**Key Principles for managing Statistical (PS1/2) Returns**

**A brief guide for practitioners, councillors and senior officers**

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As part of Planning Advisory Service’s work supporting Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in danger of [designation](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-planning-performance-criteria-for-designation) we’ve noticed that almost all councils we work with are submitting data in their [statistical returns](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/534859/PS_guidance_notes_for_Apr_to_Jun_2016.pdf) that contains errors and/or omissions. These go largely unnoticed and it only come to light when a council’s performance is called into question and the numbers are more closely examined. This note contains a short concise set of key principles to help councils get their data returns correct and manage data generally.

**Introduction**

**What are the implications of inaccurate returns?**

Inaccurate data returns can over/under state the council’s actual performance levels. Poor [performance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-planning-performance-criteria-for-designation) can lead to the council’s planning service being ‘designated’ by the government. Designation means that the government publicly puts the council’s planning service into ‘special measures’ whereby applicants can choose to by-pass the council and request that their application be decided by the Planning Inspectorate.

**But aren’t these returns simple to produce from our back office systems?**They are, but as the old saying goes, the data returns are only as good as the data they contain. Most councils have just one person whose job it is to complete the statistical returns and while there is a lot of guidance, it is quite a responsibility and mistakes can be made. Sometimes just a little help looking out for the pitfalls can go a long way. That’s why we’ve produced this set of principles.

**Who should be concerned?**

Every planning service manager. Each year the government name the LPA's are going to be failing because they did not meet the latest DCLG targets for the determination of planning applications.

**Key principles for getting data returns correct**

**First principal: read and understand the guidance issued by DCLG**. Keep up to date with the quarterly publications, and don’t forget appeals performance.

* Both PS 1 and PS2 returns are completed quarterly. DCLG issue guidance notes each quarter saying how they should be completed and by when.
* They detail what categories of development are counted for in Tables 151 and 153 and how the % in performance terms are calculated.
* So, make sure you are counting the correct categories for each of these critical tables as they do change from time to time.
* Monitor how you are doing on Appeals. Targets for Quality are just as important and losing 1 in 10 Appeals can result in designation.

**Second principal: Understand the way your back-office system** **works.** How does it collate the numbers and what fields you must complete to get statistically reliable returns?

* Check for updates from your supplier as to how the returns are calculated in their system and double check which fields must be completed and how they need to be completed.
* Use the suppliers FAQ's and on-line forums (Knowledge Hub) to ensure you are up to date.
* Ensure your system is updated when new versions of your software are published.
* Ensure your teams are 'trained' as to which fields must be completed and check each quarter!

**Third principal: Don't believe what the system is telling you!**

* Check the numbers when they are produced from your system.
* Most systems will produce a exceptions report showing potential errors in data, make sure you check these and correct errors.
* In addition, it’s a good idea to review the numbers produced and run a manual check on one application Q type to make sure they are correct. If not, raise a query with your supplier and be prepared to do the returns manually.

**Fourth principal:** Review 'carefully' the numbers BEFORE you send them off and make sure you do send them off on-time.

* Check the numbers, if they look wrong, they probably are wrong.
* Did you have a busy quarter, are numbers up? If not, why? Did you have a lot of staff off sick/holidays? Has performance dipped, if not why?
* Have you completed the PPA/EoT/EIA fields correctly?
* If you have these types of applications do the numbers completed on time match? If not, why not?

**Fifth principal:** Check tables P151 and P153 when they are published, consider your peers..

* Look out for the publication of the tables. Are your numbers correct?  If not query with DCLG.
* How are you doing? Look at using a forecasting tool (such as embedded in MS Excel) to see how you should be doing.
* Check how you are doing against your neighbours and CIPFA cohort.
* Are they performing better or worse? Give them a call and ask why?
* Any lessons to be learned?

**Sixth Principal:** Report to your Committee on your performance with comparisons to your neighbours and or your CIPFA cohort.

* Report performance to your Planning Committee. This gives visibility to how you are doing.
* Highlight issues and concerns, are the number of applications going to Committee affecting performance?
* Do you need to look at delegation?
* Is staffing an issue?
* Produce a forecast and a plan to show how perfect performance can be maintained/improved and highlight constraints to fulfilling the plan (staff/systems/delegation).

**Seventh principal:** Don't be afraid to amend data if it is found to be incorrect.

* If you find errors, any errors at any time during the last 2 years, get them corrected as soon as they are spotted.
* You need to make sure you have an audit trail for the amendments, but there is little scrutiny of revised data other than after the list of 'designated' LPAs is published.

**Appendix**

**Designation**

So, what are the numbers going to be?

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1 – Designation thresholds and assessment period overview **Measure and type of Application** | **2017 Threshold and assessment period** | **2018 Threshold and assessment period** | **Live Table** |
| Speed of major Development (District and County) | **50%** (October 2014 to September 2016) | **60%** (October 2015 to September 2017) | District - P151a  County – P151b |
| Quality of major Development (District and County) | **N/A** – we are not assessing quality in this designation round | **10%** (April 2015 to March 201712) | District - P152a  County – P152b |
| Speed of non-major Development | **65%** (October 2014 to September 2016) | **70%** (October 2015 to September 2017) | P153 |
| Quality of non-major Development | **N/A** – we are not assessing quality in this designation round | **10%** (April 2015 to March 201713) | P154 |