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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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Contents

[The PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit 2021 Version 3](#_Toc79671373)

[How to use it 4](#_Toc79671374)

[Who is it for? 5](#_Toc79671375)

[When to use the Toolkit 6](#_Toc79671376)

[Facilitator’s tips 7](#_Toc79671377)

[For more information & Help 8](#_Toc79671378)

[Performance Management 9](#_Toc79671379)

[Introduction 9](#_Toc79671380)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 9](#_Toc79671381)

[Financial Management 16](#_Toc79671382)

[Introduction 16](#_Toc79671383)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 16](#_Toc79671384)

[Workload Management 22](#_Toc79671385)

[Introduction 22](#_Toc79671386)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 22](#_Toc79671387)

[Processes, IT and administration 27](#_Toc79671388)

[Introduction 27](#_Toc79671389)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 27](#_Toc79671390)

[Political leadership 33](#_Toc79671391)

[Introduction 33](#_Toc79671392)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 33](#_Toc79671393)

[Team Management 43](#_Toc79671394)

[Introduction 43](#_Toc79671395)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 43](#_Toc79671396)

[Training 51](#_Toc79671397)

[Introduction 51](#_Toc79671398)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 51](#_Toc79671399)

[Pre-applications 56](#_Toc79671400)

[Introduction 56](#_Toc79671401)

[How to involve staff in the discussion: 56](#_Toc79671402)

[Receipt and validation 63](#_Toc79671403)

[Introduction 63](#_Toc79671404)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 63](#_Toc79671405)

[Consultation and allocation 69](#_Toc79671406)

[Introduction 69](#_Toc79671407)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 69](#_Toc79671408)

[Considering an application 77](#_Toc79671409)

[Introduction 77](#_Toc79671410)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 77](#_Toc79671411)

[The Officer Report 86](#_Toc79671412)

[Introduction 86](#_Toc79671413)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 86](#_Toc79671414)

[The decision and conditions 92](#_Toc79671415)

[Introduction 92](#_Toc79671416)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 92](#_Toc79671417)

[Monitoring and enforcement 99](#_Toc79671418)

[Introduction 99](#_Toc79671419)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 99](#_Toc79671420)

[Appeals 107](#_Toc79671421)

[Introduction 107](#_Toc79671422)

[How to involve staff in the discussion 107](#_Toc79671423)

# The PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit 2021 Version

This latest version of the PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit updates the original version that was prepared in 2015. It aims to provide a ‘health check’ for Planning Authorities and act as a simple way to develop an action plan for improvements to their Development Management service. The themes covered are largely the same as the 2015 version but we have used the feedback from Councils who have used the toolkit to make it easier to use for local authority staff who have busy day jobs and therefore need a quick and easy reference point to enable them to focus in to specific areas where improvements can be made. This version has also been piloted on a four Planning Authorities who have provided invaluable feedback on the practical use of the toolkit. A special thank you to: Plymouth City Council, London Borough of Redbridge, Harborough District Council and South Hams District Council / West Devon Borough Council.

Each section is designed to stand alone and there is no preferred order for running through each section. Therefore you can tailor your sessions to how they best meet the priorities for improvement in your own Development Management Service. Some themes will reappear in different sections to help you cover as many topics as you need. For example speed of decision making is raised in three separate sections – Performance Management, Political Leadership and Considering an Application – therefore the discussion can take place when any of those sections and being considered.

The format in each section is for you to consider statements defining what an excellent and poor Planning Authority looks like and then to consider some tips to improve performance. The purpose of defining poor and excellent is meant to be controversial and to stimulate debate within a Council. The tips will work for some Councils and not for others because every Council is different and therefore has different priorities for improvement. The tips are also aimed at getting Planning Authorities to think about solutions and to work through challenges in bite size ways rather than being overwhelmed by the problems it faces.

## How to use it

For each section discuss where you feel your Council sits on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). If you disagree with one another (which you are likely to do) discuss why you have different views as perception is a really important factor in improving how things are done. Ultimately the final score is not as important as what you are going to do about it. However it is really important to write down why you have either agreed on a score or why you can’t decide on a score. This will help you to understand where you are as a service on the journey between poor and excellent and if you don’t write it down you will have no record of why you came to those conclusions.

Next look at the ‘top tips’ and actions you want to take from the session. Which tips are you going to take on board and which are you going to dismiss? – it is ok to say a tip is not for you as long as you know why. Then if you decide you want to take forward a tip decide how you are going to implement it. Some you simply need to do and others may involve outside support such as from PAS. Also consider what other actions have come out of the discussion. Encourage all staff taking part in the session to generate other ideas and actions to help you develop an action plan.

Finally decide what score you would like to be. It may seem obvious that you always will want to be a 5 (excellent) but this is not always the case as it depends on where you want to focus your priorities as a service. For example how important is monitoring performance to your service? All Planning Authorities will want to monitor speed and quality of decision making as these are the minimum benchmarks set by Government but you will then need to balance the time spent in collecting information about all areas of the Development Management process against the staff resources you have to deliver an excellent service. Only you will know whether you want to reach a 5 or whether you may be happy to be a 3 or 4. However again it is really important to write down why you have settled on a particular score.

Following pilot work on the toolkit each section usually takes about an hour to an hour and a half to complete. However the time you spend on each section very much depends on how much discussion and disagreement takes place – it will sometimes be shorter and sometimes longer. Also some sections are longer than others so there will inevitably be a difference in time spent on each.

When you have completed the sections that you feel are important to your service you should be in an excellent position to prepare your own action plan of improvement in the format that is appropriate for your organisation. However it is also really important to use the toolkit to reflect back on the things you are doing well and therefore do not need to change. Do not simply dwell on the negatives but celebrate success and promote best practice within your service. It is really important when Planning Departments are struggling with resourcing and workload presssures to celebrate with staff good practice and a job well done.

We have learned that no process is ever “fixed” and every Council has room to improve further. Let us know how you get on, and how this kit has helped. But before you begin here is some crucial advice we have taken from the most successful councils:

* In many projects there is a big gap between “the big idea” and the subsequent HR process of changing job descriptions and organisational structures. This gap can be reduced by involving the affected people in the redesign, and not treating it as part of the ongoing day job.
* There is no process that cannot be made stupid by treating it too narrowly. It is essential that everyone understands how the department works *as a whole*. Silo working, narrow targets and work being batched into trays is poison to a process.
* It is impossible to design out error. Almost every part of the Development Management process requires an assessment of risk and proportionality, and councils are often guilty of introducing sign-offs and double-checks after some kind of mistake. Doing ‘less’ will sometimes mean things are omitted that should not have been, and you need to find a corporate culture that understands (and forgives) the occasional error.
* We encourage councils to be bold and innovative, and you will find some challenges in the toolkit that encourage you to stop or drastically change some core tasks. This needs to be balanced against the support needs of the people who work for you. If you remove too much structure and support too quickly you might expose gaps in skills or confidence. You will need to acknowledge your staff as individuals and make judgements about how fast each is able to adapt.

## Who is it for?

The toolkit is designed to help councils think properly and run a ‘health check’ of their service before taking on change and improvement work, whatever their circumstances or whatever is providing the stimulus for change. It is up to each Council to decide who leads on each section of the toolkit but there is a suggestion made at the beginning of each section on how the session should be run. it should always involve a range of staff who can make the changes happen that should always include staff at all levels of the service. It is unlikely to be effective if it is simply used by senior management who impose changes on staff. Equally it is unlikely to be effective if it is only used by officers who have no power to make changes. It should be discussed with as many staff as is practicable so that changes can be made from an informed position by people who understand their business. You may find it helpful to have an external facilitator, such as PAS, to help you discuss the issues that the toolkit raises, but equally you may want to nominate a member of your own staff to act as the facilitator. It will be particularly useful for:

**Authorities designated/in danger of designation**  
- Identifying the things to stop doing to "get out the hole" and back on track with National Indicators  
- Provides the structure for having sensible and realistic conversations about risk with leadership

- Helps with staff morale to recognise the areas of the service that are being run well

**Cash-strapped authorities**  
- Helps councils differentiate the "must do" Vs “nice to have"  
- Focuses on the big picture and maximising income/reducing cost

**'Cruising' authorities**- Guards against complacency and can provide a stimulus to ‘shake things up’ every now and again involving officers & councillors  
- A regular review helps keep things lean

**High-performing authorities**- Complementing the cycle of learning, and keeping staff engaged and empowered to identify and effect change and improvement   
- Reinforcing and understanding the culture/purpose of the service

**Authorities that need specific support**

- Enables Councils to focus on specific areas of their Development Management service where they are aware that improvement is needed but want help in identifying how that improvement can be made

**Groups of councils preparing to collaborate**

- Councils can often trip themselves up by failing to understand and appreciate differences in approach before combining processes. This toolkit helps draw out these differences so a common process can be agreed.

- It helps to draw out best practice across the councils that can be shared and celebrated

## When to use the Toolkit

There are no hard-and-fast rules about using the Toolkit; it can be used as a sense-check or critical review for current ongoing improvement work, or as a means to stimulate thought and ideas to kick-start a new programme of change and improvement. It will work best where it is used as a ‘continuous improvement’ tool rather than for ‘one-off’ projects, and when used to engage staff and other stakeholders in the design of improvements rather than imposing it upon them.

Feedback suggests that councils intend to use the Toolkit as part of:

**regular team meetings** – working through the various sections in a priority order that makes best sense for the Council or concentrating on known problem areas.

**team ‘away-days’** – many councils will take their team away for a day to plan changes and improvements and the Toolkit can proivide a useful focus and structure.

**focused, concentrated improvement work –** 2 or 3 focused days working through areas of the Toolkit and creating an improvement programme.

**geographical groups** – facilitated sessions working through common issues and sharing good practice.

**councillor engagement** – the Toolkit has a specific section on political leadership, and covers the councillor role at each stage of the DM process (not just the committee).

## Facilitator’s tips

* Spend time deciding which sections are most important to your service and also the order that you want to prioritise. Inevitably staff will get tired so choose the most important section first remembering that you should leave at least an hour for each section
* Try not to cover too much in one session. It is impossible to do all the sections in one session!
* Each section should be discussed in detail with challenges such as: Do we agree with excellent? Do we agree with poor? Are the tips helpful? What do we need to do if anything to change?
* Make sure you have someone to write down your conclusions and check what has been written before moving on to the next session. It is really important to ensure everyone’s thoughts are represented accurately
* The scores are there to help you conclude the effectiveness of your Development Management service but do not spend too long debating the scores, they are only there to give you guidance
* As always it is about getting the right people in the room and making them comfortable to contribute. Some staff may feel that their contribution is not as important as others. Make sure it is inclusive and everyone’s views are given equal weight
* Some staff may feel uncomfortable when some topics are discussed e.g. managers may feel uncomfortable when discussing the effectiveness of the management processes and case officers may feel uncomfortable when discussing customer feedback. Ultimately you need to decide whether all staff should be involved in the whole session, but the toolkit works best when staff are able to express their views openly without fear of repercusssions.
* This process can work really well with people from different councils so that services can learn from each other and suggest ways of working together in future.
* Many issues that people identify can be tackled at a number of different levels. Encourage people to think of what they could just do on Monday, as well as the bigger trickier things that need buy-in.
* Always agree a follow up action plan that will result from the discussions, otherwise the ideas, enthusiasm and momentum will be lost.

