The Prelodgement Revolution in Development Assessment at Moreton Bay Regional Council (MBRC)

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Introduction

In March 2008 the former Caboolture Shire, Pine Rivers Shire and Redcliffe City Councils were amalgamated to form Moreton Bay Regional Council (MBRC). As the third largest Local Government in Australia MBRC is home to 357 000 (2010) people living within 2037 sq km with a growth rate of 3.4%. Located within Queensland’s south eastern corner, in 2007/2008 MBRC was the 3rd highest growth area in Australia. MBRC is predicted to be home to 523 000 people in 2031.

During 2008/2009 3626 lots and 3712 residential dwellings. As a high growth, amalgamated Council it has been important to align processes and provide reliable, consistent and quality advice to development proponents. The aim of this advice is to assist applicants to determine the merits of their proposal and whether to proceed prepare well made development applications with commensurate savings in time and resources for all stakeholders in the process.

Although all three former Council’s conducted a Prelodgement Meeting Service prior to amalgamation, the process was significantly different with varying degrees of success. Given that MBRC operates under three different planning schemes and will for some time, it was identified that ensuring consistency in the provision of information in relation to developments was a priority for the amalgamated Council.

This paper will look at how the system was changed, why it was changed and what the outcomes have been. In particular, it will examine whether it has resulted in improved development processes and outcomes and the levels of satisfaction for development proponents.

What we started with

Each former Council operated a Prelodgement Service with varying methodologies and standards of advice provided to applicants.

In the former Caboolture Shire Council prelodgement meetings were held on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. A range of Council officers attended the meetings to provide advice from their area of speciality. The meetings were normally 30 minutes in length and often ran over the limited time available. Notes were taken for use by Council officers after but no formal minutes were provided at, or after, the meeting. The first meeting was free but a fee was charged for subsequent meetings or on site meetings. Feedback to Council indicated that while the service was generally well received the number of
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officers at the meeting was seen as a waste of Council resources and the lack of time management was a source of frustration.

The former Pine Rivers Shire Council held regular prelodgement meetings with Senior Planning and Engineering officers. There were no fixed times or days in general and a one hour slot was allocated to each meeting. There was no charge for the service and it was open to all. While minutes were not taken applicant’s were encouraged to take notes that could be confirmed by the officers later. Applicants were encouraged to submit plans and information prior to the meeting so that research and assessment could be conducted on the proposal.

At the former Redcliffe City Council prelodgements were held once a week with Senior Planning and Engineering officers. Minutes were taken at the meeting however, they were not provided to the applicant but were attached to the file for the assessing officer’s reference. Applicants were encouraged to submit their minutes for clarification.

Why Change?

As you can see prelodgement meetings were being offered differently at each Council location in line with pre-amalgamation processes. The format and timings of meetings were different, as were the Council officers who attended. This inconsistency was identified as a risk to Council and also as an opportunity for early alignment and improvement.

MBRC has three different planning schemes that were prepared under completely different policy regimes and approach the regulation of development in significantly different ways. For example, early in the amalgamation process development proponents wanted to pursue associated units that could be constructed in the former Pine as self assessable development in Caboolture. Under the Caboolture Planning Scheme this use would be defined as a Dual Occupancy and triggered a code assessable application. This type of query was quite typical at the start and proponents were confused as to how the same Council could have such different requirements from one area to another. Having a streamlined and consistent prelodgement service would significantly improve responses to these kinds of requests in the post amalgamation Council.

Therefore, ensuring advice being provided to development proponents was consistent and correct for each planning scheme across the region was a major focus of the process review. It was also essential to ensuring that development activity was not unduly affected as a result of the amalgamation process. To this end, senior officers such as the Manager Development Services, Development Planning Manager and Development Engineering Manager were to attend the meetings to ensure consistency as well as robust and reliable advice.

How did the Revolution Start?
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The opportunity presented by the amalgamation was seized upon to establish "the best most informative and reliable prelodgement meeting process" in Australia. This goal was pursued by defining a prelodgement meeting and indentifying objectives of the process.

At the commencement of the process review Council officers clearly defined a prelodgement meeting as being:

“A prelodgement meeting is a meeting between a prospective applicant and Council Senior staff to discuss a development proposal prior to the formal lodgement of a development application. A prelodgement meeting provides a prospective applicant with the opportunity to discuss and receive feedback from Council on the technical aspects of a development proposal, identify relevant issues and to provide advice on any technical supporting reports that will be needed to be lodged with the application.”

