

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

Camden Council – Officer reports: keeping them proportionate

Summary  	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce time spent writing reports based on risk aversion
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create templates / protocols for different types of applications; and streamline reports for smaller scale applications • Use a more detailed report for refusals and complex cases recommended for approval.
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources better utilised elsewhere in the process • Improved quality and conciseness of report writing • Risk reduced as the approach is guided by both the complexity and contentiousness of a scheme • Highlighted a more efficient use for informatives
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A proportionate approach can still deliver the same value • Not all decisions require a report • Full involvement of and cooperation with legal team was an important factor in assessing the risks and exposure to the potential of appeal and judicial review

Introduction

Camden Council reviewed their development management service, looking at their processes and how work flows through the department, where they add value and with an objective of limiting waste. One issue identified that, in some cases, officers were spending too much time on report writing for schemes that simply did not warrant it.

What they did

The answer was not to scrap report writing! Instead, a more proportionate approach has been adopted, guided by both the complexity and contentiousness of a scheme. For small / simple cases without objections, reports granting permission include the assessment of the scheme

as an informative with the decision notice. It is a condensed version of the officers' reasoning instead of a separate and unduly lengthy report. More complex cases recommended for approval and referable to the council's members' briefing panel or committee have full reports. The same is the case with recommendations for refusal where a fuller report is prepared in order to deal with the potential for an appeal. In practice, Camden also found that a small proportion of cases didn't need a report, and that informatives on decision notices suffice.

Not all reports are the same of course. They vary in length depending on a scheme's composition and complexity; but officers are encouraged to keep

their reports concise. Some committee reports can still be quite lengthy, but this reflects the scheme of delegation which means that only complex and contentious major applications go to committee. Thus, longer reports are limited in number.



Camden Council Offices.

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Challenges are quite rare. By the end of discussions together, the legal service were content with this balanced approach, and that it achieves a good blend of robust decision making and resource efficiency. The management team provides guidance on *how* to structure the informatives on decision notices – ensuring officers take a consistent approach. Informatives can still be quite time consuming, with case officers being required to write a very concise summary that covers everything.

This focus on report writing more generally has driven up the quality of reports, including those to committee. council's 'Driving Up Quality' training programme run by officers. Monthly training sessions keep up momentum. Management find that the team continue to look at ways to prune their reports.

Results and Learning

In making this change the most significant 'push back' came from the council's legal services team. They were initially concerned about the risks of challenge and wanted every decision to be as robust as possible in case of judicial review. The DM team worked with the legal team to assess the risk and it was determined that **designing an approach on every application's worst case scenario was not efficient.**