## For more information & Help

If you would like more information about any aspect of the Development Management Challenge Toolkit or would like to take part in or organise a facilitated improvement session please contact Planning Advisory Service[**pas@local.gov.uk**](mailto:pas@local.gov.uk)

To help you progress your action plan there is a range of support available on the PAS website along with links to other helpful sources of information. Please visit the website at <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas>

# Performance Management

## Introduction

This section considers what performance means for your Development Management service. Do you keep on top of the MHCLG speed and quality performance measures? Do you have other measures in place that assesses how well you are doing? Do you actively seek feedback from both customers of the service and your own staff? Do you set down in writing what is expected of staff in terms of performance? If you have said no to any of these questions consider whether they are important to how you deliver your service and whether you can clearly justify your approach.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is really important that you involve officers across the service in this discussion. The managers will be more aware of the information that is reported at management meetings, corporately and to Members but it is equally important that you understand what performance means for more junior case officers and the technical support team and their perception of the importance of performance.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The only performance statistics measured are the statutory performance measures that look at speed and quality of decision making. These are only considered on a quarterly basis when returns are asked for by MHCLG. Therefore there is no real understanding of ongoing quality of service except in terms of the measures used by MHCLG and the Council does not know if it is in danger of not meeting the MHCLG performance standards in advance of the quarterly returns. | Uses a variety of performance measures so that there is a clear understanding of quality from a number of perspectives and ensures that there is regular information provided on performance as measured through the MHCLG performance tables. These performance measures are regularly reviewed as part of a programme of continuous and ongoing improvement. | 1. Regularly monitor the statutory performance measures – at least every month 2. Have a variety of qualitative and quantitative performance measures that are important to the Planning Authority 3. Include a customer feedback performance target |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **Top tips** |
| The managers who take responsibility for the Development Management Service are unaware of ongoing performance until it is reported formally. There is no acknowledgement when performance is good and is not something that is discussed very often with technical support and planning officers except when they are told that management action is needed because of a performance target is missed e.g. following notification from MHCLG. | The managers regularly review performance and take decisive action when needed. Tech support and planning officers are regularly told about performance, have a chance to discuss performance, are praised when performance is good and are clear what action needs to be taken when performance needs to improve. | 1. Schedule performance discussions into relevant management meetings and staff 1 to 1s. 2. Create reports that can clearly be read and explain performance e.g. use of graphs, comparisons etc 3. Discuss performance with external bodies e.g. agents’ forums and take on feedback received 4. Include performance as a regular item for the Committee |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **Top tips** |
| Neither the technical support or planning officers have specific target dates for determining applications and so applications often go over the 8 and 13 week targets. If the 8 or 13 week is coming up and pressure is put on staff by either their manager or the applicant to issue the decision in time the applicant is asked to agree to an extension of time regardless of the issues still outstanding. | Monitors applications through weekly reports to the management team and issues are discussed between the relevant officers and manager at regular 1 to 1s. Applicants are aware of likely decision times and extensions of time are agreed when both sides agree it is appropriate and well in advance of the decision | 1. Make use of the Planning software to provide performance information 2. Different staff need different information e.g. Head of Planning only needs high level information whilst a case officer will need detailed information about their own cases. 3. Monitor performance of applications with and without extensions of time 4. Have a proper system in place to record extension of times with reasons |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **Top tips** |
| There is no obvious opportunity for the Council’s customers to feedback on planning performance apart from the formal complaints route or a generic Council feedback process. When customers do provide feedback there is no process in place to respond and when compliments are received it is acknowledged in an ad hoc way if at all. | There are regular opportunities for customers – including agents, developers, stakeholders and the public - to feedback on performance. When issues are raised these are discussed by the management team and changes are made. These changes are fed back to the people who have given the feedback as part of a programme of continuous improvement. | 1. Consider regular local agents’ forums and other stakeholder forums 2. Raise customer feedback as part of regular staff and management meetings 3. Have a learning through experience process so that lessons can be learnt from both positive and negative customer feedback |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **Top tips** |
| There are no clear set down ways of carrying out the Development Management process apart from a few disparate notes on different aspects of the Development Management process. Staff learn on the job with whoever is available to teach them and different staff do things in different ways depending on how long they have worked in the job or who taught them. When changes are suggested the phrase “we have always done it this way” is a common response. | There is a clear set way of carrying out the Development Management function (e.g. through a manual on Development Management) for all staff to refer to that is written collaboratively with staff and forms part of the induction process. It is reviewed at least yearly with the input of staff and is referred to regularly by everyone involved in the Development Management process. No one uses the phrase “we have always done it this way” because staff are always keen to improve the way they work. | 1. Do not let the ‘manual’ become a big piece of work in itself, let it evolve as changes are agreed and keep it simple and in whatever format fits the needs of the service 2. Make sure you have regular reminders to staff on the content of the ‘manual’ and allow staff to challenge if they think it is wrong 3. Use management meetings to discuss things that can improve and translate changes into amendments to the procedures |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Financial Management

## Introduction

This section looks at the way you manage your Development Management service financially. Do your Development Management managers properly forecast income from Development Management activities? Is every opportunity taken to drive up income or are you content to give advice for free or below cost because your income is being driven from other sources? Do you make the best use of your own staff before using consultants or agency staff or are you happy to use the Planning budget to fill the gaps to relieve the pressure on your permanent staff? There is no “one size fits all” approach to prudent financial management but it is important that DM understand their budgets and use resources effectively.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

The information required in this section will largely be known by the management team so they should take the lead in this section. However representation from more junior staff is also important to gauge the ownership of income targets from all staff and their views on recruiting agency staff and consultants.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Development Management managers are not involved in the monthly monitoring of Development Management budgets and actions are initiated by the Finance team or a manager from outside the specialism of Development Management. Therefore Development Management staff have little understanding of the need to drive up income by bringing in planning income or other discretionary services such as pre application fees. | There is a manager who takes responsibility for monitoring Development Management income and expenditure on a monthly basis with clear projections on actual income and expenditure against targets. This is regularly discussed with both the management team and the Finance team with actions taken with the involvement of relevant staff when required. | 1. Ensure the manager responsible understands the budgets and the necessary actions that are required. 2. Work with the Finance Team to ensure that income and expenditure can be easily understood and relates to actual work carried out e.g. planning application income in current year against previous year and 5 year average 3. Raise finance as part of the regular management discussions with a Development Management Manager recommending actions 4. Involve staff in discussing income generating ideas |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| An income target is imposed on the Development Management service based on Council needs and cross subsidises other areas of the Council where income is more difficult to achieve. The discretionary service charging schedule is based on historic charges and has not been assessed against customer needs or value for money. | Development Management managers set an income target based on realistic forecasts taking into account the previous years’ income, expected applications that are likely to be received in the year and a pre application charging schedule that maximises income when required whilst also meeting the statutory restraints in the Local Government Act and good value for money for the customer. | 1. Forecast likely fee income based on Local Plan delivery targets and from intelligence obtained from the development industry 2. Regularly discuss progress on key developments with key delivery partners and likely fees that will be received in forthcoming months 3. Annually review discretionary fees and ensure they both give value for money and keep in pace with inflation. 4. Speak to customers and benchmarking authorities to find out what discretionary services are helpful to customers and will attract a fee. |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Frequent use is made of consultants to undertake urgent work when a crisis is reached. As the work is needed at short notice staff do the minimum necessary to meet financial standing orders and selection is largely based on who is available or willing to undertake the work at short notice. | Development Management expenditure is carefully managed that maximises the use of in-house resources. Where work is contracted out work it is undertaken for good business reasons and achieves best value for money through the use of service level agreements, framework agreements and competitive tendering processes. However when agreeing partners it is not just based on price but on qualitative measures and track record. | 1. Set up a framework agreement for services that are likely to be needed on a frequent basis e.g. viability assessments or use an existing framework agreement in operation 2. Discuss consultancy opportunities with neighbouring LPAs. Can you share an Urban Designer or Tree specialist? 3. Ask colleagues in other LPAs about consultants and whether they would recommend them. Speak to colleagues direct rather than relying on formal references. 4. Think carefully about the qualitative measures for assessment – will you work well together and give you the quality you need? |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Workload pressures are managed through the frequent use of agency staff from a variety of recruitment agencies. The agency staff rarely stay long. Key posts are blocked from recruitment due to budgetary constraints and ongoing restructuring. They are therefore filled through recruitment agencies on an availability basis. | The use of agency staff is managed based on sound management decisions and consideration is always given to employing permanent staff or staff on fixed term contracts in the first instance. Where it is necessary to employ agency staff a selection process is used and advice is sought from other LPAs who have previously used the staff concerned. | 1. If you know there will be a recruitment issue try to fill temporary posts through trusted sources such as PAS, previously employed staff or recommendations from other LPAs. 2. Look to local Universities to source recent graduates or students who are looking for relevant experience with a view to obtaining their first planning job. 3. Consider more junior staff acting up as a career development opportunity or temporarily seconding staff from other parts of the department or Council. 4. When using agency staff ensure they have a buddy / mentor to help them understand how the Development Management process works in your LPA. |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** | | | |

