



**Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study**

**Sedgemoor District Council Development  
Management Service**

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## **1. Team Background**

Sedgemoor District Councils Development Management Service includes two area teams covering the District, a compliance team and support team. The service sits within Inward Investment and Growth which includes Major Projects in connection with Hinkley Point C and National Grid upgrade (EDF), Planning Policy, Economic Development and specialists (Landscape and Conservation Officers).

In March last year as a result of government guidance the whole team commenced remote working and the planning process was re-designed over a 2 week period to go from predominantly paper-based to electronic. During this time Officers remained available and all applications were still accepted. To ensure accessibility of the service 'essential staff' were identified to process paper applications (once a week) submitted by the public that were unable to engage virtually.

In May 2020 Sedgemoor commenced virtual planning committees weekly, reducing to fortnightly and then monthly to progress the backlog of applications awaiting committee determination.

Applications, notwithstanding early predictions have continued to increase resulting in greater pressure in terms of capacity issues which in culmination with internal promotions has resulted in additional staff being taken on and trained during lock-down. The team is inclusive and currently operate with a number of unseen disabilities including partial deafness, colour blindness, type 1 diabetes and autism. Whilst these can impact on the needs of these individuals this is accommodated within the service and does not adversely affect their roles or ability to perform as a team. The range of abilities can also highlight wider accessibility issues for members public

## **2. Development and application of imaginative approaches and techniques to achieve high quality planning solutions.**

A key priority in maintaining delivery is providing clear updates regarding service provision, delays and improvement measures. Sedgemoor District Council updates a forum of Architects and agents on a quarterly basis on changes to our website, processes, staffing, delays and improvements. We maintained two Annual CPD events virtually to ensure they were appraised of changes to legislation including temporary permitted development rights, use class changes and extensions to permissions enabling the built sector to flourish. We updated the validation checklist in lock down increasing quality and consistency of the applications to ensuring electronic use.

Staffing changes through re-deployment, supporting economic development with business grants, and adjustments to cover long term absence was communicated to manage expectations. The nature of working remotely caused delays during the registration process, exacerbated through two internal promotions and loss of our planning apprentice role. The quarterly update confirmed measures imposed to improve performance which included tripling broadband width, transitioning staff into the office and training additional staff.

A planning and COVID page was launched for our website and regularly updated in line with changing government guidance. This confirmed changes in processes and determination of applications through virtual means and remote assessment by requesting site visit photos where necessary.

Virtual planning committee commenced May 2020 running weekly, then fortnight to monthly to recover the backlog of applications awaiting determination, allowing the continued progression of major development through the planning system. In May 2021 following cessation of virtual committees hybrid meetings were arranged, Members present in person whilst the meeting ran virtually to comply with regulations and allow maximum accessibility. The launch of virtual planning committees was communicated through direct e mail and the website to confirm operation.

High planning performance has been maintained throughout this period due to integration of Development Management with Economic Development, Planning Policy and Major Projects. Over 1,205 applications having been decided since 23rd March 2020 including 57 'Major' developments

of housing, mixed use, leisure, Council led schemes and employment, 432 'Minor' developments and 716 'Other' developments maintaining performance of 100%, 95% and 92% respectively over this period. A number of applications have also received resolution through committee during this time including housing for over 1,796 dwellings and one site providing over 32Ha of employment land. Our performance and ability to adapt is important and has allowed us to support the delivery of development and outcomes for the local community through new housing development and job creation.

Joint working has been maintained with County Highways and Highways England to agree funding ratios, future funding junction improvements and a design and build being promoted through Somerset County to allow for new development.

Joint working is also underway with the surrounding Districts and County through 'Enabling Growth' Project which supports and facilitates appropriate business and housing growth within the County.

Strategic projects are being pursued such as determining and addressing phosphate impact/mitigation, standardization of conditions, streamlining 106 agreements and sharing best practice.

### **3. Client/applicant/partners satisfaction with the service provided.**

Delay in processing applications has delayed determination putting pressure on Officers and our positive and pro-active relationship with applicants and agents. As a result we are prioritizing applications that can be resolved without the need for consultation ensuring they are determined as soon as we are able. This has received favorable comments:

I therefore just wanted to say many thanks for being able to deal with this well within the 8-week deadline, by my calculation just 5 days from validation to decision, and that includes a weekend!!)...It's good so see that there are Council's that are managing to cope with the current unusual circumstances.

