

A twenty-first century appeals system....?

So I awoke, and behold it was a dream. – John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*



The Andy Rogers column

When I was a young man approaching the last quarter of the twentieth century, life seemed simple. Computers were in their infancy. The appeal system enabled one to obtain an independent decision in a reasonable time. Pre-application discussions were informal and gave you a good idea of what would be acceptable. Planning officers were noble folk who stayed in the job for their pension. Once you had negotiated a scheme, you could be sure that the committee would be recommended to approve.

And submitting an appeal involved filling in the forms by hand, making copies of the relevant documents and popping round to the Post Office.

Now we live in the twenty-first century. Computers are tiny, universal and so easy to use. The appeal system is weighed down by an ever more complex set of immutable procedures. Pre-application discussion is expensive (if available) and often abortive. Planning officers from the Antipodes do not know their area and anyway move on before your application reaches its

delayed maturity. Planning committees shelter behind the God of public participation and so follow the loudest local voice, regardless of the planning merits of the case.

But not everything changes. Submitting an appeal still involves filling in the forms by hand, making copies of the data and popping round to the Post Office (although this takes much longer as the local Post Office has closed and therefore the main one has a long queue). Why is this? – because (along with most of my colleagues) I use a proper computer – an Apple Mac.

So we tried to find out why the Planning Inspectorate is still struggling to bring Mac users into the twenty-first century along with everyone else and this is what they told us:

We know this is a problem and work has commenced to address it.

1. The changes required have been specified and are in the change control process.
2. Testing and development infrastructure has been acquired [we've bought a Mac].

3. The business requirements are being prioritized alongside the Planning Act changes and other priority developments.

4. The Inspectorate will provide Mac support at the earliest possible opportunity.

Fabasoft (the Austrian software chosen to run the system) needs to be fixed so that we can make it work for Macs.

[No news on why the appeal forms can't be completed on screen, as was once possible, even if they then have to be copied and sent by post.]

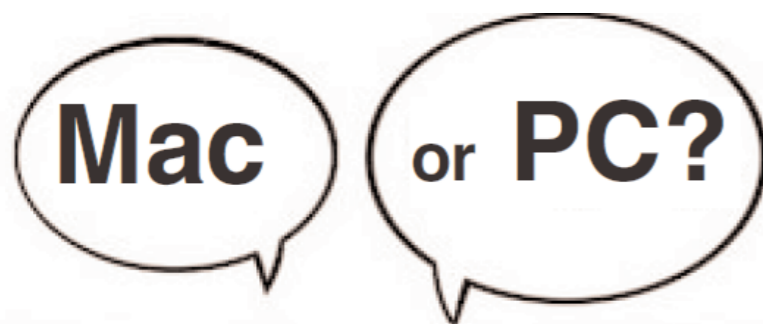
However, it seems to me that as Mac compatibility has been a problem for some while (at least since early 2006 to my knowledge) why have they only been working on it since last year? And if they have been working on it since last year, why isn't it fixed already? What is really meant by "the earliest possible opportunity"??

And surely, given that the Inspectorate's 'market' is architects, planners and designers – and at least 50 per cent of them use Macs – a system that works on Macs, Safari, Firefox, etc should have

been a business requirement from the start. After all, the Planning Portal has allowed full access to Mac users for on-line planning applications (including efficient completion of on-screen forms) for well over a year now.

Finally, it seems amazing that Austrian software that's apparently incompatible with Macs was chosen in the first place. There are many good British companies that can provide software which will work on Macs, etc. So why not use one of them?

Like Martin Luther King: I have a dream, that one day... planning appeals will be accepted online from my Mac after completing the forms on screen. Is this too much to ask in the twenty-first century?



Applications down 30 per cent

Planning applications

In the March quarter 2009, authorities undertaking district level planning in England received 111,000 applications for planning permission; this represents a decrease of 30 per cent compared with the corresponding quarter in 2008. All regions, including National Park authorities, saw a decrease in

the number of planning applications received when compared with the same quarter a year ago. The largest decrease was in the East of England (33 per cent) whilst the lowest decrease was in London, the West Midlands and the North West (all 28 per cent). National Park authorities also saw a decrease of 27 per cent. In the year ending March 2009, author-

ities received 507,000 applications; a decrease of 22 per cent compared with the year ending March 2008 figure.

