

Evaluation Report – Reduction in Duty Planning Services

Report owner: Rebecca Fox, Project Director Regulatory Planning and Reform

Date of review: 31/07/2024

Introduction

Consistent with Wagga Wagga City Council's commitment to customer service, duty planning services have long been available from 8.30am to 5pm five days per week. Any person can call Council or come into Council's offices during these hours to discuss their planning query with a planner who has the requisite experience to assist. The Development Assessment and Building Certification Division also has a building surveyor on duty during these hours to assist with building queries.

The Division currently has eight planners rostered to provide the total 42.5 hours of duty services required per week. Duty staff are required to be available at Council's offices during their rostered time and it is difficult to undertake core functions while on duty given the interruptions from queries.

In May 2024, Council engaged a Project Director to undertake a review of the planning and development services provided by the Division with the objective of ensuring the long-term, sustainable provision of these services in the most efficient manner. This review requires significant input from Division staff who are also often overwhelmed by their existing workloads. There was a significant backlog of applications awaiting assessment (about 170 development applications) and a lack of resources with at least three vacancies within the Division.

Description of the initiative/program

A decision was made to temporarily reduce the duty planning services provided by the Division with the aim of:

- Allowing the planners to focus on applications that are already with Council for feedback or determination.
- Finding capacity for the planners to participate in the Service Review.
- Assessing whether a reduction in a duty service would be accepted by the community.

The community was advised in advance via various communication channels that Council planners would not be available on Wednesdays for six weeks and that planning queries would be answered on a different day of the week. Callers were asked to call back on another day of the week and messages were generally not taken by Customer Service on those Wednesdays. This approach was to ensure that the Thursday duty planner was not overloaded with messages to return each Thursday.



City of Wagga Wagga

Published by Hootsuite

7 June

Council Planners will not be available on Wednesdays in the Civic Centre building from Wednesday 12 June until Wednesday 24 July.

This temporary change is to allow officers to focus on applications that are with Council for feedback or determination.

Council is undertaking a service review of our planning processes in order to streamline and improve outcomes for applicants and residents.

During this period we are asking applicants and potential applicants to contact us on a different day of the week.

Council staff appreciates the patience and understanding of applicants, and the community in general while we work through a large number of planning applications.

For any questions in relation to this, or other planning matters, please call 1300 292 442 during business hours, or email us at council@wagga.nsw.gov.au

Alternatively, you can visit <https://wagga.nsw.gov.au/building-and-development> to learn more about building and development in Wagga.

Read more about the decision here <https://news.wagga.nsw.gov.au/.../a-temporary-change-to...>



[A temporary change to Council's Duty Planner service | Council News \(nsw.gov.au\)](#)

Evaluation Methods

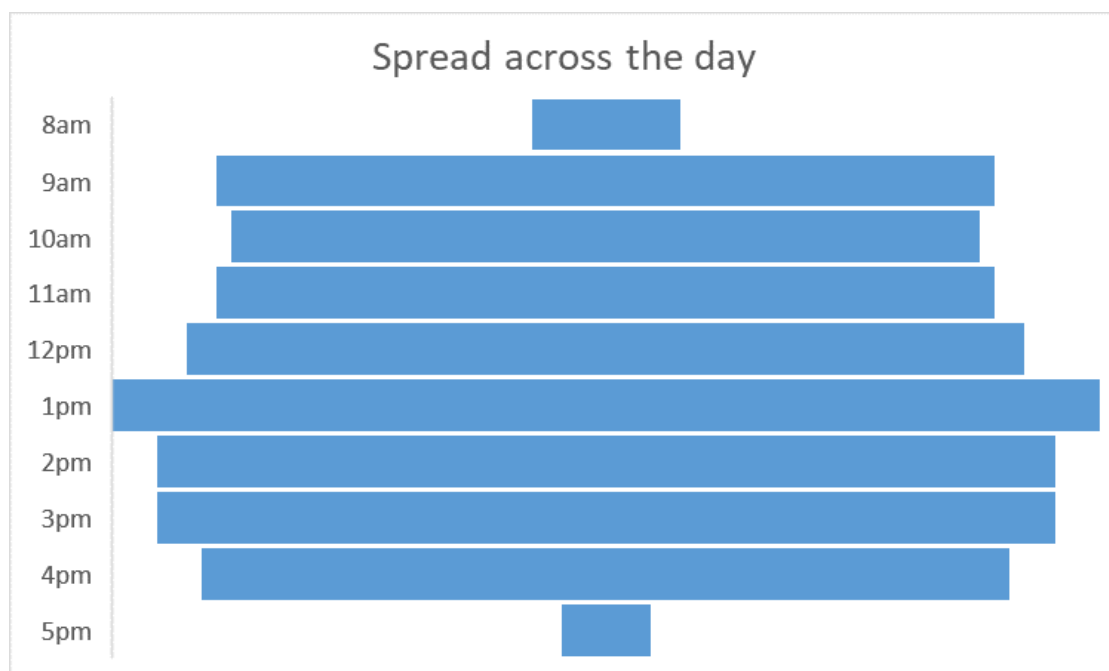
- Analysis of existing data regarding use of duty planning services over last three financial years.
- Analysis of calls, queries and concerns raised by customers when duty planning services were reduced.
- Qualitative analysis of impact of reduction in duty planning services on Division staff.
- Analysis of practices at other regional councils.

