

Customer Driven Engagement in Planning



Context

North Ayrshire Council's planning service has embedded a place-based approach to customer service across all six localities. The service plays an active role in Council-wide initiatives, including the development of Place Profiles ([North Ayrshire Place Profiles](#)), the Local Housing Strategy ([Local Housing Strategy](#)), and the Community Planning Locality Partnerships ([Our localities Archive - North Ayrshire Community](#)). This collaborative and locality-focused approach ensures that customer needs, aspirations, and regulatory requirements are understood within their community context and feed directly into service delivery.

What Happened

The planning service reviewed how customers interact with planning and development processes, identifying opportunities to make engagement more proactive, accessible, and meaningful. A focus was placed on understanding customer aspirations and improving experiences, rather than relying on formal surveys or consultations which can lead to fatigue.

Key actions included:

1. Sharing data across the Council to build a fuller understanding of local needs.
2. Front-loading customer contact, including same-day call backs, and live phone lines.
3. Providing pre-application advice and removing discretionary charges to encourage early engagement.



4. Streamlining processes to ensure applications are determined within statutory timescales.
5. Maintaining high officer availability through hybrid working and the Planning Microsoft Teams Group to support personal callers and direct communication.
6. This proactive customer approach was reinforced through monthly discussions to review feedback and continuously improve the customer experience.

Areas of Collaboration

Customer service improvements were delivered through cross-service collaboration within the Council. Planning worked closely with colleagues in housing, community planning, and other departments to align customer insights and data. Local engagement also supported community-led initiatives, such as the Largs Gondola project, where the Planning Service facilitated constructive discussions with an American venture capital company to help local aspirations progress.

Overall Result

The planning service now operates with a strong financial position, supported by fee over-recovery despite maintaining free pre-application services. Customer satisfaction is reflected in a very low number of complaints, which are consistently outweighed by positive feedback. The service's streamlined processes, proactive communication, and place-based approach have collectively strengthened relationships with communities and partners, leading to improved performance and trust in the planning process.

Lessons Learned

1. Effective customer service depends on accessibility, consistency, and early engagement.
2. Listening to feedback through ongoing contact is more valuable than over-relying on surveys.
3. Collaboration across council services ensures decisions are informed by a complete picture of local needs.
4. Being proactive and pragmatic supports positive outcomes and builds confidence.
5. Maintaining availability and direct contact with customers is essential for a responsive and trusted planning service.

This case study has been prepared in collaboration by North Ayrshire Council and the National Planning Improvement Team at the Improvement Service. We publish good practice case studies identified through our work on the National Planning Improvement Framework and the National Planning Hub. They aim to support the sharing of good practice and build collaboration across the sector in addressing common challenges. Please email us at npi@improvementservice.org.uk if your authority has a good practice case study to share.

