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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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| Consultation and allocation |



# Introduction

Consultation and allocation forms one of 15 sections of the PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit. Please refer to the complete document for information on the other 14 sections and further background to the toolkit.

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.

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 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 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 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.

# 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.

# Facilitator’s tips

* Ask yourself challenge 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
* 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 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 Managament Challenge Toolkit or would like to take part in or organise a facilitated improvement session please contact Planning Advisory Service**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 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
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| **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
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| **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
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| **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
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| **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
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| **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
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| **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** |