Michael Hyde MRTPI – MH Planning Associates

To manage expectations in these challenging times our website is regularly updated and the architects and agents are updated by email. Within the last year we have received the below:

Thank you very much for your email and the explanations of the current pandemics further affect on us all; it is much appreciated in all cases the assistance and calls taken and received from your team, a Real Tonic and always helpful...thank you for all you are doing to keep the system going  
Keith - TeKKWiseLtd

I greatly appreciate SDC's willingness to have officers being contacted directly and keep agents informed and up to date with the issues you are facing. Sadly this is not the case with many councils we are dealing with who seem to use COVID as an excuse for officers to cease communicating directly with agents about applications. As a dyslexic I greatly appreciate being able to discuss any issues directly, so there are no misunderstandings and solutions can be agreed promptly. So a BIG THANK YOU for continuing to be available and for keeping us up to date and managing our expectations. We in turn can then manage our clients expectations and keep them informed.'

Mime Architects

By virtue of your email, you have managed our expectations so we can manage the expectations of our clients. We are in difficult times at present; indeed all of us. Therefore as long as we work together and manage each others expectations and communicate well (which you guys at Sedgemoor do extremely well) then all should be good.

If our clients and us as agents have to wait they we to wait - of course there will always be the odd exception where urgency is required but you have already demonstrated that you act quickly and efficiently - almost Ninja style!!!'

Mike Tremlett – Graham Moir Associates

We also undertook Member Training virtually ahead of our first hybrid meeting May this year.

I wish to pass on my very genuine thanks for the 1st class, very informative & extremely helpful tutorial yesterday... yesterday was the most useful & helpful tutorial I have ever been part off. From beginning to end I have gained & stored so much it has completely changed my train of thought & approach to future DC meetings.

Councillor Alistair Hendry

#### **4. Ability of planners to manage multi-disciplinary projects or to work within a multi-disciplinary environment**

Through the Enabling Growth Project Sedgemoor District Council has engaged with knowledge exchange groups providing peer support for Senior and Junior levels within Planning. Senior level includes heads of planning within the adjoining Districts and County enabling open discussion across authority boundaries, increasing collaboration on strategic issues and advancing improvements.

Junior level provides peer support and relatable experiences for those early within their planning career allowing shared learning and exposure to differing approaches to consider current and future practice.

More integrated relationships have eased arrangement of multi-disciplinary meetings to discuss and resolve issues, local or strategic. On a local level this has involved a virtual meeting with local residents, developers, County Highways and the Lead Local Flood Authority co-ordinated and lead by the case officer to discuss and determine next steps regarding local drainage and land level concerns on an application site. This open exchange with the adjoining residents allowed all parties to understand the needs and concerns addressing the issue comprehensively and fostering good relationships between neighbours and developers.

Sedgemoor has regular meetings with Highways England and worked collaboratively with them through lock down to agree modelling for motorway junctions, equate out a contributions strategy for improvement measures, apply this to current planning applications and pursue match funding to ensure certainty of delivery and continued growth. Streamlining these relationships has been vital in resolving the capacity debates to allow allocated growth.

Sedgemoor is also involved in regular meetings to ensure a consistent approach and resolution to the phosphate issue within Somerset that is stalling relevant development within the SSSI impact zone. These meetings are collaborative between all local authorities and include representatives from Natural England with guest speakers from 'EnTrade' who are looking to deliver a phosphate credit scheme and Wessex Water.

The pressure of additional workload for County Ecology in respect of the above and County Highways as a result of Covid has impacted on consultee responses on planning applications. Somerset Enabling Growth Project has been seminal in addressing this issue and Sedgemoor have recently started hosting Ecology and Highway surgeries (2hr sessions once a fortnight) in conjunction with County where applications which require advice, clarification or discussion can be raised, resolved and actioned. This has reduced overall workload for the consultees whilst allowing officers to raise and move cases forward in the absence of formal responses. The outcome of the surgeries are confirmed within a spreadsheet sent to the consultee for confirmation to ensure an appropriate audit trail.

Sedgemoor is streamlining 106 instructions collaborating with County (Highways/Education/Rights of Way) and authorities across Somerset to form one point of instruction and minimise duplication.

Once tested this can be rolled out across the County. We have also run a CPD 'lunch and learn' session sharing best practice in communicating with agents. Sessions are recorded and saved onto the Enabling Growth Project TEAMS which is accessible across all Somerset authorities.

**5. A demonstrable commitment to EDI sits at the heart of our definition of a high level service**

Our Corporate Strategy sets out three priority themes: Customers and Efficiency; Growth and Infrastructure; Housing, health and wellbeing. Planning is one of the key services that cuts across off of these areas and needs to ensure delivery of growth in a sustainable and accessible way to ensure the needs of the wider public are met.

Internally within the service there are a number of staff members with unseen disabilities. At point of appointment if these are disclosed there is a discussion on what these conditions mean for them, what reasonable adjustments may be required and what they are comfortable in disclosing to others. Their day to day functioning within and as part of the team is not affected and it has not affected their integration into the respective teams.

