

Note: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the [PAS website](#).

Eastbourne Council – ‘Project Zero’ Validation Project

Summary  	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce validation backlogs • Avoid staff being pigeon-holed into performing repetitive tasks
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a focus and energy around validation by creating a ‘responsibility rota’ • Clarify process responsibilities and targets • Keep validation checklist updated and relevant
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced stress and increased job satisfaction • Speed up validation process • Up-front investment has saved on average a week per application in terms of determination timescale
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge of balancing Project Zero work against current/existing workload • Managers had to work closely with already busy officers to build confidence in the system • With hindsight, the system could have been phased in over a longer period

Introduction

Prior to budget changes five years ago, validation of planning applications was the responsibility of an administration team, which sat in the planning department. The validation process was rigid and with limited flexibility. At the same time, planning officers across the service were handling incoming telephone queries at all times, distracting from their core job of assessing applications. Following budget changes, the administration team was taken out of the new structure. Attempts to improve validation, such as using an approved agent scheme (whereby certain ‘repeat applicants’ would be ‘trusted’ to self-validate applications) proved ineffective and were still resource

intensive to operate. The Council faced a backlog of applications waiting for validation and ever-growing piles of correspondence created through ‘failure demand’ as applicants chased progress on their applications - creating yet further correspondence and work.

By necessity, the Council’s development management team had to devise ways of ensuring administrative functions (including validation) were integrated into the wider department. Rather than define a specific validation role, the decision was taken to approach validation in a more ‘corporate’ way. This gave rise to the ‘Project Zero’ initiative.

What they did

Under Project Zero a team of around twelve junior planners and planning technicians are responsible for managing application validation and external communication. These officers spend about 30 percent of their time working under the 'Project Zero' initiative – the aim being to ensure that the 'group tray' which comprises applications received and still to be validated and incoming correspondence is cleared (and so back to 'zero') each day.

To support this process and aid efficiency, Eastbourne also published a revised local validation checklist. The new list sought to increase the clarity for both the validation officer and the public around exactly what information is required for each type of application.

Officers in the team are assigned to Project Zero duties in four-hour shifts three times a week. During this time the officer has responsibility to answer any calls that cannot be addressed by the front desk, to clear the group tray and to direct the post. This time away from their case load of applications or current projects creates the space to focus in on getting the validation and correspondence tasks 'back to zero'. This also allows the remaining team members to focus on their 'day job' exercising their professional judgement on tasks associated with dealing with planning applications – being planners! The delegation of telephone duty ensures that those working on determining applications are not distracted.



Project Zero also supports officers to develop a more diverse skillset and broaden their planning knowledge. As the objective is to clear the tray, officers are less able to 'cherry pick' certain tasks and so become more experienced and proficient across a range of planning matters.

Managers work closely with the officers involved to explain the value of the new approach. Officers are supported to and given the confidence to handle and apply the additional responsibility – which can be a lot to take on when part of an already busy

workload. With hindsight, the project could have been phased in over a longer period to allow officers to adapt to the new roles and tasks being asked of them.

Results and Learning

Overall, the scheme has been a success and there is increased sense of shared responsibility and accountability within the team. Project Zero has also helped to develop a stronger team ethos to take collective ownership to clear the tray and address outstanding issues quickly

there and then – no more ‘failure’ demand.

Council has an informal service target of validating applications within five working days. Through the Project Zero initiative, this performance indicator feels more achievable. If the front end of the application process can be streamlined and ‘wastage’ eliminated, it can have a direct positive impact on the back end. This is evident where on average a week has been cut from application determination timescales.

Experienced officers are now involved in the validation (when on Project Zero duty) allowing them to apply their professional planning judgement to the validation process (e.g. not just

This initiative has improved both the speed and quality of validation. The

checking that a required document has been submitted, but also that it *any good?*) and to be flexible about what they need to ask for. For more complex schemes, a more senior planner may also be invited to support validation. The result is greater clarity for applicants and the number of applications found to be initially invalid has reduced significantly.

The success of this initiative has resulted in the approach being implemented in Lewes District Council as part of the shared services arrangement between Eastbourne and Lewes Councils.