# Workload Management

## Introduction

This section looks at how you structure your service and how easily you can redeploy staff to manage pressures. Each Council organises its staff in different ways and it is often driven by factors that are outside the control of the Development Management service. However it is essential in any organisation that the staff structures can enable the organisation to react to different work pressures such as a Local Plan examination or spike in planning applications.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is particularly important to include case officers and technical support staff in this section to understand the current morale of staff and their perception of workload management. Managers should be in listening mode and ready to help identify solutions if there are problems identified.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The staff structures are inflexible and do not allow staff to be redeployed to deal with workload pressures. Managers work in silos and are protective towards their staff resources so there is never a sharing of skills. Very few of the Development Management staff have experience of working in other areas of Planning. Therefore when staff leave or go sick there is a kneejerk reaction rather than planned approach e.g. by plugging the gaps with agency staff or simply load more cases on the remaining staff. | There is a flexible organisational structure where staff are not pigeon-holed into tightly defined specialisms and staff have a range of planning and related skills. Therefore staff can easily be redeployed where pressures exist. For example during a Local Plan Examination Development Management staff can help out with preparing statements and attending the examination. When a strategically important Major planning application is received policy staff can help by providing Development Management support to the case officer. When agency staff are used it is in a planned way to meet specific objectives e.g. to resource a PPA. | 1. Make sure discussions on resources are included as a regular item in management meetings 2. Carry out a skills audit to find out what skills staff have that may not be obvious and enable staff to be re-deployed 3. Discuss career development at appraisals and 1 to 1s so that staff are encouraged to develop their skills 4. Forward plan likely work pressures to help manage peaks and troughs e.g. when it is known that a complex planning application is likely to be submitted |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The only people who are aware of their workload are the staff themselves and sometimes they are unaware as there is no comprehensive system of recording cases. When the pressure gets too great staff raise it with their manager but there is not much the manager can do about it apart from sympathise and allow performance to slip. | Workflows are monitored on a weekly basis and this does not just include how many applications are outstanding but also includes applications determined and other associated work. Officer caseloads are not just monitored by overall number but also by type of application and includes pre applications. Managers discuss workloads with technical support and planning officers and help unblock issues. Where workloads become unmanageable action is taken and the officers are advised on the action taken and why. | 1. Create standard workload reports for each officer that can be run at any time 2. Encourage officers to have their own way of monitoring timescales e.g. writing key trigger dates in their diaries so that they keep on top of workloads 3. Consider having a threshold for number of applications per case officer that should be flagged up if exceeded |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| The number of staff employed in Development Management is based on an historic staff structure that is not based on workloads or on income generated by Development Management. As a consequence there are often significant workload pressures and no clear mechanism for employing more staff to resource an income generating activity such as a PPA. As a consequence staff morale is low and staff turnover high. | The staff structure is based on a detailed workflow and resource analysis and is regularly reviewed based on staff feedback and benchmarking work. There is flexibility within the staff structures to employ additional staff when needed to match increased workload and income generating activities such as PPAs. | 1. Consider a resource review of the Development Management service using external support such as PAS 2. Ensure that all income is clearly captured to inform resourcing debates 3. Benchmark with ‘nearest neighbour’ Planning Authorities to understand what workloads are right for your Planning Authority and use this to inform staff structure reviews |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Processes, IT and administration

## Introduction

This section is often referred to as the “back office”. It is the engine room of the service and if you get it right it enables the smooth delivery of the Development Management service. However if you get it wrong it can cause major issues with performance and customer service. Do all staff understand the processes they need to follow? Is the website clear, helpful and up to date? Is the planning software used fit for the purposes you require to carry out Development Management in your Council? Do you have an effective way of sorting out IT problems quickly? If the answer to any of these questions is “no” then improvements need to be made.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is particularly important to include technical support staff who understand the detail of the Development Management processes and for them to discuss with officers and managers whether the processes in place are effective or require improvement.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There are no set down process notes for officers or the set of process notes are out of date and do not reflect what an officer actually has to do on a day to basis. Staff induction takes the form of a new officer being shown what to do by an officer who has his / her way of doing things. | There are clear processes set up for all staff who take a role in the Development Management process. These are regularly reviewed in consultation with key staff so that they are fit for purposes. Staff regularly refer to them and they form the basis of an induction process for new staff. | 1. Make sure the right officer takes charge of putting together particular process notes e.g. Technical Support officer for a procedural matter or a senior case officer for managing a S106 agreement 2. Do not be afraid to make incremental changes whenever needed but make sure everyone uses the latest version of the procedures 3. Use team meetings to discuss when things do not appear to be correct and make changes promptly |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| There is no one assigned to update the Planning website pages and there has not been a review for sometime so the information is out of date. Changes are made when identified by individual officers or a member of the public and someone from IT is asked to sort it out. Links to other sources of information either do not work or are not there at all. | The Planning pages on the Council’s website are regularly updated and there is a clear process in place for doing this that involves staff who are dealing with day to day planning issues. There is an opportunity for customer feedback and there is a feedback process that results in a review of the planning pages as part of a process of continuous improvement. There are links to other key sources of information e.g. Planning Portal, Government websites etc | 1. Give a suitably trained officer the responsibility to regularly review the website and be a contact point for staff 2. Review other websites to benchmark the quality of Planning information 3. Do not make the webpages too wordy or technical but make use of links to different webpages 4. Test information with your customers to make sure it is fit for purpose and makes sense |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| The Development Management software has been in place for a number of years and there have not been any recent updates. The software is not supported by the originally supplier and so the IT department and staff are muddling through and will only be reviewed when finances allow. All staff find it frustrating to use but do not really see any solution to the problem. | The Development Management Software system has been well researched to ensure it meets the needs of the Planning Authority and was designed using the input of both planning officers and technical support. This was then piloted with staff before being finalised and so when it went live there were only minor technical issues that were quickly resolved with the software supplier. | 1. When a new software system is being implemented make sure it meets the needs of all staff not just technical support or planning officers 2. Learn from other Planning Authorities before deciding which option to go for. There are a number of different suppliers and each has its merits 3. Make sure the software links into the Planning Portal to minimise double handling 4. Does the software need to link in with other related functions e.g. Building Control or Land Charges? |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Problems occur on a regular basis and this causes frustration for officers and the public. If problems occur outside office hours it results in access problems and has led to complaints about the accessibility of the planning register. Officers are often late writing up decisions because the system keeps on crashing. Such problems need to be resolved by making a request to IT where it sits in a queue with all the other requests across the Council. | There is a key link officer in the IT department to work with the planning team and the Development Management software supplier so any problems can be resolved quickly and staff understand whether it is a problem for the software supplier to sort out or the Council’s IT team. This means that IT issues are resolved 7 days a week and there is minimal disruption in accessing the webpages or the document management system. | 1. Ensure there is a service level agreement with the Council’s IT department and Planning so that it can be prioritised 2. Ensure that any issues with the Development Management software are fast tracked and there is a named person or contact number that ensures a quick response 3. Ensure there is a named person with a named substitute who channels all queries to the relevant IT specialist and can gain a good working relationship |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Political leadership

## Introduction

This section focuses particularly on political leadership in decision making through the Planning Committee. Are the councillors on the Committee sufficiently experienced and trained to make key planning decisions and is the Chair sufficiently engaged in the process? Are other councillors, not on the Committee, sufficiently engaged in the Planning process? Has probity in the decision making process been properly thought through to meet the requirements of your Council? Does the scheme of delegation bring the right applications to Committee scrutiny? Are all councillors engaged in pre application discussion to the degree that best suits the Council and development community? Every Council will engage political leadership in different ways depending on the issues and political makeup of a Council but the principles below should be consistent for all Councils.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is important to involve those staff who have an active role at Planning Committee including the officer who acts as the lead Planning officer. However it is also important to involve those staff who have day to day contact with councillors on individual planning applications.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| Membership on Planning Committee is not looked at unless there is a change of political control and little thought is given to the types of interest and experience that individual can bring to the Committee. | Members of the Committee have a wide range of skills, responsibilities and local knowledge to cover the broad range of issues that will be brought to the Committee and not just based on the political make-up of the Council. | 1. Encourage as many councillors as possible to undertake Committee training including likely subs and councillors who are interested in planning or have major planning issues in their ward 2. Have regular officer / Chair / Portfolio discussions on the make-up of the Committee |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Ward / Parish councillors refer constituents to the Planning Department general number if they have a Planning issue and rely on Committee Members because they are the ones who understand Planning. Committee members are the only ones who attend training. Ward / Parish councillors do not really understand the referral process so just phone the Planning general number when they are asked. The only time they contact a Planning Manager is when they have a complaint that needs answering. | Ward councillors understand how to refer a planning application to Committee and have at least a basic understanding of the Planning process. Those not on Committee have still attended basic training on Planning and the Committee process so they can explain this to their constituents. They have a good relationship with Planning Officers and the Planning Managers so they know who to speak to if they have a Planning query and feel comfortable doing so. | 1. Ensure there are clear protocols in place for Ward councillor engagement and that is properly communicated to all councillors and forms part of councillor induction 2. Encourage councillors to look up new applications when they are submitted and show them how to do this on the Council’s website 3. Ensure case officers let councillors know when a potentially contentious planning application is submitted and invite them to discuss it directly with the relevant councillors. Extend this to pre applications if confidentiality protocols allow 4. Consider having case officers to focus on particular wards so that the ward councillors get to know specific officers |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| There is either no Probity in Planning document or one was prepared many years ago and is clearly out of date. Therefore at any councillor training reference is made to national guidance. Probity issues regularly come at the Committee and these are dealt with through the Monitoring Officer who refers to the Council’s Constitution. | There is an approved Probity in Planning document. This has been written following guidance from the LGA and PAS. The authors have included relevant Planning Managers and Planning lawyers in consultation with key councillors including the current Chair of Committee. The Probity in Planning document is regularly reviewed taking into account lessons learnt from issues that have occurred at the Planning Committee, the Council’s constitutional issues, good practice from elsewhere and changes in legislation. | 1. Planning managers should consider having debrief sessions after each Committee with the Chair and log any probity issues as part of an ongoing review 2. Involve all Committee members in the review of the Probity in Planning document by having a bespoke training session at draft stage so that they can input their comments. 3. Involve relevant officers in the review by asking them what works well and what does not work well. Ensure they are briefed on the final version. |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| The scheme of delegation has not been reviewed for many years and a large number of applications go to the Committee that are not contentious but need to be referred because they are not delegated to officers. As a consequence the agendas are too long for Members to deal with in one session and often result in adjournments or reconvening the next day. Members and officers regularly complain that they are having difficulty concentrating because the Committees last for so long. | The scheme of delegation has been developed with Committee members taking account of best practice throughout the country. It means that only those applications that require public scrutiny are on the agenda and over 90% of applications are delegated to officers. Meetings very rarely exceed 3 hours | 1. Assign a suitable officer to review schemes of delegation from other Councils and pick referrals that provide the best fit for your Council 2. If agendas are getting too long review the reasons for the referral with the Chair to consider in hindsight which ones perhaps did not require public scrutiny 3. Consider including some agenda items that only have discussion / officer presentation by exception e.g. employee applications |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| The Council does not have time for pre application discussions generally speaking and when they do take place there is often confusion over confidentiality. As a consequence there is often tension when an application is submitted either because there has been no pre application engagement or the pre application is perceived as officers agreeing things in private behind closed doors | Officers encourage applicants to engage with councillors at the pre application stage and to help ensure there is effective public engagement before a formal planning application is submitted. Councillors understand the pre application process and help the applicant overcome the concerns of the public. | 1. Have a very clear pre application engagement policy and publish this on the website 2. Discuss the pre application process with applicants at local agents forums to get the best balance of engagement 3. Include pre application engagement as part of councillor training 4. Have a protocol to agree when pre applications should be made public |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| The Committee Chair and key officers do not work effectively together. There may be a form of Chair’s briefing but this is quite ad hoc and unstructured. The Chair and officers do not discuss items in any detail outside of the formal Committee process itself and there have been frequent incidents where an item has either had to be deferred or gone against officer recommendation because new information has come to light at the last minute. | The Committee has a Chair who works well with officers and in particular the officer lead and legal advisor. There are structured Chair’s briefing session prior to the Committee and the Chair keeps in regular touch with officers on Committee business so there are no surprises at the Committee meeting | 1. Ensure the engagement with the Chair is clearly spelt out in the Probity guidance 2. Ensure that there is an effective vice Chair who can work with the Chair and substitute when the Chair is unavailable 3. Ensure there is always a debrief with the Chair after the Planning Committee to discuss what has gone well and why things may not have gone so well 4. Encourage the Chair to meet with officers outside of the formal Committee environment |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Committee members do the minimum necessary to sit on the Committee if training is mandatory and new Committee members get a briefing by a variety of different officers depending on who is available. If the training is not mandatory then it does not take place as it is not required. Councillors need to keep their own records as there is no central training register. Other training is carried out ad hoc normally because the Committee is told it has to be trained because a problem occurs e.g. appeal goes against the Council, a Judicial Review is lodged or a complaint is upheld. | All Committee members are trained annually using a set training programme that is delivered by competent people either within or external to the Council. In addition there is an annual programme of bespoke training to update councillors on topical Planning issues plus an annual training day that includes a site visit to see good practice. The training requirements are outlined in the Probity in Planning document and a training record is maintained so that councillors are reminded when further training is needed. | 1. Use the web resources on Members training from the PAS website 2. Have a library of presentation material that can be used for training and updated when required 3. Diary in training when you know it is needed e.g. after Local Plan adoption or when legislation comes into force 4. Keep a training record for every councillor that is shared with Committee support officers 5. Invite councillors outside of the Committee to training so they can be future substitutes or simply to widen their understanding of Planning 6. Use external facilitators (such as PAS) on occasion to get a wider perspective of Planning issues |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Planning performance is communicated through statutory Government returns and only discussed with Committee Members when there is a problem e.g. costs are awarded against the Council or when directed to do so by the Secretary of State or the Local Government Ombudsman | Planning performance information is regularly reported to the Committee and time is taken at the Committee for a discussion on performance including lessons learnt so that the Committee can acknowledge good performance and challenge poor performance as part of a programme of continuous improvement | 1. Include performance as a standing item on Committee agendas e.g. appeal decisions and enforcement performance. Periodically include speed and quality performance e.g. every quarter 2. Use a standard template for reporting performance information so that Committee Members understand and recognise the information 3. Use graphs to illustrate performance and to compare with previous years or Government targets |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Team Management