Planning decisions

District level planning authorities determined 93,000 planning applications in the March quarter 2009; 29 per cent lower than in the March

quarter last year and 20 per cent lower than the December 2008 quarter. All regions, including National Park authorities, saw a decrease in the number of applications determined; the largest decrease was in the East of England and in Yorkshire and the Humber (both 32 per cent). Other large decreases were in West Midlands (31 per cent), and the South East and East Midlands (both 30 per cent). The lowest decrease was in London, the North East and the South West (all 27 per cent). National Parks also saw a decrease of 25 per cent (Table 2). In the year ending March 2009, 489,000 applications were determined; a decrease of 18 per cent compared with the corresponding period a year ago.

Applications granted

83 per cent of all decisions in the March quarter 2009 were granted; a decrease of 2 percentage points when compared with the March quarter 2008. Approval rates across the region ranged from 76 per cent in London to 90 per cent in the North East (Table 2). These percentages represent a one percentage point decrease in the approval rate for authorities in London and no change in the approval rate for authorities in the North East when compared with the same quarter a year ago.

Residential and householder decisions

Decisions made on householder developments were down by 36 per cent from 62,800 in the March quarter 2008 to 39,900 in the March quarter 2009 and accounted for 43 per cent of all decisions. Decisions on applications for residential developments decreased from 19,200 in March quarter 2008 to 12,300 in March quarter 2009; a decrease of 36 per cent).

In the March quarter 2009,

Planning Decisions on Major and Minor residential development (DCLG Table 8) Year ending 31 March 2009 | January-March 2009

London Boroughs	major residential decisions	% granted	% within 13 weeks	minor resi. decisions	% granted	% within 8 weeks	major resi. decisions	% granted	% within 13 weeks	minor resi. decisions	% granted	% within 8 weeks
London	700	55	70	9,200	56	75	100	55	66	1,800	56	75
Barking & D	6	83	33	101	38	78	3	100	-	18	56	67
Barnet	34	62	88	476	53	79	6	83	100	94	53	89
Bexley	15	27	80	98	54	72	3	67	100	17	41	59
Brent	22	73	59	221	57	66	3	33	100	51	63	73
Bromley	28	71	79	370	51	70	9	89	89	65	60	55
Camden	11	55	91	284	75	52	1	100	100	80	78	41
City of L	1	100	100	3	100	-	-	-	-	1	100	-
Croydon	85	40	66	525	46	74	17	24	41	109	45	73
Ealing	23	30	65	223	49	76	4	50	25	50	52	68
Enfield	16	63	88	424	50	85	4	50	75	99	49	87
Greenwich	7	14	57	60	37	62	1	-	100	9	22	67
Hackney	18	67	67	242	63	72	3	33	100	56	71	70
Hamm & F	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
Haringey	19	42	79	281	53	79	5	60	60	58	43	83
Harrow	37	70	78	340	36	84	6	83	17	69	38	87
Havering	14	50	100	235	44	84	1	-	100	43	44	81
Hillingdon	21	33	95	336	32	71	4	25	100	71	37	72
Hounslow	28	43	79	156	31	83	4	50	75	22	36	73
Islington	11	91	82	273	68	81	3	100	100	53	72	96
Kensington	8	88	38	598	80	78	3	67	33	97	74	88
Kingston	8	50	50	210	48	71	3	33	67	40	43	65
Lambeth	37	41	92	554	45	86	11	18	100	101	47	89
Lewisham	19	79	42	265	63	59	5	100	40	45	58	73
L Thames Gate 6	67	-	-	-	-	-	3	67	-	-	-	-
Merton	12	33	33	183	55	68	2	-	50	45	58	64
Newham	15	80	53	142	36	91	1	100	100	28	36	89
Redbridge	8	50	63	127	31	83	1	-	100	32	38	81
Richmond	5	60	60	264	70	52	-	-	-	45	69	40
Southwark	49	55	73	317	59	74	11	55	73	42	55	76
Sutton	28	32	71	182	45	75	3	33	67	33	42	70
Tower Ham	52	81	38	218	70	84	5	80	40	52	63	90
Waltham	18	39	72	359	28	73	1	100	-	70	39	74
Wandsworth	30	60	77	487	76	71	6	67	67	98	85	82
Westminster	11	91	82	449	82	65	5	80	80	69	74	52

Source: Source: DCLG (www.communities.gov.uk)

incomplete data

Planning Decisions, by development type and speed of decision (DCLG Table 7)

