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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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| Processes, IT and administration |



# Introduction

Processes, IT and administration form one of 15 sections of the [PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/development-management-challenge-toolkit). Please refer to the website for information on the other 14 sections and further background to the toolkit.

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.

Please consider the statements below that attempt to define what an excellent and poor Planning Authority looks like and then consider some tips to improve performance. The purpose of defining poor and excellent is 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 they face.

# How to use it

For each part discuss where you feel your Council sits on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). If you disagree with one another (which you may 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, 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 the 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. We suggest you note down the reasons why you may not want to score a 5 at this time as this will help you prioritise your actions in any improvement plan.

Finally, 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.

Each section of the toolkit 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 pressures to celebrate with staff good practice and a job well done.

# 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.

# Facilitator’s tips

* Ask yourself challenging questions 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 and to stimulate debate
* 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. 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 repercussion.
* 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.
* It is normal for you to speed up as you get to the end of each section as everyone gets tired and you run out of time. You may well find that you have already discussed a matter that is highlighted at the end of the section. The toolkit is designed to have some duplication to make sure you don’t forget important aspects of the Development Management service. There are no hard and fast rules so skip over things if they are not so relevant to you or you have covered them earlier.
* 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 Managament Challenge Toolkit or would like to take part in or organise a facilitated improvement session please contact the 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>

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| 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. Identify where it would be helpful to set down clear procedures and assign appropriate staff to prepare process notes that can be used by all staff who need to undertake that work 2. Make incremental changes to your procedures whenever needed but make sure everyone knows about them and everyone follows the changes 3. Use team meetings to discuss when things go wrong and make changes promptly |
| **EVALUATION QUESTIONS**  **What score have you agreed on?**  **Why have you given it this score?**  **What score would you like to get to?**  **If this isn’t a 5, why is it lower?**  **What top tips are you going to take up?**  **What other actions have you identified?** | | |

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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 some time 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 web pages 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 |
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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, follows Government best practice 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. Ensure you are aware of Central Government advice on best practice and you are getting the best value from the product you have chosen 4. Make sure the software links into the Planning Portal to minimise double handling 5. Consider whether you need to link the software with other related functions e.g. Building Control or Land Charges? |
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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Problems with the Planning software 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 software problems 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 a good working relationship can be developed |
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| **SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO FOLLOW UP** |