## Introduction

This section looks at how staff are managed in your Development Management service. There are different approaches to management that are based on the management styles of individuals and the team structure in which staff work. However there are key fundamentals to managing any team that involve: communication between the manager and staff; support to all staff; the ability for managers to safely challenge staff and staff to challenge manager; and for all staff to be clear about what is expected of them.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It isparticularly important in this section for case officers and tech support staff to take the lead with the managers listening to the feedback from staff and to test the perception of the management approach against the management systems that are in place and why there may be a difference in perception.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| When changes in policy, guidance etc takes place staff either find it out themselves through professional press or through a generic Council circular. Time is not given in team meetings to discuss such matters and it is often the staff who have to bring it to managers’ attention when the opportunity arises. | There are regular team meetings where the managers communicate key planning information to staff so that they are up to date with Planning practice and policy. This includes changes in national policy, Council policy, changes in guidance, legal cases of relevance etc. Staff then also have the opportunity to raise issues of Planning practice. | 1. Put a standing item on the team meeting agenda to discuss changes in policy, guidance or case law to remind everyone that items can be raised if necessary 2. Use a chat facility to enable staff to point out interesting appeal decisions, high court judgements etc and encourage discussion on relevant items 3. Give as many staff as possible access to Planning news media e.g. Planning Resource 4. Encourage staff to gain membership to appropriate professional bodies such as the RTPI and TCPA |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Managers dip in and out of strategically important development proposals and case officers are unclear when separate meetings have taken place and what was said. Case officers are given inconsistent guidance. Sometimes they are advised at the last minute on a recommendation they need to make so they so not feel empowered to make decisions. On other occasions they are left completely on their own with no management support or interest. | There is an effective system in place to enable managers to monitor and advise on strategically important development proposals. Managers give support to case officers, helping them to navigate issues that arise and case officers are clear what level of management support is needed and when they need to seek this support. | 1. Have a regular forum that enables managers to discuss the most contentious or strategically important applications with case officers and case officers have an opportunity to flag issues 2. Encourage managers to flag up development proposals of interest with the case officer at the start of pre app or application stage so that the case officer knows that there is management interest 3. Use 1 to 1s to ensure case officers are comfortable with their roles and the issues they are dealing with 4. Carry out debriefs when managers meet developers and case officers hold developer meetings so that developers do not perceive a ‘them and us’ between managers and case officers. Debriefs should ideally be face to face or verbally relayed rather than by email |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Case officers are left largely to themselves to monitor their caseloads and to decide how to prioritise work. Managers work in a reactive way and will only normally see an officer recommendation when it is ready to sign off or when they are alerted to a problem through a customer complaint. When problems arise this is normally dealt with by asking the applicant for an extension of time so that the matter can be further considered by a manager | Managers monitor case loads with case officers on a regular basis so that case officers can prioritise work and have the confidence to make decisions in a timely manner. For example with high volume applications managers can reassure case officers that there are no issues to impede a quick decision whilst giving support for more problematic applications so that a decision can be made. | 1. Ensure there is a regular flow of information so both the case officer and manager has up to date information on caseloads and details 2. Ensure monitoring of caseloads is always on a 1 to 1 agenda 3. Provide a guidance note for staff on how to prioritise caseloads |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| There are no scheduled opportunities for managers and staff to discuss topical issues and the only time staff are brought together is when there is a problem e.g. a complaint or poor performance. These tend to occur at short notice at the convenience of management and all staff are told to attend regardless of their own diaries. | There are regular opportunities for managers to discuss topical issues with staff and staff feel able to raise any questions that are of a concern to them. The manager agrees a time when the majority of staff can attend and suggests agenda items but staff have ample opportunity to place items on the agenda and decide how the issues are communicated e.g. presentation, discussion, workshop, Q and A etc. | 1. Try to hold staff forums in a comfortable environment and not a formal setting to encourage debate. Try having them outside of the normal office environment 2. Consider the most effective way to hold meetings so that they can maximise attendance e.g. virtual, location, time of day etc 3. Do not hold them too frequently otherwise they will be seen as chore, but ensure that they are frequent enough for topics of concern are properly addressed. Try letting staff decide. |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| There may be a generic set of appraisal targets but these are applicable for all staff, are given to staff once a year and are then assessed at the end of that year. There are no individual work programmes produced because all staff either process planning applications or carry out admin so their managers do not see the need for individual work programmes. | All staff have a work programme and annual appraisal targets so that they know when they are doing a good job and when improvement is needed as part of a culture of continuous improvement. Targets are based both of the business needs and the own individual needs of staff. | 1. Let staff suggest performance targets and discuss if these are different from other members of staff who do a similar job 2. Have a standard template for appraisals and work programmes so that staff know what to expect and how to complete 3. Discuss work programmes as a team before asking individuals to complete so that everyone understands their purpose and what is expected of them |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Complaints are dealt with as required under Council procedures and the relevant officers only know about them when they are interviewed by a manager to help with a response. The outcome is not known by the relevant officer unless it involves a disciplinary matter. There is no process to record compliments and therefore it falls upon the line manager to decide what to do with them. There is no review process to review appeal decisions and it is usually the responsibility of the case officer to raise any points that they feel appropriate with managers or other staff. | The department has a learning through experience process in place whereby compliments, complaints and appeals information are logged and lessons can be learnt through actions agreed by management. Equal acknowledgement is given for positive and negative feedback and staff are always aware that the feedback has been acknowledged and know what actions have taken place. | 1. Create a standard reporting method for learning points and summarise these reports regularly (e.g. once a quarter) 2. Ensure all managers are involved in writing the reports and feed back to staff at the appropriate forum e.g. 1 to 1s, team meetings etc 3. Involve staff in the responses to complaints and let them review the draft before it is sent out for accuracy even if they do not agree with the conclusion 4. Ensure relevant managers praise staff when they receive compliments |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Training

## Introduction

Planning staff at all levels need training to do their job and DM staff need ongoing training to ensure that they can properly respond to changes in the Planning system both at a local and national level. However there are often constraints on the amount of time staff have to undertake training and the cost of attending training events. Therefore it is important that every opportunity is taken to maximise time and resources to ensure that staff are properly trained to do their jobs.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

Managers will have the detailed information to support this section and it is important that more junior staff can explain their own training needs that are either met or not met.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| There is no training budget and very little training for staff. Staff will often complain that any training that does take place is not fairly allocated as there is no process to do this. Training tends to happen by necessity e.g. an application is submitted that needs certain expertise so the case officer is sent on the training regardless of cost and savings need to be made elsewhere to compensate . | The department has a training budget and staff are encouraged to attend training based on priorities identified in their annual appraisals. There is a fair system for deciding who goes on which courses and there is a practice of staff feeding back key learning points so that those who did not attend still get some benefit. The budget is carefully managed so that the money stretches as far as possible e.g. focus on online and local events to avoid extra travel costs. | 1. Try to plan out an annual training programme so that as many staff as possible can attend at least one event and these should be at the minimum cost possible. 2. Have a maximum of 1 or 2 staff attending any single event and have a reserve list in case they cannot attend so the cost is not wasted 3. Have a regular lunchtime session so that staff can feedback on learning points to those who are interested |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Staff are frustrated that the service regularly employs consultants when they feel they could have done a better job. They feel frustrated that their talents are not being fully used and this often leads to high staff turnover. Sometimes staff mention a skill they have to their managers but then it is forgotten because there is nowhere to keep such information. | The department is aware of the skills that all staff have even if they are not obvious in their role profiles. Staff are encouraged to use these skills and share with others so that skills can be transferred across staff and staff are motivated to develop their learning. Sometimes the most unlikely skills are found in staff due to their previous jobs / experience / hobbies. | 1. Keep a skills register for all staff and renew yearly so that new skills can be captured 2. Keep a record of training that is carried out and refer to this before agreeing to employ consultants 3. Encourage staff to talk about their wider skills even if there is no immediate connection to the work of the department. 4. Encourage staff to undertake secondments to gain new skills. For example technical support staff to deal with householder applications to gain professional planning skills. |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| No professional membership fees are paid and no support is given for staff who wish to apply for professional membership. The department does not make use of the apprentice levy because it cannot spare staff time to undertake training. As a consequence there is no formal on the job learning and staff are therefore prevented from progressing in their careers at the Council because they do not meet the essential requirements. This leads to high staff turnover. | All staff are encouraged to gain professional membership of an appropriate body such as the RTPI including technical support staff who can apply for technical membership. The Council supports staff in making applications for professional membership. Technical support staff and other junior officers are also encouraged to apply for apprenticeship learning at the nearest RTPI accredited Planning course and get assistance with course fees and time off to complete the course. Staff are encouraged to keep up with their CPD learning and given as much time off and financial support as the business allows. | 1. Encourage officers within the department to mentor staff when they apply for professional membership. 2. Work with staff within the Council to maximise the use of the apprentice levy 3. Ask staff to sign learning agreements in exchange for supporting them in developing their professional qualifications to ensure staff retention post qualification 4. Encourage staff to be active within their professional bodies and to promote the benefits of professional membership |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Pre-applications