London Boroughs	Year ending 31 March 2009						January-March 2009						
	Total major decisions	% within 13 weeks	Total minor decisions	% within 8 weeks	Total other decisions	% within 8 weeks	Total major decisions	% within 13 weeks	Total minor decisions	% within 8 weeks	Total other decisions	% within 8 weeks	% of decisions delegated to officers
London	1,600	71	21,000	77	55,400	87	300	68	4,300	77	10,700	87	91
Barking &D	21	76	221	87	537	96	6	33	40	80	89	92	89
Barnet	72	89	1,008	80	3,052	88	18	100	176	90	620	94	94
Bexley	35	69	353	80	1,405	93	10	60	75	72	256	88	87
Brent	37	73	532	70	2,018	84	7	86	105	66	394	84	92
Bromley	80	83	830	74	2,306	84	21	90	163	67	430	80	81
Camden	27	78	779	62	2,077	71	5	40	179	44	473	63	91
City of London	19	26	191	84	286	83	1	-	32	84	49	86	96
Croydon	107	63	849	76	1,824	87	20	45	183	77	335	86	96
Ealing	72	56	485	76	2,468	89	9	33	109	72	487	90	94
Enfield	28	79	764	84	1,850	94	5	80	163	89	382	98	97
Greenwich	35	74	374	79	1,125	85	5	80	78	73	197	84	90
Hackney	49	65	591	73	870	84	9	67	157	69	179	80	91
Hammersmith and F	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
Haringey	27	78	504	81	1,348	89	8	50	117	85	276	85	96
Harrow	79	84	619	85	1,994	94	12	50	122	82	332	94	92
Havering	28	75	466	85	1,493	95	5	60	100	82	286	95	91
Hillingdon	87	83	646	71	2,145	89	12	67	126	77	378	94	91
Hounslow	61	66	384	83	1,893	87	13	62	54	78	319	86	76
Islington	39	82	691	85	1,240	88	7	100	151	98	305	98	98
Kensington and Chelsea	39	51	936	77	2,046	76	9	56	171	88	373	86	90
Kingston upon Thames	29	69	448	77	1,322	91	10	80	96	69	218	85	83
Lambeth	80	94	852	87	1,456	97	14	100	184	90	272	97	95
Lewisham	28	54	419	65	1,222	83	8	63	81	77	352	84	93
London Thames G	30	43	1	-	1	-	6	17	-	..	-	..	33
Merton	23	57	450	72	1,683	84	4	50	93	69	296	86	95
Newham	35	73	473	92	740	97	6	100	99	96	145	94	99
Redbridge	22	77	481	75	2,352	90	6	83	92	71	451	92	93
Richmond upon Thames	11	64	998	68	2,554	85	2	-	210	67	504	86	93
Southwark	95	77	654	78	1,052	86	19	79	122	80	198	86	87
Sutton	49	61	346	74	1,016	89	11	64	64	69	179	84	90
Tower Hamlets	90	48	598	88	651	89	10	20	141	89	132	88	83
Waltham Forest	30	67	598	72	1,042	85	6	33	122	70	207	82	96
Wandsworth	45	82	806	72	2,276	88	13	85	163	82	341	89	83
Westminster	72	76	2,128	74	4,439	81	23	87	384	71	988	80	90

Source: Source: DCLG (www.communities.gov.uk)

no data

authorities granted 67 per cent of major residential applications and determined 68 per cent of them within 13 weeks. Also 66 per cent of decisions on minor residential applications were granted and 71 per cent determined within 8 weeks (Table 8).

Local Authority performance (Table 7)

National Indicator 157 a, b and c reports on the speed at which major, minor and other planning applications are processed by district level planning authorities (for more information see page 8 of this release).

The March quarter 2009 saw 256 authorities (70 per cent of all authorities) make at least 60 per cent of their decisions on major

applications within the 13 week period; 314 authorities (86 per cent) made at least 65 per cent of their decisions on minor applications within the statutory 8 week period; and 317 authorities (86 per cent) made at least 80 per cent of their decisions on other applications within the statutory 8 week period. The number of authorities meeting the performance target in the March quarter 2009 compared with performance in the same quarter a year ago represents a decrease of 6 percentage points on major applications, no change on minor applications and an increase of 3 percentage points on other applications.

In the year ending March 2009, the percentage of authorities meeting the target on major applications

was 77 (282 authorities) and for minors 88 (323 authorities). These represent a decrease of 9 percentage points on major applications and 4 percentage points on minor applications when compared with the year ending March 2008 figure. The percentage of authorities meeting the target for other applications was 86 (315 authorities); a decrease of 5 percentage points when compared with the corresponding period a year ago. The chart below shows the percentage of district level planning authorities meeting the performance targets for major, minor and other applications.

Applications decided under delegated powers

The final column in Table 7 shows

the percentage of applications decided by planning officers under a scheme of delegation and without referral to committee or councillors on such decisions. 359 authorities (out of 367) provided information on delegated decisions in this quarter. On average, authorities delegated 90 per cent of decisions to planning officers.

