



Graham Frankland Head of Procurement and Property Services at Hartlepool BC discusses the Property e Service Delivery Standards developed by the ODPM funded NeSDS (National e-Service Delivery Standards) project.

Why did you agree to lead NeSDS Property stream?

“When ODPM and Havering LBC first approached Hartlepool to lead the Property Standards we were excited to become involved in the NeSDS project. We had seen the benefits that have arisen from the initial PARSOL e planning service delivery standards in 2004 and that they had been admitted as ‘evidence of improvement’ under CPA. So it made sense to build on that beginning. As the development of electronic property services is high on our own agenda in Hartlepool, leading the property e standards stream of the NeSDS project seemed an obvious extension of our objectives. We believe that the property e standards are a great opportunity to use and define the best practice that is already available within the Local Authority Community.

As an excellent Council our aspiration is to be a leader in improving services to our customers. We strive to improve the consistency and coordination of all our property information and its communication to our in-house customers, members of the public and other organisations in the local community. The project gives Hartlepool the opportunity to build on the progress it has made in this area in a collaborative environment which can really “make a difference” both locally and nationally in the services we provide.

Why do we need e standards?

The “electronic age” of service provision is developing quickly but there is a danger that piecemeal solutions to property information around the country could lead to confusion in those stakeholders using and seeking information. It’s not just the technical standards that need to change but the cultural behaviour and working practices of Local Authority property services departments.

The standards will outline what a Local Authority Property Services Department should look like, how it should work, who should be in it, what best practice work flows and processes it should adopt. The development of consistent culture based standards means that common understanding and working practices can be put in place so that by working together both internally and with each other, Local Authorities will realise the efficiencies in provision of service through electronic working in line with the governments Priority Outcomes.

As the minimum levels of service in the property e standards reflect the minimum requirements sent out in the Priority Outcomes, the property e standards become a positive roadmap for us when we make the changes needed to meet those challenges and the CPA requirements.

The property profession, has, over the past 5 years, been promoting improvement in asset management planning and this has been reinforced by the CPA process which now has a greater concentration on the effective use of resources by Local Authorities. The establishment of common yet demanding standards will assist Local Authorities in the asset management process and also provide access to its stakeholders to ensure there are real community benefits.

The profession as a whole needs to become more open and connected with its customers and the NeSDS project provides another vehicle to help realise this goal. Its all comes down to delivering top quality customer service and real transparent government.

What benefits will the Property e standards bring to Property Services departments and to individual officers daily work?

The standards will provide a clear view of how property services should be e enabled and provide a signposted route for future development based on the best practice across the country. Practitioners will be able to work with and develop common and consistent work processes to provide electronic access to property information and more efficient workflow. This information will be available at a “touch of a button” releasing valuable officer time that can be concentrated on more effective day-to-day property management. An example of time saving would be the creation of an online asbestos register and schools drawings database information is uploaded directly from the survey process so it would be directly accessible by the site manager of the school without time spent looking for and copying drawings.

Why is it important that this is a Local Authority generated process?

The purpose of the standards project is to draw on the established best practice in our Local Authority community. We know what we are doing - We deliver property services every day at the “front-line” and have built up a real knowledge of our customers, what they want, how and when they want it. Some of us do it better and we should share what we do best with our peer group for everyone’s benefit - It is important in the initiative that the “local authority” angle is the driving force. The service standards must be built on practical understanding that makes a difference to the end user - local authorities are clearly best placed to draft and oversee the development of the benchmarks. It is after all the local authorities who are responsible for delivering all local services including national agendas.

How have you made sure it is by local authorities for local authorities? What is an inclusive process?

The process we have set up to define the property e standards is intended to make sure to the best of our ability that we include the best practice opinions of as many stakeholders as possible. By including over a dozen local authorities from around the country on the working group there is a definite emphasis on practitioners, professional bodies and independent experts working together to provide benchmarks that they themselves consider will help deliver real service improvements. The conclusions have to be realistic, practical and yet challenging. They will map into the priority outcomes too

helping to join up the process of change under the current Gershon/egov agenda. Easington DC actually approached Hartlepool straight away to become involved in the workstream so that they could be “in at the start” of the standards process and gain maximum benefit while East Riding DC was keen to be involved after participating in an earlier National Project.

Can you give any examples of the real life benefits that your council will get from applying the standards?

The adoption of common standards will help build confidence among both our service users and our staff, make it easy for us to work together internally, and reducing the ‘silo mentality’ that can present in some council departments. It will also assist us in establishing the necessary links with other organisation and agencies to support our own area service delivery objectives in pursuing more efficient and streamlined neighbourhood management. A key part of this is the development of the Council’s Customer Contact Centre which will become the focus for all customer facing services at Hartlepool – this will include the Estates and Asset Management Section which will directly benefit from the e-standards programme enabling a variety of customer queries to be handled and satisfied more speedily and efficiently.

Clearly the freeing up of officer time, much of which is currently spent on answering telephones and letters, will provide instant service improvements to our customers. It will also have the benefit of allowing our professionals to concentrate on using their skills in the field rather than being stuck behind a desk. Overall the standard will make more information available to all who require it within the Authority and it will encourage the creation and maintenance of accurate information and widen the scope of information held and available.

Will the Property Standards help with gershon efficiency / priority outcomes changes?

As we have discussed the minimum levels of service set out by the Property standards mirror those laid down in the relevant Priority Outcomes. So using the standards to guide change in a property services department will allow the Authority to meet its Priority Outcome requirements in that area too.

Of course, it will also promote the type of efficiencies that will go towards the overall 2.5% Gershon CPA savings required of every council. Some examples of this include providing clear customer access channels so that they access the information they need either “on line” or via the council contact centre rather than tying up officer time with simple enquiries. In other words the increased output of front office staff through the Customer Contact Centre function and streamlining of back office processes for officers will prove to be more cost effective and productive. It will also reduce transaction times and exchange of data.

Another example is the efficiencies and cost savings available through the use of online transactions and payments such as rent collection, issue of permits etc as well as the opportunity to move to online procurement and management.

Finally there are the direct customer benefits that will include -

- Direct access to information on the Council property holdings.
- Ability to find out who owns land within the borough.
- Make enquiries about buying and selling land.
- Communicate quickly and directly with property staff to speed up land and property enquiries and transactions.
- Community access to Council accommodation.
- Contact centre geared up for property enquiries.
- Information available 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
- Making things consistent for all customers wherever they are based. Especially tenants who move location and Companies who are based in several different locations.
- Transactions generally, need to extend to the whole cycle – electronic invoicing and payment electronically.
- Sales and Lettings – see a property, ask questions about it. Extend to cover every stage of an application, even to submitting the tender.
- Potential for making payments of rent and other charges on line where and where it suits them.

This will lead to a happier customer, contented elected member and more efficient property officer – it’s a win-win all round.

For more information visit www.nesds.org.uk or email nesds@haverling.gov.uk