and June 2021, citizens submitted 1,982 proposals via the Decidim platform. Following technical validation by the council, 823 proposals progressed to the next stage. The final public voting phase took place in June 2021, resulting in 76 selected projects for investment. In total, residents could determine the allocation of up to €75 million of the municipal budget, representing approximately five per cent of Barcelona's overall budget for 2020–2023. The process led to around 44,000 new user registrations on the platform, with citizens casting more than 47,000 endorsements during the validation phase.

## Areas of Collaboration

The participatory budgeting process was coordinated by the City Council of Barcelona in collaboration with local communities and neighbourhood organisations. The process combined online engagement through the Decidim platform with in-person assistance points located across the city's districts to ensure accessibility. Municipal staff, digital platform specialists and community groups worked together to validate proposals, facilitate voting and ensure equitable participation across all areas of the city.

## Overall Results

The initiative enabled citizens to directly influence spending decisions on community projects and local improvements. Seventy-six projects were ultimately selected through participatory voting, reflecting the priorities identified by residents. The process significantly expanded citizen engagement in decision-



making, as evidenced by the increase in registered users and participation levels. The integration of digital and offline channels improved accessibility and strengthened public confidence in how municipal resources are allocated.

### **Lessons Learned**

The Decidim platform demonstrated that transparent digital processes could enhance trust and participation in planning and budgeting decisions. Combining online systems with physical support points ensured that participation was inclusive and accessible to a broad demographic. Clear communication of process stages and feedback on proposal outcomes improved user experience and helped citizens understand how their input contributed to final decisions. The case illustrates how embedding openness, traceability and responsiveness within civic processes can improve customer care and strengthen relationships between authorities and the public.