The objectives of the process are to:

- Provide a reliable and informative Prelodgement meeting service with a high degree of accessibility to development proponents;
- Provide access to accurate relevant advice from Senior Officers;
- To facilitate well made applications and reduced costs for clients and Council;
- Expedite the development application assessment process; and
- Effectively collect application data by offering on-line booking service through ePathway that will collect data for future reporting.

MBRC has implemented internal and external processes that focus on providing the best customer orientated prelodgement service in Australia.

**Accessability**

To request a prelodgement meeting development proponents complete and submit an online prelodgement request form. This is available on Council’s website. Applicants have the choice of either a concept or detailed proposal prelodgement meeting. The type of meeting they request is dependant on their needs and the level of information they have on their proposal at the time. Plans of the proposal are able to be attached to the online request.

Obviously online services may not suit everyone so there is the option of contacting development services directly and filling in a hard copy form. MBRC is committed to being involved in development proposals from the conceptual stage so that issues can be resolved early in the process before significant time and resources have been expended by the development proponent after which they are much less likely to be open to a change of direction in the development proposal.

The online service has been very well received with 53.8% of meetings being booked online via ePathway. 15.4% of meetings were booked by email. The
more conventional methods of paper based and phone bookings made up 19.3% and 11.5% of all bookings.

It is the applicant’s right to request a prelodgement meeting on any development proposal no matter the size or scale. Each request is perused by the Development Planning Manager prior to the meeting being set up. The Development Planning Manager makes an initial assessment of the proposal, identifies internal referrals, historical issues and whether the meeting is classified as a major or a minor proposal. A major meeting is considered to be a significant proposal and will require more time to discuss and deal with all issues. Minor meetings are generally smaller proposals that will have standard responses and are unlikely to trigger significant reports or external works.

This process also identifies some simple matters that could be dealt with by a telephone call from the Customer Liaison Officer or via written advice thus avoiding the need for a meeting but still providing clear, consistent advice to development proponents.

Prelodgement meetings are offered on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday between 9 am and 1.15pm. Major meetings are generally held on a Monday and are 1 hour in length. Wednesday and Friday meetings are for minor proposals and are allocated 45 minutes each. This ensures that the size and scale of the proposal is reflected in the meeting time. Certainly the experience to date is that this amount of time is adequate to deal with the two different types of meeting and lack of discussion time and meetings running overtime are no longer a problem at MBRC. Meetings are slotted into the first available appointment time within two weeks of receiving the request.

Details of development proposals are circulated to relevant internal technical officers and Unity Water with sufficient time for the assessment and provision of advice. Council then ensures that relevant technical input is coordinated in the process and conflicting advice is resolved in the process.

**Attendance And Advice**

Council has made a commitment to ensuring that the prelodgement service is supported by Senior Officers at the Director, Manager and Principal Planner levels. Ensuring that the actual decision makers are providing the initial advice on the application. Most Council’s when considering the MBRC process express concerns with utilising senior officers in this fashion. For this reason this issue is examined in more detail.

Most Councils have focused on the provision of customer service in the form of fact sheets, responses to phone enquiries and all provide some form of prelodgement service. However, they have generally rejected the use of senior officers in prelodgement meetings as not being cost effective and these officers having other responsibilities in the development assessment process that are more pressing. MBRC contends that the use of senior officers (being those that will ultimately be making the decisions on the
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application) ensures the consistency of advice and gives development proponents the assurance that this advice will be followed through in the assessment of the application. The lack of reliability of prelodgement advice was raised as a major concern by some stakeholders to the extent they see them as a waste of time and don’t have them in some jurisdictions. It also reflects Council’s recognition of the importance of the development industry to the region.

Certainly the prelodgement service is not a tick and flick approach to development and in many cases proposals that do not meet Council’s requirements are able to be redesigned or altered as a result of the discussions at these meetings so that they are a more acceptable alternative. This is also a reason for having such Senior Officers at the meeting, who have the development experience to be able to identify potential alternative solutions and other means of achieving the development. It is very rare for a development proponent to walk away with a no to the development, we look at alternative ways under the scheme of achieving the vision, size scale and intensity of the development and alternative locations that may be more appropriate.

Minutes & GIS

Meetings are minuted by an operations officer as it progresses in a standard template developed for this purpose. This ensures that Council’s technical officers are focused on providing information to the applicant rather than recording the meeting proceedings accurately. Council is able to display the minutes in the meeting room and all participants are able to review them for accuracy. This often results in additional clarification being provided that would not have been possible if Council produced the minutes after the event. In most cases (the only exception being when the technology doesn’t work properly) the applicant walks out of the meeting with a set of minutes signed by the meeting chair that indicates Council’s position on the development proposal and if they are to proceed, the reports and information that will be needed to support the application.