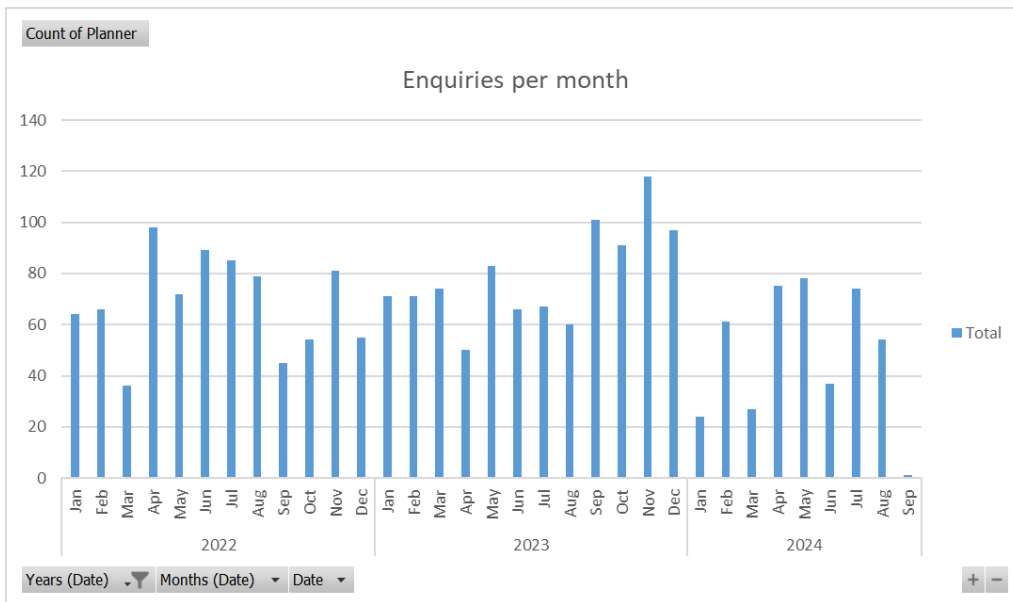
Results/Findings

Analysis of existing data regarding use of duty planning services over previous three financial years

Noting that the duty logs have not been consistently used by all planners and the quality of information recorded is inconsistent, the following analysis has been made:

- Average of 12 enquiries a day
- Average length of enquiry is 8.5 minutes
- Over 90% of calls are resolved during the interaction (secondary calls are generally new issue or revised enquiry)
- Each enquiry results in approx. 1.25 calls / per property (as in a quarter call back for more information / other enquiry)
- Spread across the day is reasonably consistent with a slight uptick in the afternoon
- There doesn't appear to be any consistency to the flow of enquiries across the year





Analysis of calls, queries and concerns raised by customers when duty planning services were reduced Wednesdays 12 June 2024 to 17 July 2024

- 12 June 3 calls 2 front counter
- 19 June 3 calls 1 front counter
- 26 June 5 calls 2 front counter
- 3 July 5 calls 3 front counter
- 10 July 3 calls 2 front counter
- 17 July 7 calls 1 front counter

Despite some initial hesitation from Customer Service and Division staff to advise customers that no duty planner was available that day, there were no complaints and customers (almost without exception) agreed to call back or return to Council on another day.

Qualitative analysis of impact on Division staff of reduction in duty planning services

All staff were invited to provide feedback on their experience by email. Below are the direct responses received (and anonymised).

Planning Administration Staff:

- It seemed to reduce the number of phone enquiries during that period for DA related items. The few phone enquiries I did receive were Applicants requesting updates on their current DAs. Which they were understanding and happy to receive a call back on a different day from the planner.
- From my perspective, there was an increase in productivity during the (reduced service period) with DA finals coming back for end processing.

- The first couple of weeks were hectic. It did settle down and seemed to work well.
- It was a rough start with calls coming through but seemed to work nicely once we advised Applicants and Customers of the updated process.

