



# Good Development Management

June 2019



Citiesmode, Arup and PAS for LGA and MHCLG

# Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Acknowledgements .....	4
1 INTRODUCTION: FINDING GOOD DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE.....	5
Background .....	5
What <i>is</i> “good” development management? .....	5
What solutions have the biggest impact? .....	6
2 CASE STUDIES .....	8
Summary .....	8
London Borough Southwark Council – Graduate Scheme.....	9
Oxford City Council – Trainee Planner Scheme .....	12
LB Brent Council – ‘team approach’ to large scale major applications .....	14
Bassetlaw District Council – Delivery Officers .....	17
Eastbourne Council – ‘Project Zero’ Validation Project.....	19
Doncaster Council – Validation, Case Allocation and Key Accounts.....	22
Camden Council – Officer reports: keeping them proportionate.....	25
Cambridge City Council – Pre-Application ‘RAG’ Assessment .....	27
Epping Forest District Council – Quality Review Panel .....	30
Cheshire West and Chester Council – Pre-application support for householders	33
Copeland Borough Council – Leadership in planning .....	35
West Lindsey Council – Peer review and sign off officers .....	38
Coventry Council - Effective engagement with stakeholders .....	40
Key Lessons.....	42
3. CONCLUSIONS; DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS ARE INNOVATING – JOIN THEM .....	43
Summary .....	43
Evaluating and Improving Your Service.....	43

## Executive Summary

On behalf of Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and the Local Government Association (LGA), Citiesmode and Arup has investigated how Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) across England are designing and implementing projects to improve the efficiency, quality and delivery of Development Management (DM) services.

### Key factors affecting performance

We identified a number of factors which positively affect efficiency, quality and delivery ('accelerators') - notably leadership and the availability of a talented pool of DM officers. We also identified a number of 'pinch points' which can cause delay and limit the effectiveness of DM services. This table is a summary of these factors:

Accelerators	'Pinch Points'
Leadership and management	Pre-Application (design advice)
	Validation
Talented DM officers	Engagement with internal and statutory consultees
	Decision making – sign off

### What has the greatest impact?

For this report we have chosen 13 examples of LPA projects which have tapped into these accelerators and/or addressed these pinch points. We found that solutions focused on the following typically have the greatest impact on a council's ability to deliver a good DM service:

- **People** – recruiting development management officers with the right skills, especially to deal with major applications, and officers doing the right level of work.
- **Processes** – designing processes that eliminate waste and duplication and/or create new processes which add value and save time later in the application process.
- **Empowerment** – the extent to which the officers feel *empowered* to use professional judgment to make recommendations, and (although not a primary focus of this report) how members can be empowered to make good decisions.

### Improvement projects in context

The case studies are from authorities across the country, with different sizes of planning department and facing very different development challenges. What the case studies have in common is that they are all being delivered in response to the resourcing and funding challenges facing local planning authorities working in a constantly changing/evolving national policy environment.

The case studies represent a range of interventions from relatively small-scale process tweaks through to more in-depth interventions involving resources, structuring and ways of working that require more significant and longer-term investment.

### **Be inspired; adapt and adopt**

The case studies selected give a flavor of the different types of improvement programmes being pursued. We hope they'll inspire you to work with your members and colleagues to develop your own creative and new ways of working that will help improve the efficiency, quality and delivery of your DM service.

## **Acknowledgements**

This report is the result of the efforts and support of many people. Their involvement was both appreciated and invaluable. They are recognised below.