Open communication between the development proponent and Council officers is encouraged at these meetings as they are treated as commercial in confidence. To assist the discussion, access is also available in the meeting venue to project the GIS layers.

No Fee

As part of the review of the prelodgement service MBRC made a specific decision not to apply a fee to this service, this is to encourage the maximum usage of the service. Prelodgements are seen as a critical element of the development assessment process and whilst they are not a mandatory requirement to making a development application they are an excellent means of ascertaining Council’s requirements with respect to specific proposals.
MBRC’s philosophy is to front load the process to reap benefits for all stakeholders in the formal development application process. Further, the information supplied at this stage is considered in the detailed assessment of the application when it is received by Council.

To ensure that the Councillors are aware of proposals within their divisions the Divisional Councillor is sent an optional appointment for any prelodgement. Development proponents can request the attendance of their Divisional Councillor at their prelodgement meeting. Councillor participation is to be in accordance with the code of conduct. An electronic report is sent to all Councillors informing them of upcoming prelodgement meetings for all divisions on a weekly basis. Councillors are aware of the requirement that the meetings and information be treated as commercial in confidence.

Since 16 March 2009 when the MBRC Prelodgement Meeting Service began, 1001 Prelodgement Meetings have been held and the feedback from our customers has been outstanding. Of these prelodgement meetings 199 have resulted in development applications. Whilst this is only 20% of all prelodgements resulting in a development application being lodged, the investment in the service, particularly by senior officers, is considered warranted as applicants are being supplied with consistent advice and it is easier to deal with a poorly conceived proposal at prelodgement than at development application stage when significant time, resources and money has been expended to prepare a formal development application. It was anticipated that applications resulting from prelodgement meetings would be “well made” and be lodged with the required information ie. avoiding the need for an information request.

**What have we found – Customer Satisfaction**

As part of our ongoing improvement strategy for the prelodgement process each proponent at every meeting is given a customer feedback form and invited to provide comments on the service. The most recent 2011 feedback shows a high level of satisfaction with the service being provided by MBRC.

Of interest, 48% of all prelodgements were conducted with people who had utilised the service previously. Of these 45.5% rated it better than the previous meeting, 45.5% rated it the same whilst 9% felt it was not as good as their previous experience.

Feedback at the end of the prelodgement indicated that 86.9% of respondents thought they would lodge a development application. This hasn’t occurred in reality and is probably a result of the global financial crisis making developments less viable. Most respondents said they would definitely use the service again and this is occurring.

When asked to rate the various aspects of the prelodgement service out of 5 MBRC has not scored below a 4 in any respect. The meeting venue has been rated at 4.7 out of 5 - it is a large room that allows seating for up to 12 people with access to a light pro and computer with access to all Council systems to
enable the minutes to be produced on the spot. Officers conducting the meeting were rated 4.9 out of 5 in terms of politeness and professionalism. The helpfulness of the information provided at the meeting was rated 4.7 out of 5 and 4.8 out of 5 in terms of it being understandable. Notes taken at the meeting were rated 4.75 out of 5 in terms of accuracy.

It is interesting to note that the overall satisfaction has improved in all aspects of the service since 2009 even though the responses then showed a very high satisfaction with the service provided.

**Constant Review – the Revolution is always moving forward**

Since the MBRC Service began we have consistently collected feedback and refined our processes to improve efficiency, relevance and quality. Customer feedback and the changes resulting from the amalgamation process have resulted in the continual refinement and improvements to the prelodgement process. As we all know change is a constant in all aspects of our lives and to keep the MBRC process meeting both the needs of our organisation and our customers progressive changes have occurred since inception.

One of the biggest changes that has occurred to our service occurred on 9 August 2010 when the entire Development Services department (except the North Lakes team) was relocated to the Caboolture Office. Previously meetings had been held at Pine, Redcliffe and Caboolture offices on alternate days. Given the location of our Department in Caboolture it was decided that all meetings would be held in the Caboolture offices. This information was clearly communicated to our customers and no negative feedback has been received on this change. This has resulted in significant savings for the Council in terms of travel times for officers and provides for a constant high quality meeting venue.

The initial process did not involve categorisation of applications into major and minor meetings and all meetings were given a 45 minute time period to deal with all issues. Feedback from our customers indicated that for the larger proposals insufficient time was allocated resulting in dissatisfaction due to lack of timeliness and ability to fully discuss the proposal. The classification system of prelodgements has successfully addressed this issue.

