

'Pre-Apps' need to get the buzz back

In 2003 local authorities were given the power to charge for pre-application advice but the routine since has lost its shine, reflects Grant Leggett

I can still remember the buzz as a planning officer in 2003 when local authorities were given the power to charge for pre-application advice. The authority I worked for was an early adopter and we brought in the service immediately. There was a new sort of pressure to deliver, but it was a pressure and challenge we relished. And we responded with gusto.

Pre-app enquiries were put in a specially-coloured folder that sang from in-trays. They took priority over applications and Duty Planner schedules. We rigorously adhered to the pre-app timetable; they were acknowledged within 5 days and a meeting was set up within 10. We studied the proposals and held internal pre-meeting discussions with the team of officers that would be in the actual meeting. We agonised over our advice and wrote pre-app advice reports full of detail, and the advice went out 10 days after we'd met.

Now fast forward to today, thirteen years is a fair old time in planning, and anyone would expect that over that timescale the process would lose its shine once it became routine. But sadly, in many cases, it has gone beyond being routine. It's not only lost its shine, but it's become a bit grubby.

We have seen pre-app dropped down the priority list for officers who are charged with high caseloads. Planning departments see it as a chore that takes them away from their pressing applications. Many developers are now cynical of the process for a variety of reasons. Some view it simply as a tax that is made compulsory by the threat that an application that has not been through pre-app will be auto-refused on its first attempt. Accordingly, some applicants, even on substantial developments, are being advised to submit applications without any pre-app, recognising that even if refused, the refusal will provide more concrete advice than pre-app advice would, and in some cases it is quicker.

Others see it as a deliberate delaying tactic to keep applications back till sometime in the future. There is a sense that officers are drowning so deeply in their current caseloads they just want to delay anything new coming in.

One can't help but sympathise with these views. Everyone has a tale to tell of how the pre-app process has outraged them. Often local authorities' published timetables for advice are often seemingly ignored and the process drags on interminably, to the point that some applications are made before formal advice is received. More often than not we give our own advice to developers following meetings on what should be progressed, albeit at some risk, but balancing that risk against delays in waiting for a response that could take weeks or not be clear.

There is something very disheartening about paying a pre-application fee in the thousands of pounds only for the meeting to be attended by one or two officers. The disheartenment quickly turns to anger when the officers haven't reviewed the

information and the meeting becomes a glorified presentation of the proposals to officers who are unable to comment because they haven't had time to digest it or don't have the expertise or authority. Important matters are sometimes not considered in the meeting, meaning the written response is a one-sided view that has not been discussed, and results in a prolonged period of exchanges to clarify matters that could and should have been dealt with face-to-face.

Perhaps most frustrating to developers are the cases where the advice received is simply a regurgitation of policy with no real assessment or balance. Consideration of planning applications is not a tick-box exercise and neither should pre-application advice be.

There are still very good news stories in the pre-app world. Recently we have gone through a process that was timely, attended by the relevant officers of all necessary disciplines, and where the meeting fostered an open discussion on the main issues. Even though the authority in that case was opposed to the development in principle, we were able to have a sensible discussion on it where both sides understood their points of view. And while it was clear the authority was not going to be persuaded to our way of thinking, we were able to put that to one side and examine all the proposal's other elements in a constructive way.

Developers, of course, are not blameless in the creeping decline of pre-app services. Successful pre-application discussions are a two-way street. Where in the early days they were as excited about the prospects of the new service that they also contributed with great enthusiasm, nowadays their pre-application submissions are often lacking in detail. Whether this is because of the decline in the quality of services causing them to be cynical is a matter for some consideration, but not an excuse for not holding up their end of the deal.

Developers also often have unrealistic expectations of the quality of advice they can get when they are reluctant to invest in it. They expect detailed advice despite only wanting to provide scant detail. The all-too-common and somewhat outdated tactic of asking for way too much at pre-app knowing it will get knocked down by officers has also worn very thin. Officers are jaded, and I expect somewhat insulted by this tactic, and we think it only serves to prolong the pre-app process since it's only really by the second stage that a sensible scheme is on the table.

Sometimes developers don't understand the nuance involved in pre-app advice. There is an art to reading between the lines of the advice that officers give verbally and in writing, which some developers don't entirely grasp. Some also don't fully understand the implications of pre-application advice being without prejudice. It is, and must always be a fundamental principle of pre-application advice that it is given as the >>>



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>>> informed and honest views of officers, and understood that sometimes when proposals are subjected to the full public glare of consultation, officers will change their views.

At the heart of the decline in pre-application services is resourcing. We recognise that the lack of resource in local authorities has stretched everyone to breaking point. If there is a panacea to improving the service, it is more resource for local authorities that desperately need it. The difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in the public sector are reaching a crisis point. Some authorities are considering, or in Lambeth's case have implemented, pay rises across the board to planning staff to help stave off approaches from the private sector or to prevent people leaving planning altogether. These pay rises are, ironically, paid for by pre-application fees, which we expect are set to rise across London. We will await the reaction to the increase in fees. It remains to be seen if the price increases serve to improve the quality of the services and attitudes to it, or whether it will be viewed more cynically as an inflationary rise required to ensure the existing level of service.

Should the level of resourcing not change to enable the quality of services to improve, developers can take the bull by

the horns and do their bit to raise the bar. The simplest means of helping to ensure a good quality pre-application service is to ensure that the quality of information provided is up to scratch. It must be sufficiently clear and detailed to enable the relevant matters to be considered and advised upon. Clarity is as important as detail; developers should make the local authority's job in giving them the advice required as simple as possible, by making each pre-app submission clear and easy to understand.

A helpful tactic we use is to provide a simple schedule of key matters to be discussed and advised upon. We follow this up immediately after pre-application meetings with our own schedule of matters agreed and not agreed.

There is no doubt in our minds that pre-application advice remains an essential and valuable part of the development process. There is also no doubt that it should remain as a paid-for service. But all parties to it need to contribute to bringing the buzz back. Local authority resourcing remains the main issue in my mind, for why the service has declined. While there doesn't seem to be any quick fix coming for that we need to do our part to keep it streamlined, focused and timely. ■

BELOW:
Pre-application is an essential part of the process and can be very successful



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