## Introduction

Unlike planning applications there is no set process for considering pre applications and it is not mandatory for Councils to offer a pre application service. However it is good practice to do so as part of the service the Council gives to the applicant and also to help de-risk and speed up the consent process. In the same way most Councils charge for pre application advice but some consider that this is not appropriate and it can be resourced through existing Council income. There is no definitive right way to provide advice prior to a formal planning application but all Councils must be sure that they are delivering a service that it right for the Council and the customers.

## How to involve staff in the discussion:

It is important that all staff involved in the pre application process are involved in the discussion, including managers, case officers and technical support staff so that the process can be understood from start to finish.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** | |
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| Pre application is not promoted by the Development Management service because it does not have the time or resources to provide a pre application service. However the decision on giving advice has not been made on sound business reasons and if an applicant wants pre application advice a manager may agree to meet the applicant on an informal basis but this is not minuted or given any formal recognition. Therefore the process is inconsistent depending on the officer contacted by the applicant. | | There is a clear, well publicised pre application service. The information sets out a clear commitment of the service that an applicant can expect with clear performance standards. It does not over promise and caveats the information by reminding the applicant that the pre application advice does not guarantee an outcome at planning application stage. | 1. Set out the pre application service offered in the form of a webpage and guidance booklet 2. Regularly discuss with agents the service they prefer to gain the most from pre applications 3. Regularly discuss the pre application process at officer meetings to ensure it meets the expectations of both what the Council and applicants | |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | | | |
| There is a basic fee schedule that covers the key decision types – Major, Minor and Other. It has not been reviewed for a number of years and does not represent the officer time spent on a pre application. Therefore pre applications are discouraged because they are a drain on staff resources. | | There is a clear charging schedule for pre applications that covers all the types of services that the Council is willing to offer. This ranges from simple householder advice to advice on large scale strategic developments. There is a menu of services that include a scoping view up to a comprehensive service of all application requirements. Various hybrid options are available e.g. advice on viability, a focus on S106 requirements, advice on a particular condition etc. The fee schedule is reviewed at least annually based on customer feedback, inflation and best practice elsewhere | 1. Ask applicants what services they would benefit from 2. Undertake a time recording exercise to establish the actual cost of particular pre applications and set fees accordingly 3. Seek customer feedback on value for money 4. Benchmark with similar Planning Authorities to identify appropriate costs 5. Review fees at least annually using an inflationary measure (e.g. RPI) as a benchmark for price rises | |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | | | |
| There is no procedure in place for agreeing Planning Performance Agreement (PPAs) and are avoided wherever possible. Sometimes PPAs are agreed at the insistence of an applicant. In such instances the applicant writes the PPA and the Council signs it with little comment. However very often there is a dispute between the Council and the applicant. Deadlines set in the PPA are consistently missed and the applicant does not feel they get value for money. | | PPAs are encouraged for some developments where it is beneficial for both the Council and the applicant and a template has been established to help draft PPAs. When a PPA is drafted all consultees (internal and external) sign up to the timescales and the Council ensures that there are sufficient resources to meet the timeframes. The Council is selective on agreeing PPAs to those developments where it is appropriate to provide an additional level of service to agree a positive outcome. | 1. Establish a template for PPAs based on good practice, but ensure that there is sufficient flexibility for each PPA to be a bespoke document based on what the Council and applicant agree 2. Be realistic about timescales and resource requirements. Ensure it covers the actual costs and employ additional staff if necessary to resource the PPA 3. Ensure there is a senior manager referral point in case there is an issue during the lifetime of the PPA 4. Do not overcommit with PPAs. Only have a PPA when it is beneficial to both applicant and Council to put extra level of resources to gain a positive outcome 5. Do not forget to get the commitment of internal and external consultees before signing a PPA | |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | | | |
| There is an ongoing tension between officers, councillors, parish councils, neighbourhood forums and the public over public awareness of pre applications. There is a concern that officers are making decisions behind closed doors but also there has been tension with applicants because information has been put in the public domain when there was an expectation that it would remain confidential. The Council is regularly faced with Freedom of Information requests to disclose pre application information. | | There is a clear policy of confidentiality versus public interest. Applicants are clear at the beginning of the process when and if their pre application will be made known to the wider public and there is an agreement with the Council over consulting interested parties, councillors, forums and the general public. This has been agreed in discussion with relevant parties so there is not suspicion from the public that decisions are being made behind closed doors. | 1. Have a clearly worded statement at the pre application submission stage explaining the Council’s policy on disclosing pre application information 2. Clarify with an applicant upfront if information should be withheld under Freedom of Information quoting specific sections of the legislation 3. Include pre application processes as part of councillor training | |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | | | |
| Pre application advice is normally carried out in an ad hoc way based on how much time an officer has to carry out the pre application with a series of emails and meeting notes rather than a summary report. Generally case officers prioritise planning applications because they are more closely monitored and pre applications either get forgotten or dwindle to a close and the applicant takes whatever information they have collected to draw their own conclusions about the final form of any planning application. | | The expectations on the output from pre applications is clear and is agreed upfront with the applicant. There is a standard format for the officer to present the information with the appropriate waiver regarding relying on the information at planning application stage. Pre applications are given equal priority to planning applications because they are seen as part of the same process of delivering the right development in the right places. If the pre application is supported then at the end of the discussions officers will clarify with the applicant the validation requirements and whether the information provided is sufficient. | 1. Prepare a summary report template for writing up pre applications and share this with the applicant at the start of the process so that it can be modified as necessary to meet the requirements of the Council and applicant 2. Always clarify with the applicant when the pre application has been completed and ask for feedback from the applicant for any future improvements 3. Ensure the conclusion of a pre application is properly recorded and made available for the case officer at the planning application stage and make it clear if the pre application has not included advice that the Council thinks would be helpful to the applicant 4. Always try and ensure the same case officer deals with both the pre application and planning application | |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | | | |
| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** | | |

# Receipt and validation

## Introduction

Councils manage the registration and validation of planning consent applications in different ways based on the team structures and software used. Sometimes it is an administrative function, or there is a designated officer (s), or it will be undertaken by the case officer, or a combination of these options. The key to providing an excellent receipt and validation service is to undertake the task quickly and accurately so there are not further delays in the consents process.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

The staff directly involved in the receipt and validation process will need to take a lead role in the discussion with other officers and managers ready to challenge the processes followed if appropriate.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There are no clear processes for validation and it is carried out by different staff depending on workload demands. The Council does not know how long it takes to validate applications but generally speaking applications get moved up the list if an applicant complains about the time it is taking | There is a clear performance target to ensure that validation is carried out in a timely way (normally within an average time of 5 working days) and there is a process in place so it is a clear who does what with regard to the roles of technical support / validation team / case officer. Performance targets are regularly monitored and if missed then this is reviewed and changes made if necessary. The managers can clearly see where delays have occurred e.g. type of application delayed, particular member of staff slow etc. | 1. Have a clear set of process notes for validation. Decide who is going to do the validation (e.g. case officer or technical officer or combination) and then ensure it is consistently implemented 2. Set realistic performance targets that can be achieved but are not too generous. Commit to more challenging targets when processes have settled in 3. Consider incentivising online applications and Planning Portal applications by committing to faster validation times 4. Generate reports that give you detailed information about validation so it can be effectively monitored |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| A local validation list has been produced in the past because legislation requires it but it has not been reviewed as required by the NPPF (every two years). Agents regularly complain that it is too onerous and consultees complain that it is not sufficiently comprehensive. | There is an up to date local validation list that has been tested with consultees and local agents so that it is clear what information is required but is not overly burdensome for the applicant. There is a process by which officers can use their discretion to validate an application that does not meet all the local validation requirements. | 1. Use feedback from both agents and consultees to inform the review of the local validation list 2. Assign the review of the local validation list to officers who are both senior enough to make decisions but close enough to validation to understand the problems experienced in the current version 3. Benchmark with other Councils to ensure the right balance is achieved on validation requirements 4. Consider the introduction of an accredited agents scheme with local agents to see if it has any mutual benefits |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Validation is inconsistently applied depending on the officer. Agents know that if officer A carries out the validation then almost anything will be allowed whilst officer B will reject most applications. Applications are often appealed due to non determination because of the frustrations that applicants have with the validation process | Relevant officers have had training on validation and there is a consistent approach that ensures that the Council is helpful wherever possible by not strictly following a ‘tick box’ exercise but equally does not allow poor applications to be validated first time. | 1. Monitor validation performance and ensure staff are sufficiently trained to take a consistent and proportionate approach 2. Have a clear set of process notes to aid consistency 3. Include validation as a regular item at relevant team meetings |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Applicants are aware an application is invalid through a standardised letter that is generic for all applications. No details are given of the contact officer. The Council keeps the application until the applicant responds and some applications have been held for many months. | When an application is invalid the applicant is clear about the reasons why, what is required to make the application valid and who to contact for any follow up discussions. They are also clear about the expectation of the Council to make the application valid and the implications of not providing the information within certain timeframes. | 1. Publish on the website the Council’s policy for returning fees 2. Monitor invalid applications through regular reports so that managers can discuss reasons for delays with case officers 3. Consider retaining part of the fee if an application has been returned due to the time spent in validating the application |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Consultation and allocation

