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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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| Officer report |



# Introduction

The officer report forms 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 PAS website for information on the other 14 sections and further background to the toolkit.

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.

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

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

# 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 the 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 setion. 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 on 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 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 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 a 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? |
| **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?** | | |
| 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 are 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 |
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| Case officers are not overly concerned by the quality of their reports because someone else will spot their mistakes and if it is a Planning 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 with 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 to advise case officers in advance on the level of management scrutiny that will be required before a decision is made |
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| Members of the Planning Committee 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 Planning 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 |
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| **SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO FOLLOW UP** |