Planners:

- I find it hard to switch off. There were less interruptions and I could focus just that little bit more (on complex issues) which made me feel a little more in control. It was calmer in the office and that really helped.
- It started well, in the first couple of weeks I felt that everyone was invested in the 'mindset' of head-down, no interruptions, let's get the DAs written and the office seemed very quiet!! During the last couple of weeks, it just seemed like any other day other than no duty calls coming through to the planners.
- Not having the interruption of calls from duty or elsewhere was beneficial to concentrating on tasks. This does rely on another staff member having all calls so this impact needs to be considered.
- Other than perhaps the first week I do not think that there was a significant increase to duty calls the following day which indicates that no call is urgent and that customers are willing to call back the next day.
- Definitely provides a good break where you can focus on DAs.
- Has not seemed to impact other duty days too much – in terms of increasing calls.
- Have not received any negative comments from the industry.
- If nothing else, I found it really good for stress management. It was much calmer in the office. Everything didn't seem like it had a sense of urgency (like it often does). I think sometimes we get so caught up on the person calling or emailing right at that moment, forgetting the bigger picture.
- It allows time for focus. And if we are all focused at the same time we are also less likely to be interrupting each other too. It felt like we were all working for a common goal.
- Early on, in particular, I felt I got some additional DAs out. For me it fell apart later when other things loomed over the top (Panel, Council reports etc). I think we would need to keep working to keep focus if we kept doing it.
- Duty service has evolved into much more than it was ever intended to be. We are now required to:
 - provide updates on other Planner's DAs
 - answer post DA questions about other Planner's consents
 - take phone messages when someone isn't available
 - have a backup planner answering questions when the duty officer is unavailable.

Issues raised by staff when considering a permanent reduction in duty services:

- Duty services are an important part of good customer service.
- Ensure any changes don't lead to increased correspondence – that takes more time than a phone call – or poorer quality applications. Perhaps wait until our 'front end' improvements are made.
- Provide services when the majority of enquires come in - typically between 9/9:30 till 1/2.
- Return to service being provided downstairs with Customer Service – improves relationships, learnings and flow of information.
- Implement initiatives to increase the number of calls dealt with by Customer Service – needs education, confidence and buy-in. Knowledge base will help. I would also suggest that we do some training with Customer Service about simpler things like where to find a

DP, zoning, fencing etc. I know the knowledge base will help but I think just having the conversation will help their confidence in giving that advice.

- We should be focussed on quality of applications and advice over quantity - I think we are better to focus on doing it well, rather than doing it all the time.
- Good customer service involves complete and correct advice the first time.
- Query whether duty services provide good advice efficiently. We mostly have no notice of the question about to be asked (appointments with notice of queries may help us be better prepared with input from other parts of Council), it prioritises free advice over people who have paid for an assessment, formal pre-lodgment meetings may provide better quality advice especially for bigger development, lunch cover is inefficient.
- Duty planner function needs to be properly defined (not a phone answering service) and role could be part of the lodgement team.

Analysis of practices at other regional councils

- Wodonga Council: Monday to Friday, 10:00am – 3:00pm
- Murray River Council: Everyday, 9am – 12.30pm
- Griffith City Council: Monday – Friday, 9:00am – 12:00pm
- Moira Council: Monday to Friday, 8:30am – 5:00pm
- Albury Council: By appointment via email to the Council website only. This is currently not working very well and Albury are looking at changing this to improve the service for the customers.
- Dubbo Regional Council: Monday to Friday, 1:00pm – 4:30 pm
- Orange: Monday to Friday, 1:00pm – 4:00pm or via appointment
- Tamworth Regional Council: Monday to Friday, 8:30am – 4:30pm
- Bathurst Regional Council: Monday to Friday, 8:30am – 4:45pm

Conclusion

The reduction of duty planning services for six Wednesdays in June and July 2024 was considered successful and a permanent reduction of duty services should be implemented with appropriate consultation and communication.

In summary:

- Duty services are considered best practice customer service and valued by the Wagga Wagga community.
- The benefits to customers can be maintained with reduced duty service hours, consistent with practices at other councils. This however should be monitored to ensure there are no unintended consequences (for example, poorer quality applications or increased emails).
- Consultation with the Customer Service team should be undertaken to ensure they are supported with the change and further knowledge.
- The benefits of reduced duty officer hours for Division staff are considerable (less stress, more time to focus on existing workload) and, with continued focus, should result in faster turnaround times for applications.
- Any permanent changes to duty services should include consideration of any new 'concierge or advisory' service, redefinition of the services to be provided and strong communication with the community prior to implementation.