## Introduction

It will always be important that the right officers consider the right applications both in terms of experience and capability and also capacity in terms of workload. The consultation process is also essential to sound decision making since it is a statutory requirement to consult certain individuals and organisations and also a key premise of determining any planning consent application is to ensure all relevant issues are considered. Do you have an effective way of quickly allocating the right applications to the right case officers? Is it clear who should be consulted and how that consultation should be carried out? If the answer is “no” to both questions then there is a real risk to your Development Management performance.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

Managers will probably have the most detailed knowledge of how the current system has been developed and case officers and technical support officers will have the best knowledge of how the procedures work in practice so the discussion will be most effective if all staff share how procedures work in practice.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There is no set procedure for allocating applications and this tends to mean that the best officers end up with the greatest workloads as they are the keenest. This causes a great deal of resentment from staff who feel that they are being penalised for being good at their job. If cases get reallocated during the course of an application it is in an ad hoc way rather than for good business or customer service reasons. | There is a robust procedure in place to allocate applications, for example by using project management software and more senior officer screen applications to quickly flag up potential issues before allocation. There is access to reports on workloads so a manager can easily find out if a particular application has had the involvement of a named case officer. No system is full proof but case officers have a roughly even level of workload dependent on their experience and grade. | 1. Make use of the software systems available to help allocation and monitoring applications e.g. IDOX Enterprise 2. Try to avoid having to reallocate applications as this frustrates applicants and can appear unprofessional so a slight delay to ensure the right applications go to the right case officer is time well spent 3. Use 1 to 1 meetings to monitor actual workloads. It is often very difficult to assess this just through numbers of applications assigned to each officer 4. Even if a manager does not always allocate applications make sure a manager has oversight of the process and can spot issues quickly |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| There is no consultee guide and individual case officers decide who to consult by referring to legislation and asking their manager when they think they need to consult someone. Statutory consultees do sometimes get missed which has resulted in challenges. When this occurs staff might be reminded at team meetings and emails but there is no reference point for staff to go to. | There is clear guidance for case officers to decide what applications need to be referred to which consultees with a named contact point. The guidance also highlights statutory consultees. This guidance is updated on a regular basis as staff change, legislation impacts on consultees or further clarity is needed following issues that arise. | 1. Make the guidance as unambiguous as possible and specify when the case officer should discuss directly with a named person 2. Consult potential consultees when the guidance is reviewed so that they can advise on wording and ensure the contact names are up to date 3. Make sure it is clear who are the statutory consultees so that case officers know to chase consultees if no response is given 4. Ensure that the Planning software is updated when consultee information changes to ensure that the method of notification is as smooth as possible |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The method of publicity is buried in the SCI but is not separately highlighted on the Council’s website. The method of neighbour notification comes down largely to the preference of the case officer. For example some officers will write to a large number of residents to make sure everyone knows about a proposal while other officers only write to those immediately affected. The use of site notices largely depends on if an officer has time to visit a site | There is a published publicity code that forms part of the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) that clearly spells out how interested parties are notified e.g. use of neighbour notification letters and site notices. This is supplemented by the use of social media to advertise key development proposals working with the Council’s communications team | 1. Keep the publicity clear and simple e.g. a table. Also include other consents such as prior approvals, lawful development certificates etc 2. Use local contacts to help advertise an application e.g. local councillors, residents’ groups etc 3. Assign someone in the service to innovate on the use of social media and remember that publicity needs to access all sections of the community |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The site notice and neighbour notification wording has been lifted straight from the regulations and has never been tested with the public. Neighbour letters get sent in plain envelops addressed to the occupier and site notices are on plain white paper which makes it difficult for the public to spot a planning notification. If there is a query raised about location of site notices reference is made to the case officer who explains where it was placed from memory. | The site notices and neighbour notification letters have been designed following feedback from the public so that they are simple to understand and stand out in the local area. The case officer identifies where to place a site notice through the use of a map and photos and these are stored on the Planning software. | 1. Date photographs that you take of site notices so it is clear when they were posted 2. Consider using a method to differentiate site notices such as amendments, reserve matters etc (e.g. using differently coloured paper) 3. When a new site notice replaces an older one make sure this is clear for the public to spot 4. Make neighbour notification letters stand out from junk mail e.g. using bespoke envelopes that make it clear that it relates to Planning 5. Be inventive with your site notices so that they stand out e.g. using images, photos, coloured plans etc |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| If interested parties want to find any updates on a planning application they need to search the website. There is no more customer friendly system in place e.g. alerting interested parties by email. Councillors generally find it difficult to use the website so if they want to get information about a planning application they ring the general Planning number or a named officer who they have dealt with previously. There are regular complaints from the public because they have not been told about new information or other comments received. | The Planning software allows all interested parties to be notified when additional information is added to particular planning applications and people are encouraged to receive these notifications so they can proactively comment as necessary. This is made easier with clearly labelled sections in the application file that flag up when additional information is added. For the benefit of those members of the public who do not have the IT capabilities local councillors have received the necessary training so that they can advise their residents as necessary. There is a clear way in which local residents can ask questions about an application if they wish. | 1. Give regular reminders to councillors and residents groups on ways they can be updated on planning applications 2. When choosing a new software provider consider how easy it is for the public to help themselves with regard to updates on planning applications 3. Use the website to inform the public how to help themselves 4. Consider a yearly training session for all councillors on accessing planning application information 5. Allow the public to feedback on the website on the accessibility of planning application information so changes can be made as necessary |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Relationships with Parish / Town Councils and Neighbourhood Forums is poor and therefore they tend to default to referring planning applications to the relevant Planning Committee when they have issues rather than negotiating with officers to try to resolve issues of concern. | There is a collaborative and trusting relationship with Parish / Town Council and Neighbourhood Forums because officers understand the importance of these decision making bodies to explain the relevant Planning issues to local residents and to make a positive contribution to the Planning process. Equally the councillors / forum members respect the views of officers and feel comfortable discussing issues direct with officers. | 1. Establish a protocol with the relevant bodies so that they can actively engage in the Planning process and avoid unnecessary items being referred to the Planning Committee 2. Organise bespoke training for Parish / Town Councils and Neighbourhood Forums to focus specifically on Planning issues that are relevant to them |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Considering an application

## Introduction

All Councils need to be mindful of the national performance standards based on speed and quality. A Council may not feel that it is necessary to be ‘top of the league’ but it does need to ensure that it does not fall within the designation criteria. Councils will have varying ways in which applications are managed, but it is really important that there is consistency and fairness in the way every application is considered and an opportunity to reflect on the implications from decisions made so that there is continuous learning.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

Case officers should take the lead in the discussion as they will be closest to the day to day ways of working. Managers and technical support officers will then be able clarify whether the practice is consistent with processes in place and all staff can then be able to suggest improvements if necessary.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There is no day to day performance monitoring of the speed of determining planning applications and performance information is only gathered at the quarterly MHCLG return period.  Officers tend to take a ‘just in time’ approach to determining planning applications and pass them for signing off on the last day of the 8 or 13 week period if they remember to determine them in time. As a consequence if there are any issues the applications either go over time or an applicant is asked to sign an extension of time. | All managers and case officers are aware of Government expectations regarding speed and this is regularly monitored by officer and team. There is a project management system in place so officers know when they are on target for meeting performance deadlines. The Service’s performance targets are more challenging than the Government targets so there is a degree of slack built into the system if there are any unforeseen issues. | 1. Generate weekly reports on planning performance based on individual officer performance, team performance and service performance 2. Consider setting challenging targets for the more straightforward applications. For example a 5 week target for householders so that they can be moved through the system quickly 3. Incorporate project management software that allows an officer to understand whether their application is on track e.g. a traffic light system |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The need for site visits is not considered in a structured way, is inconsistent and not necessarily based on Planning merits. The technology available to consider sites virtually (e.g. Google Maps) is also not used in a consistent or structured way. As a consequence issues often arise either during the decision making process or post decision that should have been identified on site. | The Service has a consistent approach to site visits e.g. deciding through a risk based approach or based on type of application. All case officers follow the same protocol. Use is made of Google Maps and other virtual means of assessing a site. If a site visit is needed the case officer undertakes as much work as possible in a single visit e.g. posting a site notice, taking photos, visiting the applicant, visiting neighbours etc | 1. Create a process map for case officers to decide on the need for a site visit based on need and risk 2. Managers to review case officer use of site visits so that they help case officers decide if a site visit is necessary 3. Encourage case officers to work together so that if one officer is in an area they can put up another officer’s site notices, take photos, check on an issue etc 4. Provide training to case officers to maximise the use of Google Maps |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Case officers consider planning applications sequentially and often it is unclear what the recommendation will be until the end of the determination process when the case officer reviews the majority of the information for the first time. Therefore even the most straightforward applications will be determined at the end of the determination period. There is a single template for all officer reports so officers often end up including irrelevant information because the template indicates a response is needed e.g. a section on planning obligations for householder applications.  Case officers will also negotiate on all planning applications even if there is little chance of them ever being acceptable so time and resources are spent unnecessarily from both the applicant and planning authority side | There is a consistent approach to considering different types of planning applications. If applications are clearly unacceptable there is a fast track process to reaching a quick refusal decision without taking unnecessary officer time. If applications are clearly acceptable at validation stage there is a fast track approach for a quick positive decision. This may involve a shortened report format that is particularly used for householder applications. If negotiation is required there is a disciplined approach to avoid excessive time spent from both sides. For example all outstanding matters are negotiated before readvertising and deadlines are given to receive additional / amended information. | 1. Create different report templates for different types of applications e.g. householder, minor commercial, minor residential, major etc 2. Triage applications with the manager so that the case officer has the confidence to fast track applications as required 3. Create a protocol for readvertising applications so there is a consistent approach to the need to readvertise 4. Introduce strict disciplines for considering recommendations so that it is not acceptable for a case officer to pass through a decision on the last day of an 8 week / 13 week period unless previously agreed with the manager |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Extensions of time are used as a matter of routine and usually at the end of the 8 or 13 week period. This is normally done through an exchange of email and on the basis that the officer has run out of time. Usually the extension of time period is over optimistic so further extensions of time are routinely agreed. | Extensions of time are used sparingly and always with the prior agreement of the applicant who has agreed that it benefits both sides to continue negotiating. Case officers do not use an excuse that they have not had time to look at a planning application as a reason for negotiating an extension of time. When extensions of time are used there is a set template that clearly states the reason and extension date. Very few applications have more than one extension of time. | 1. Create a simple template that can be sent to an applicant that clearly states the reason and extension date so that there is a clear audit trail 2. Monitor applications with extensions of time by officer that can be discussed at 1 to 1s |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The involvement of senior managers and senior members is very often ad hoc and disjointed with case officers which causes communication issues and mixed messages to the applicant. There are frequency disagreements between departments over the appropriate decision to take on planning applications | There is a process in place for case officers to discuss contentious, strategic or politically sensitive proposals with senior managers and senior members. This allows the case officer to get a steer on the approach to take in the consideration of the application. This process allows key decision makers outside of Planning to input their views e.g. housing, transport, environment etc. As a consequence the Planning service is joined up and gives consistent advice to applicants. | 1. Set up a forum to discuss contentious applications and schedule them well in advance as senior managers have very busy diaries. If there is nothing to discuss then the meeting can simply be cancelled 2. Try to ensure all relevant interests are represented in any forum you set up and therefore if the senior manager cannot attend then nominate a sub but make sure they are senior enough to make decisions 3. Ensure that the person who manages the agenda can make a call on which items are appropriate for the forum and it does not get dominated by low level applications that does not need senior management input |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The case officer sees themselves simply as the “postbox” and lets consultees take a lead in negotiations. As they are not subject specialists but *just* the case officer they do not feel able to challenge a consultee. Applicants regularly go directly to the consultee to get their views of the application. | There is a clear communication route for the applicant to the Planning Authority. The case officer is aware of all discussions that take place with the applicant and consultees. When it involves providing an opinion on the merits of the application the case officer is always present and has agreed in advance that this is the approach that is going to take place. All consultees both internal and external understand that this is how the Council works. | 1. Provide project management training to case officers so that they can use the skills of managing work and people to deliver an outcome i.e. a planning application decision 2. Take a zero tolerance to a consultee giving opinions on the outcome of an application directly to the applicant. The only conversations they should be having directly should involve clarification on information required 3. Make use of pre meetings before meeting an applicant so the case officer and consultees can agree a strategy for negotiating with an applicant |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| No one really knows what applications are out of date unless the case officer or manager gets a complaint from the applicant. The only time case officers and managers are challenged is when poor performance is brought to their attention e.g. by their own Members, PAS or MHCLG | All out of date cases are regularly reviewed so that it is clear why a decision has not been made. This is particularly relevant for cases without an extension of time but includes all cases that have gone over 8 or 13 weeks so that it is clear why there is an extension of time. Case officers are challenged over out of date cases and managers help to bring the consideration to a conclusion. | 1. Include a report on out of date applications on a regular basis for discussion at management meetings and 1 to 1s with the case officer 2. Where necessary have a specific discussion with the relevant staff to unblock a planning application 3. Introduce a process whereby applicants are given a certain timeframe to provide the information needed and if they do not then move to refuse the application or ask the applicant to withdraw. Keep a detailed audit for appeal purposes |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# The Officer Report

