

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

West Lindsey Council – Peer review and sign off officers

Summary 	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce bottlenecks in process by reducing senior officer time taken up with application sign off
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established planning peers system where senior and junior officers can sign off others' reports
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up-skilling of junior officers • Staff more confident as a result of being trusted with more responsibility • Improved consistency of approach benefits customers
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost; benefit analysis showed that, counterintuitively, allowing a wider group of officers to block out time to deal with reports, actually improved the flow of work through the department

Introduction

In 2015, West Lindsey Council was struggling with below average performance in terms of determination timescales for planning applications. The bottleneck in the process was the signing off of officer reports. A team leader and two principals were the only staff members with authority to sign off officer reports. They were the most experienced officers, but also amongst the busiest. Exacerbating this issue was a largely manual system that included printing out hard copies of reports.

What they did

A PAS peer review of the service facilitated by senior officers from other authorities, made a number of recommendations including broadening the number of officers that have authority to sign off reports. This led to the authority introducing a rota, whereby two officers - one senior and one less senior – is assigned to clear the in-tray for the day and to sign-off the reports. They are responsible for

that one day of the week to sign off reports, typically blocking out a few hours of dedicated time.

The initiative has since been expanded to cover the entire service, giving everyone some level of enhanced responsibility. The change was cost neutral and implemented rapidly - managers simply sat down and agreed a rota based on people's availability.

Results and Learning

The Council initially considered whether to have a single sign-off with officers simply 'self-certifying' their own reports. However, there was the concern that this would expose officers to too much individual risk. It was also considered good practice to have 'two sets of eyes' (author and reviewer) on reports before they go out.

Teaming a more senior officer with a junior officer on the rota allows the more junior officer scope to ask questions and to decline to review a very complex report if they're not

comfortable. This approach has a marked upskilling effect as junior officers are exposed to a range of report styles and development types.

An initial criticism of this new approach (largely from councillors and members of the public) was that there could be some inconsistency compared to the previous system. On the contrary, however, the new approach has led to greater alignment in approaches across the department. . Additional concerns about a possible increase in appeals, created as a result of more junior officers being given greater responsibility for sign off, have also been unfounded.

The approach does rely on a strong team-working ethos. It also needs a

degree of trust and management oversight from the beginning. There is a safety net (in essence reverting to the previous system to escalate a report up), but this is not used often.

This new way of working is supported by fortnightly workshops to allow all planning officers to talk about their applications as a wider team. The workshops allow the team to discuss complex projects as a group and junior staff are encouraged to speak up. Confidence across the team has grown and this approach has enabled this change.



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