**How has this service changed the culture of Development Assessment in MBRC**

The Prelodgement Process set up by MBRC is consistent with and reflects key components of the cultural change called for the Planning for a Prosperous Qld – A Reform Agenda for Planning and Development in the Smart State (August 2007) by the then Department of Infrastructure and Planning. The prelodgement process was developed to provide for improved stakeholder communication and supporting information. It encourages engagement between Council and the development proponent as early as possible in the development process. The MBRC provides for most of the
critical elements identified by the department in achieving cultural change as follows:

- Provides for outcomes over processes, the Senior Staff involved are focused on the product on the ground rather than “blindly implementing” restrictive process and are able to provide ongoing direction to staff throughout the assessment stage of the application to achieve the agreed outcomes of the prelodgement meeting;

- Provides for flexibility and considers alternatives as per performance based planning frameworks alternative solutions are able to be workshopped at the meetings and the benefits and impacts of the proposal discussed openly with information provided on what will need to be demonstrated in the application;

- The meetings provide for collaborative problem solving. All participants are given the opportunity to share their views and discuss issues. It is vexing that some development proponents will go to detailed design prior to a prelodgement being undertaken even though they require departures from the planning scheme and by the time they engage with Council they have spent so much time and money that they are unwilling to make changes and run the gauntlet of the development assessment process. The prelodgement process changes this balance at MBRC and results in engagement in the conceptual stages of the development proposal.

- The meetings are used as an important tool to provide applicants with information on the IDAS process under the Sustainable Planning Act. This is particularly important for non professional applicants so that they understand the process and the expectations and requirements for making a properly made application. Potential State interest matters that may need to be addressed or work through the State agencies are also flagged.

**What are the impacts on Development Applications**

As part of the Moreton Bay Regional Council HAF Planning Reform Project a File Survey Report was commissioned from PLANDEV Business Solutions. This report looked at the way in which MBRC processes residential applications using the HAF T5 methodology.

Of the 135 files surveyed in the review, prelodgement meetings were identified as occurring 18 times, 8 for reconfigurations, 7 for Multiple Dwellings, 2 for Dual Occupancies and 1 for a Boundary Realignment. When the applications were eventually lodged they were all consistent with the original prelodgement proposal.

Information requests were still issued on these applications, originally the Council had envisaged that the prelodgement process would significantly reduce the instances of information requests however the data would appear to indicate that it does not obviate the need to utilise an information request.
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In 3 instances information requests were issued for clarification of technical reports submitted as part of the application.

This is a step forward as previously we would have been requesting the report and then assessing the full report in the decision making period and inevitably extensions of time were then necessary.

Only one information request was for a technical report that was not identified in the prelodgement minutes.

This report identified a number of areas that the process could be further improved and Council is working on these recommendations including:

- Interpretation of minutes, despite the review process that occurs in the meeting prior to sign off there can still be disputes as to what was actually said at the meeting and what it meant. This emphasises the importance of clarity in the provision of information and writing in plain English.
- The use of the prelodgement service has not significantly reduced the need for information requests as applicants don’t address the matters raised in the meeting when they lodge their application.
- Provision of incentives to comply with the recommendations of the prelodgement meeting.

The report also identified that the prelodgement meeting appears to have a holistic benefit in both educating customers and improving customer relations.

What can other Council’s learn from our Revolution?

The MBRC Prelodgement meeting service could be easily adopted and implemented by other Councils. To facilitate a successful roll out of this service the following commitments would be required:

- Allocate senior officers to conduct the meetings who are also given appropriate delegation to provide advice and determine development applications.
- Provide a venue that is set up with the technology to access relevant data and prepare, review and print the meeting minutes.
- Provide a free service with meetings of sufficient time and frequency to provide prompt, relevant and meaningful feedback.
- Establish an online meeting booking process.
- Establish and build relations both within the Council and with development proponents to enable the provision of full, timely, reliable and consistent advice and with development proponents to enable open communication and collaboration to achieve improved development outcomes on the ground.

Conclusions

The comprehensive review of the MBRC prelodgement processes was borne out of necessity, to address the pressing issue of achieving consistent,
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reliable development advice in a new Council with three completely different planning schemes. What has resulted is a service that provides clear, consistent advice to development proponents at no charge with written notes that give direction as to how aspects of the planning scheme are to be addressed with respect to that specific development. The implementation of this service has also seen the cultural change in the organisation as to how development proponents are dealt with and the adoption of a more collaborative approach by the Council Officers involved. Review and improvement are a fundamental aspect of the process that has been developed to ensure continuous improvement. The next exciting phase is to explore avenues to encourage applicants to prepare applications that address the issues raised at the prelodgement meeting and to encourage more applicants to have prelodgements.

Long Live the Revolution!!