## Introduction

The officer report can be a very important document for the Planning Authority to demonstrate that a decision has been properly considered taking into account relevant legislation and policy. However in the vast majority of cases it will be given little scrutiny because the application is not contentious. Therefore it is important that officers spend the right length of time writing a report depending on the application it concerns. In the same way some reports will need considerable management oversight whilst others will need very little management scrutiny. The key to being an excellent Planning Authority is getting this balance right.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

All Development Management staff will be able to make an equal input into this discussion whether it is from the perspective of Member expectation, ability to defend an officer recommendation / decision or the practical issues with preparing a report and presenting it either on the website or to the Planning Committee.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There might be a generic officer report template that was prepared a number of years ago but it is not really fit for purpose so case officers normally create their own structure and as a consequence they include different information depending on who is the case officer. When an appeal is lodged officers normally have to write a separate appeal statement because the officer report is inadequate. | The officer report follows a template and the template changes depending on the type of application and the decision made. Reports for householder applications are very short unless the decision is to refuse or a Planning Committee item. Major application reports include additional information such as S106 requirements. If an application is being refused it is usually written in a form that can be used as a written representations appeal statement or sent to the Planning Inspector without any further additional information | 1. Use best practice to design a number of templates for different types of applications and decisions 2. Consider just having a tick box report for very straightforward householder application – will anyone actually read them? 3. Include standard wording to ensure officers include key information e.g. housing supply, Equality Act, Human Rights Act etc. However make sure that officers actually check that the standard information is correct e.g. have they assessed against the Equality Act? |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Every officer has their own way of doing things depending on their own particular interests and experience. Some write in a very chatty way whilst others write formally in the third person. The reports include unnecessary information and tend to ramble. | The officer report follows a logical order that tells a story to explain the decision making process. For example it starts with a description of the development and consultation responses, then ends with a conclusion and reason for the decision. Whilst each application is considered on its own merits the language and structure is always the same so a third party would not be able to tell which individual officer wrote the report. | 1. Carry out training for all case officers on the approach to report writing. Let all staff debate the best form of report writing so that the service challenges itself on the report structure 2. Look at how other Councils write reports and learn from best practice |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Case officers are not overly concerned by the quality of their reports because someone else will spot their mistakes and if it is a Committee report there are normally a number of managers who will look at it. If there is an error in an officer report it is difficult to pin ‘blame’ on it; the case officer says that the line manager should have spotted it, the line manager thinks the senior manager should have spotted it and the senior manager thinks that both the line manager and case officer should take greater ownership of the report. | The case officer takes ownership of their report and ensures it makes clear logical sense, covers all the relevant issues and is written in a professional manner. There is oversight by a manager who agrees the final decision but the case officer is responsible for providing a clear recommendation and for ensuring the report covers all the essential analysis. | 1. Introduce a checklist for officers to follow to ensure that they write consistent and comprehensive reports 2. Have a clear protocol for signing off reports to ensure it is clear who is accountable 3. Encourage managers to risk assess applications and brief case officers on the level they need to review their reports well in advance of case officers producing the final version |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Members are not happy with officer reports but do not feel able to challenge back on the quality of the reports as they are not the professionals and so there are parts of the report that they either do not understand or do not understand why it is included. | The Members of the Committee are encouraged to feedback to officers on the quality of officer reports in terms of layout and content. They point out when a good report has helped them understand an issue and also when they have found the report confusing or overly complex. The officers use this information to regularly review the way reports are written and ensure that it is clear, concise and in Plain English. | 1. Use the Chair’s briefing to check with the Chair that the officer report is properly laid out and whether anything needs to change either before the Committee meeting or as an ongoing learning process 2. Use the annual Member training to review the officer reports so that Members can better understand why information is included and Members can challenge officers on content 3. Review how other Councils write reports to continuously improve |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# The decision and conditions

## Introduction

Councils have different schemes of delegation to decide which decisions need the scrutiny of Members and need to held in public. However whichever scheme of delegation is agreed it needs to be clear, transparent and unambiguous. The final decision must equally be clear, transparent and unambiguous so the applicant is clear what further they need to do to implement their proposal whether that is through a resubmission, appeal or the discharge of conditions. This should not be held up unnecessarily through the poor use of conditions or ambiguity with the S106 agreement process. All Planning Authorities should continuously review their decision making process to improve the service they provide.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

Managers will have a particularly important role in the feedback the service receives from applicants and Members on the decision making process. However all staff will be able to take an active role in the discussion from the management of Planning Committee agendas, to practical difficulties in getting decisions agreed to any subsequent complaints that might be received by the service.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| The scheme of delegation has not been reviewed for many years and a lot of the items go to Committee because the scheme of delegation says so not because they are contentious. The agenda therefore is long and often difficult to manage in a single session. There are often arguments between Members and officers whether an item should be on the Committee agenda because the scheme of delegation is ambiguous. | There is a clearly thought out scheme of delegation that all councillors are happy with and understand. This means that only the most contentious applications go to the Committee or if there are probity issues (e.g. employee applications). The Committee agendas are manageable because there is an effective scheme of delegation. | 1. Regularly review your scheme of delegation with Members of the Committee to ensure it meets the Council’s requirements 2. Regularly remind all councillors of the delegation criteria and encourage them to inform their constituents 3. Monitor the percentage of items going to Committee. If there is little or no debate on an item discuss whether the scheme of delegation needs to change 4. Use best practice from other Councils. Do not be afraid to copy from others |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The decision making thought process is unclear. The officer report jumps from one issue to another and there is no clear conclusion. Therefore an interested party is not clear why there is an officer recommendation to approve or refuse. | The officer report ensures that the decision making process is clearly set out. The issues are set out making it clear why an issue is considered acceptable or unacceptable and it leads to a logical conclusion e.g. it is clear how an objection is addressed through amendments or conditions | 1. Use an officer report template to steer the case officer to go through a logical process to conclusion 2. Provide either in-house or external officer report training for staff who are new to report writing or who struggle to write clear reports |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| There is a default position of putting a condition in place to avoid any risk. Pre commencement conditions are not clearly identified and there is often a discussion post decision whether a condition is actually a pre commencement condition or whether another trigger point may be acceptable. Applicants often complain that there are too many conditions particularly since the Council is poor at discharging conditions in a timely manner. If a consultee asks for a condition it is normally included without question by the case officer as *they are the experts*. | There is a robust approach to minimising pre commencement conditions. Other conditions are minimised through effectiveness negotiation with the applicant prior to a decision being issued and case officers challenging consultees when they suggest conditions. | 1. Have a selection of trigger points that you can use as labels to conditions e.g. pre-damp proof course level; pre occupation; pre commencement of x units etc 2. Provide guidance to case officers on good condition wording and undertake training for officers either in house or using external providers 3. Have a list of condition wording that case officers can use but ensure that case officers do not simply cut and paste standard wording but adapt the wording to meet the requirements of the application in question |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| S106 agreements are normally negotiated once other matters have been agreed and therefore at the end of the decision making process. There is often a delay whilst each side has to find resources to prepare the documents and usually it results in the applicant producing a draft that the Council responds to rather the other way round. Planning decisions that require a S106 agreement hardly ever meet deadlines on performance and therefore go over time and sometimes results in complaints from the applicant due to time delays. | Applicants are asked to suggest heads of terms for S106 agreements at validation stage along with key information such as land ownership details and contact points for solicitors. The Council also sends the applicant a template for S106 agreements. In this way an early start can be made of drafting a S106 agreement and legal teams from both sides are lined up and can programme in their time. As a consequence S106 agreements can usually be signed within the agreed decision timeframes. | 1. Work with the Council’s Planning lawyer to produce S106 model templates and publish these on the Council’s website so that applicants know what to expect. 2. Have a regular catch up meeting with the Planning lawyer to track progress on S106 agreements, advise of future work and address problems that have occurred 3. Insist on certain information being provided as part of a local validation list e.g. heads of terms, legal contact details and land ownership information |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Feedback on decisions usually takes the form of formal complaints where the Council attempts to defend its position on quality or speed or an appeal decision. There is no mechanism in place for applicants to feedback comments on the decision making process and therefore there is no continuous learning. | There is an opportunity for applicants and agents to feedback on planning decisions. For example they may be encouraged to fill out an online feedback form after receiving their decision notice and there are regular agents forums for agents to feedback on general decision making. The managers also have an open policy of encouraging feedback. All feedback is used as an ongoing learning process which is discussed with staff and managers on a regular basis. | 1. Send a link to a feedback form with every decision notice and ensure the information is collated to separate those who have received approval and those who receive a refusal 2. Give agents the opportunity to discuss decision making with the service. This does not always mean having to have a physical meeting but could involve chat facilities 3. Use feedback in a positive way by have a learning through experience feedback policy and ensure all staff can both see this feedback and use it for future learning 4. Introduce a culture where all feedback is used positively to improve the service provided |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Monitoring and enforcement