Lock down in particular has had a significant impact on peoples well being notwithstanding any underlying conditions. Sedgemoor launched a number of initiatives with 'Wake up and work out' sessions being run to encourage physical well being and a well being webpage providing links to an Employee Assistance Programme for counselling and general advice, mindfulness workshops and resilience programmes. This service has been accessed by a number of the team during the last year with many feeling comfortable discussing their mental and emotional well being within the team meetings which bonded the team and helped many push through their day to day issues.

Starting from within and looking out planning considers Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in determining applications. From residential development to community or commercial facilities these should be arranged to ensure equitable access. Under the Equality Act 2010 the Local Authority has to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and advance equality of opportunity between persons who share relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not and foster good relations between those with and without relevant protective characteristics. Consideration of planning applications against this is being incorporated into reports and forms part of presentations to Members at committee so they can consider the impacts of development on all. A number of officers are also attending a webinar later this month on Neurodiversity in Planning Engagement Toolkit: Making Planning as Accessible as Possible promoted by BECG.

Beyond policy accessibility is a consideration in provision of play equipment associated with development with accessible roundabouts, 'sound scape' areas (musical tubes, rain sounds) and quieter play zones being provided. Northgate, which is an Inward Investment Project sought to provide an multi use facility with open circulation spaces, accessible connections with foot and cycle links and an accessible play space with natural wildflower areas.

**6. Commitment to staff development, business improvements and active participation in professional and educational activities**

Within the Corporate Strategy our 'Values' are Honesty, Integrity, Aspiration and Teamwork. These are core to the operation of all our teams and align with RTPi code of conduct.

Sedgemoor has Investor in People Gold rating and is committed to investing in staff development. The Planning and wider Inward Investment and Growth team have benefited from planning apprentices for over four years with each successive year resulting in the appointment of the apprentices to a role within Planning or the wider service with only one apprentice leaving the Local

Authority for a position within the Police.

We have former apprentices within roles within the Economic Team, 3 as Planning Technicians 1 of which is currently working within the Major Projects team covering HPC and EDF developments and 1 as the CIL and 106 Officer. This investment and succession planning has worked well for the individuals and the business enabling the Authority to maintain and grow the positive and pro-active culture and embrace new and different approaches with team members always being encouraged to ask why we do what we do.

This has allowed staff empowerment in suggesting improvements that are more obvious from an operational perspective. Improvements suggested by others range from amendments to processes, updates and additional pages on the website, streamlining the messaging system and reducing documents produced at validation stage through culmination.

Just prior to lock down an APC event was hosted for the team and off the back of this there are 4 members of the team currently working on their logs with a review to submitting for chartered status before the end of the year. Internally existing Chartered Members within the team are providing mentor support for these individuals to encourage momentum.

Staff members are encouraged to maintain their CPD with local 'Lunch and Learn' sessions providing insight into surrounding districts practice, RTPI events for relevant courses and most recently Homes England Summer Learning Plan was circulated and a number of officers subscribed to attended specific training on 'Understanding Compulsory Purchase Orders' and 'Principles of Market Failure' among others. As part of succession planning there is also an apprenticeship degree and Masters in planning being undertaken by individuals within the team and a Level 7 Management Course.

Last year the now Service Manager had the opportunity to host RTPI events in person moving to virtual events and through connections with the Planning Aid Task Group hosted a more informal event this year on community engagement and the white paper. This considered the potential changes and impact that these could have on community engagement and delivery in the future.

## **7. Why should your team win this award?**

"Amongst other things the partnership that has developed between the County and District Planning Authorities and its associated relationships and culture has enormously improved performance on highways matters and has enabled a coordinated and rapid solution to Phosphates issues which could have been a major barrier to development in Somerset." - Senior Leadership Team for Enabling Growth Project

Enabling Growth has formed a connectivity across all Districts and the County enabling us to ask 'why' things done that way and 'what' can we do cumulatively to evolve and improve services. This open discussion has allowed officers to challenge the status quo and suggest and trail changes with the workload for improvements being shared. The drive for progression is shared by all and is being driven from Sedgemoors perspective to realise improvements and share our pro-active and enabling culture.

Notwithstanding the challenges the team faced officers have proven flexible in the wider support for Economic Development through government grants, successful funding bids for levelling up and High Street Funds. High planning performance has been maintained through determination of major projects, housing allocations and employment allocations supporting the delivery of development and outcomes for the local community through new housing and job creation. This is achieved through the open collaboration between Development Management, Economic Development, Policy and Major Projects with solution focused approaches to sites and addressing barriers.

None of the above would be possible without the team behind it all and the time and effort they have all put in with the majority of planning officers having to accommodate for home schooling during lock down. Mentally and emotionally the team demonstrated amazing support for each other and flexibility in approach focusing attention where required. This in turn allowed the continued and successful operation of the service which has been noted by Architects and Agents.