

Planning Department criticised in UK review

By Tom Innes
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JERSEY'S Planning Department has been heavily criticised by UK experts in a review that highlights duplication, confusion and lengthy delay in dealing with applications.

The department has released a report by the Planning Officers Society, which conducted a 'health check' that culminated in a report containing 61 recommendations.

Environment Minister John Young has denied that the report is a damning one and defended the department, which he said had been affected by restructuring and budget cuts.

A steady decline in the number of applications dealt with inside the target times of eight weeks (for minor cases) and 13 weeks (for major cases) is highlighted in the report. Having been above the benchmark of 85% in 2014, by 2018 just 52% of major cases and 70% of minor applications were determined within the set limits.

The report said there was 'no apparent explanation for this continuing decline in performance levels in terms of workload, resources or changes in processes'.

Pre-application advice should be provided to all applicants, but the report's authors said this system was not functioning properly and that 77 requests were outstanding having not been dealt with inside

the target time of six weeks. Some agents no longer attempted to have pre-application discussions because of the poor response rate that meant waits of up to 16 weeks.

The report also describes:
● How a more positive approach to planning should be possible without compromising professional integrity.

● An absence of any rigorous performance management and monitoring.

● A prima facie case for closer working [with Building Control and Land Registry] to avoid duplication, potential confusion and protracted time scales.

● How the minister's portfolio had been spread across four separate departments in diverse locations, making the minister's oversight role more difficult and causing greater disconnection from the planning function than previously.

● There was no formal minuting of briefing meetings between the minister and officers.

● A policy for redaction of personal data that is significantly more risk averse than in England and errs on the side of caution to an unnecessary level.

● The failure to act on a previous recommendation from 2013 to set up an annual developer/agent forum or similar customer focus group to provide regular feedback on the department.

Deputy Young said that while



■ Environment Minister John Young: 'I would not lay the blame on officers - they have had a rough time'

he accepted many of the recommendations, he could not accept the underlying theme of the report that the planning function should serve as an enabler of development.

'The department's job has got more difficult and contentious at a time when budgets have been stripped out and senior staff have been lost,' he said. 'The reorganisation of government has had a very significantly disruptive effect, and

morale levels have dropped. 'I would not lay the blame on officers - they have had a rough time and need more support and resources.'

The minister said he had had one brief meeting around a year ago with those responsible for the report, and was initiating several positive changes that were not mentioned.

He admitted that the performance in determining applications with stipulated times had dropped and that applications by householders needed to be given greater priority.

Publication of the report comes shortly after the launch of a petition by Islanders dismayed by the conduct of the Planning Department and calling for an independent review into the conduct of officers.

Former Jersey Royal Company owners Tom and Rose Binet initiated the campaign after reaching 'breaking point' in their dealings with planners and joined forces with others in launching the petition, which was promoted via an advertisement in the JEP last Thursday.

Mr Binet alleges that green zone policy has been misused, with wealthy applicants treated differently from those who are less well off, and that members of senior management have an unreasonable attitude in dealing with some applications.

In brief

Drugs charges

A 23-YEAR-OLD man appeared before the Royal Court yesterday charged with four drug charges. James Andrew Mayo is facing charges relating to MDMA and cannabis resin. The court was told that Mr Mayo is alleged to have possessed both drugs with intent to supply on 4 October at the police station. He was also alleged to have been concerned in the supply of both drugs between 1 September and 4 October. The case was adjourned to 17 January.

Murder trial

A MURDER trial is due to start in March. Jamie Lee Warn (46) appeared before the Royal Court yesterday charged with murdering Zsuzsanna Besenyi and perverting the course of justice. The trial is due to begin on Monday 23 March with the trial set for three weeks. As well as the one murder charge, he has denied two counts of criminally perverting the course of justice by knowingly and voluntarily giving false information.

Assault case

A MAN will be sentenced in January for grave and criminal assault. Richard Murray (37) had previously admitted the charge along with a further offence of breach of the peace by fighting. He had faced two other charges of intending to pervert the course of justice. However, the prosecution offered no evidence on both charges. He is due to be sentenced on 24 January.

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UK fishermen urge Islanders to participate in marine park talks

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FISHERMEN in Jersey have been urged by UK counterparts to take part in discussions about setting up a coastal marine park.

Proposals for a so-called 'emerald ring' around the Island - advocated earlier this month by Economic Development Minister Lyndon Farnham - provoked a hostile reaction from the Jersey Fishermen's Association.

But a fisherman in Devon has spoken positively about the experience in Lyme Bay, where the industry has worked together with conservation charity Blue Marine on a scheme to protect the marine environment while also encouraging sustainable fishing.

Angus Walker, who fishes from Axmouth, said the collaboration had worked well after a difficult start.

'There was definitely some initial concern,' he said. 'People get frightened of change and some of us were terrified.'

Lyme Bay was closed to mobile fishing gear in 2008 as part of a move to protect the seabed and halt the decline in fish stocks. The initial result was an upsurge in the use of pots, causing further damage to the seabed, but this has been reversed since Blue Marine began working with local fishermen and limits were agreed.

'Two of us drove away from our first meeting and within 100 yards I had said that we had to go to every meeting because these people were dangerous,' Mr Walker added.

end - they have become champions of our industry and appreciate that fishermen are an endangered species as well.'

With studies showing that the reefs and seabed in Lyme Bay were regenerating, accompanied by a recovery in fish populations, Mr Walker said Jersey could learn from the experience.

'My main message is that you have to sit round the table with conservationists and people from government or they will do what they damn well please,' he said. 'Better still, come up with ideas and constructive arguments and then you can start to make headway.'

Blue Marine's UK project director Tim Glover said work in Lyme Bay had relied heavily on the input from local fishermen.

'It was important because they knew as much if not more than we did,' he said. 'We have quite a good relationship with fishermen in Jersey and hope we can work with them.'

It's remarkable how quickly the flora and fauna in the area did recover thanks to management measures that look at the whole ecosystem - it's not a case of excluding fishing, but it needs to be managed.'

Writing in the Future Jersey supplement published by the JEP, Senator Farnham said the Island had an opportunity to be a world leader in conservation by creating a coastal marine park around the entire coastline.

The suggestion was welcomed by the National Trust for Jersey as a move that would bring protection of marine habitats in line with the terrestrial national park that covers 16% of the Island's land-mass.