## Introduction

The planning decision is just one part of the development process and, whilst the Planning Authority cannot insist that a development is actually delivered, it can ensure the planning process does not hold up the delivery when approved. Therefore the effectiveness of the discharge of conditions process or dealing with amendments is key to ensuring that the developer can implement a scheme as long as it meets the requirements of the Planning Authority. It should also continually monitor outcomes to ensure that they are to the quality that the Council expected. Each Council will choose how much resource is put into enforcement and how it prioritises enforcement. However whatever approach it takes, it needs to be transparent and prioritse the matters that are important to the Council.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is particularly important that all staff involved in the post decision making process are involved in the discussion including planning enforcement officers and any other staff involved in condition monitoring. However it is also important that those not directly involved can provide a perspective on how this part of the decision making process is perceived.

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| The Committee or officers do not hold post decision site meetings or reviews. There is therefore no monitoring on outcomes of decisions that are made. | The Committee and officers hold regular post decision reviews to critically assess the results of their decisions. As part of this process there is dialogue between Members, the applicants and officers to see if lessons can be learnt about good and bad practice. These lessons are then used as part of the ongoing Member and officer learning. | 1. Schedule in Committee post decision site visits e.g. as part of the annual training event or when there is a light Committee agenda 2. Incorporate officer site visits as part of an officer training day and encourage all staff to participate regardless of grade or experience 3. Encourage applicants or current occupiers to participate so that you can learn first hand the issues with a development 4. Use the opportunity to motivate staff by praising staff for a job well done |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| The case officer is so overloaded with work that once a decision is issued they will only deal with post decision matters if an item is assigned to them from a manager. If an applicant has a post decision enquiry it gets routed to the main Planning number or the Council’s call centre and whoever picks up the call will get the relevant information from the Planning software as the case officer does not have the capacity to deal with such matters. | The Planners’ job is not finished on an application until the development is complete. Either the case officer who issues the decision will guide the condition discharge process or there is an assigned officer to carry out this task and this officer helps to consider where enforcement action may be necessary. For larger developments if there is no obvious sign that development is about to take place when the application is close to its expiry date an officer will contact the applicant and find out why there is a delay and offer to help unblock any impediments to development taking place. | 1. Keep a track on post decision matters such as conditions. Assign an officer to follow up on conditions that are not discharged and to bring in the condition discharge fee 2. Managers to use 1 to 1s with case officers to review decisions and check on progress 3. Use other officers in the department to help unblock delivery issues e.g. housing, ecology or conservation officers 4. Encourage the most appropriate officer to work with enforcement officers to find a negotiable solution to an enforcement issue |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Non material amendments are treated as a very low priority as they generate no fee and normally a junior officer will pick them up if they have time. There is no guidance on what constitutes a non material amendment so the officer needs to use their own judgement on a case by case basis. Normally they are agreed through a letter or email but it very much depends on which officer is dealing with it. Some officers have come up with their own forms but they are ‘unofficial’. The information sometimes appears on the application file but are often forgotten. | There is a clear policy on what constitutes a non material amendment. This is published on the website and officers have received training on differentiating a material and non material amendment. There is a process in place for dealing with non material amendments but it is very straightforward and all correspondence is placed on the application file for audit purposes. | 1. Use best practice to provide guidance on non material amendments but discuss with officers as it needs to fit the type of development that the Council receives 2. Introduce process notes for agree non material amendments but do not overcomplicate the process 3. Have an effective process for uploading relevant information onto the Planning software |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| Condition discharge applications are treated as a low priority and there is no allocated officer to undertake this task so it is often forgotten. The timescales and agreement is driven by the efficiency of consultees rather than the Planning Authority. Priority is normally determined by a deemed discharge notice being served on the Planning Authority. Numerous conditions are discharged through a deemed discharge notice and so this has become part of the standard practice. | There is a clear process in place for condition discharge applications and the timeliness is performance managed alongside planning applications. No deemed discharge notices have been served on the Planning Authority because officers regularly update the applicant and agreement is reached on timescales. A simple notice is issued with the discharge of a condition that clarifies whether the condition has been discharged in full, in part or not discharged and a record is cross referenced with the original application. | 1. Offer a paid for pre application condition discharge service for complex condition discharge matters. If the applicant does not agree to this then make a decision based on the information submitted 2. Have a clear system in place on who deals with condition discharge applications and whether it is the responsibility of the case officer or another suitably qualified officer 3. Introduce a simple notice to discharge conditions but do not overcomplicate matters 4. Include timeliness of condition discharge as part of the performance measures so it is prioritised by staff |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| There is no enforcement policy and the priority is normally decided by whoever shouts loudest or the pressure Members put on officers for political reasons e.g. forthcoming election. No one really knows how many enforcement cases are currently live and performance standards are based on the number of complaints received over inaction by officers. | There is a published enforcement policy and this has been discussed with councillors. The enforcement policy prioritises cases and gives clear performance standards that are then adhered to by officers. The number of outstanding cases are closely monitored and where necessary action is taken to reduce the number of cases through management support. | 1. Undertake specific councillor training on the enforcement policy and present at Committee 2. Encourage regular case reviews between the enforcement officers and managers to assist moving cases forward and avoiding a large outstanding caseload 3. Consider reporting performance at Committee and celebrate successful action 4. Create process notes for dealing with enforcement cases so that they are properly recorded and consistently dealt with 5. Encourage all enforcement enquiries to be lodged online to ensure that they are accurately recorded |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |
| There is no time for proactive enforcement work because of resource issues. As a consequence many planning enforcement cases are simply not investigated because abuse of the planning system is so widespread that it is pointless trying to take any action. | There are regular high profile proactive enforcement initiatives that help raise the profile of particular enforcement issues in the area. For example resources are put on proceeds of crime cases that gain media attention and acts a major deterrent to landowners. In this way the number of ongoing enforcement cases reduces because potential contraveners know that they will not get away with works that require planning permission. | 1. Agree with the lead Member for Planning a forward programme for proactive initiatives and involve the Council’s communications team so that it can be widely publicised 2. Seek support for the lead Member for Planning to temper councillor expectations on certain enforcement action so that they do not promise too much to the public |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)**    **Why this score?** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |

# Appeals

## Introduction

It is really important to properly resource appeals and have a clear process. Different Councils operate in different ways which might involve a designated officer to undertake appeals or it might be the responsibility of the case officer. Also different appeals need different levels of resource and expertise with informal hearings and public inquiries needing a considerable amount of attention. However if a Council does not properly resource and manage appeals it can be very damaging for the Council both in terms of reputation and potentially large costs against a Council.

## How to involve staff in the discussion

It is particularly important that all staff involved in the appeals process are involved in the discussion from technical support staff who might administer an appeal under the direction of PINS, to the officers who present and write appeal statements to the managers who take responsibility for the outcome of decisions made by PINS

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| There is not much consistency on how appeals are managed and it really depends on the officer involved. There is no effective risk assessment carried out by managers so it relies on the officer assigned to the appeal to manage the process. There have been a number of recent appeals lost and costs awards against the Council because officers have failed to defend the case effectively, have missed key deadlines or have failed to provide relevant information. | There are clear officer procedures in place for dealing with appeals to ensure that the cases are quickly allocated, officers know what is expected of them and all the deadlines set by PINS are met. The right managers are aware of the appeals submitted and can support officers as necessary in defending appeals through effective project management. | 1. Have a clear process in place so that whoever deals with appeals follows a consistent process with template statement of case reports 2. Establish a project team to manage informal hearings and public inquiries so that officers allocate appropriate time to defend the appeal and all deadlines are met 3. Provide regular reports on appeal deadlines to make sure deadlines are not missed 4. Carry out officer training either internally or externally to ensure all officers understand what is expected of them. This is particularly important for informal hearings or public inquiries |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)** | | |
| If there is a costs claim against the Council it is left up to the appeals officer to decide how to defend it. Often there is no time to do this so it is left to the Inspector to make the call without a defence put in place by the Council. The Council has had to put a budget against costs awards because many succeed against the Council. Cost claims are almost never made against an applicant and most officers do not even realise this is an option. | There is a clear process in place to both defend a costs claim against the Council and to make costs claim against an applicant. Officers have an understanding of when it is appropriate to make a costs claim against an applicant and the right level of support is given to officers in a timely way to defend a costs award against the Council. | 1. Introduce a process whereby managers are immediately informed if a costs claim is made against the Council so that they can support officers in defending against costs 2. If the costs claim resulted from an overturn at Committee involve the Members of the Committee in defending the costs claim 3. Provide training to officers so that they understand the way costs can be claimed against the applicant to enable them to flag up appropriate cases with managers when appropriate 4. Consider external training for both Members and Officers on making defendable decisions e.g. PAS training |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)** | | |
| The appeal decisions are simply uploaded onto the website and no further discussion takes place unless the matter is specifically raised by councillors or managers. Appeals are lost for similar reasons because lessons have not been learnt and it relies on officers to pick up this trend through memory or referring to planning histories. There is no item on Committee agendas to discuss appeals. | Every appeal decision is seen as a learning opportunity. If an appeal is successful the appeals officer is suitably praised and a record is made of the correct use of policy. If an appeal is lost then a review is undertaken on why the refusal reasons were unsuccessful. If appropriate this is discussed with managers and officers so that there is effective learning from the decision. A summary of appeal decisions is also presented to Committee so that learning points can be raised with Members if necessary. | 1. Create a simply summary report to report to Committee and include appeal decisions as a regular Planning Committee item so that learning points can be discussed and minuted 2. Raise appeals as a regular item in officer and manager meetings so that lessons can be learnt 3. Use specific examples in officer and councillor training to illustrate where an appeal went well or went badly |
| **SCORE: (out of 5)**  **Why this score?**  **What score would you like? (out of 5)** | | |

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| **Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?**  **Which tips are helpful?**  **Actions to take forward** |