### **Local Government Association (LGA)**

David Pye

### **Planning Advisory Service (PAS)**

Richard Crawley

Martin Hutchings

### **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)**

Simon Llewellyn

Alex Philpott

Simon Gee

David Waterhouse

### **Citiesmode**

Sara Dilmamode

### **Arup**

Kieron Hyams

Isabelle Joyce

Lauren McHugh

William Marr-Heenan

### **Case Study Contributors**

Adrian Arnold, Oxford City Council

Ione Braddick, Epping Forest District Council

Sharon Brown, Cambridge City Council

Robert Charnley, Cheshire West and Chester

Russel Clarkson, West Lindsey District Council

Bethany Cullen, London Borough of Camden

Natalie Cockrell, Bassetlaw District Council

David Glover, Brent Council

Nick Hayhurst, Copeland Borough Council

Tracy Miller, Coventry City Council

Leigh Palmer, Eastbourne Borough Council

Jenna Rumley, Doncaster Council

Juliet Seymour, London Borough of Southwark

### **Workshop Attendees**

Hannah Blunstone, CBRE

Andy Brown, Swindon Borough Council

Phil Courtier, Broadland District Council

Chris Fridlington, Bolsover District Council

Andrew Murdoch, Oxford City Council

Gary Rice, Interpolitan

Lindsey Richards, Homes England

Hannah Smith, Arup

Pete Smith, London Borough of Croydon

Phil Villars, Indigo Planning

Ben Wrighton, Robert Turley Associates

# 1 INTRODUCTION: FINDING GOOD DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

## Background

Development Management (DM) services across England are responsible for granting or refusing planning permission for development and enforcing against breaches of planning control. They are the enablers of well-designed homes, places of work, and important infrastructure such as new transport facilities and schools.

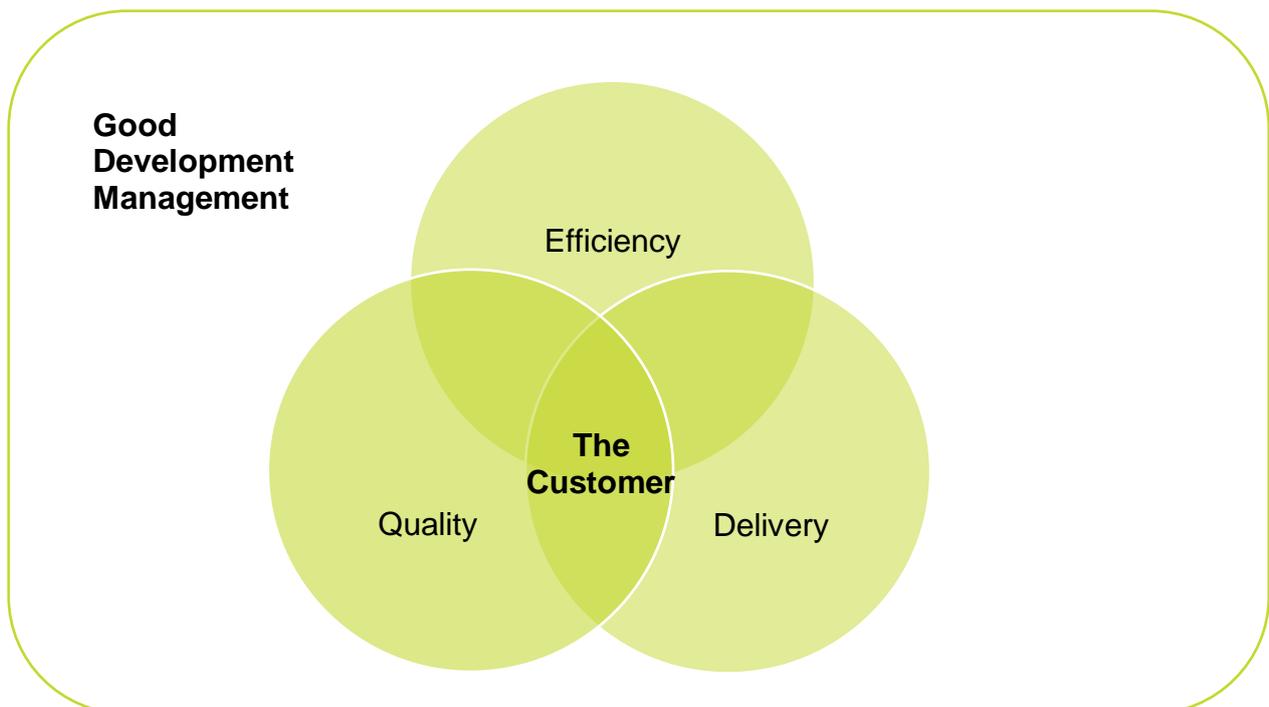
But what are the features of a *good* development management service? And what are local authorities across the country doing to ensure that they are delivering one?

We investigated some specific initiatives by DM teams in different parts of England with vastly different development contexts. We assessed how they are tackling common challenges and improving the way in which DM services are delivered.

## What is “good” development management?

According to the opening paragraph of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the ultimate objective of any planning service is to deliver sustainable development. Beyond meeting this objective, the extent to which a development management service can be considered ‘good’ by customers and stakeholders is subjective.

Our research identified that ‘good’ can be attributed to three, interlinked factors:



### 1. **Process efficiency.**

Most processes have points of duplication and checking and should be continually reviewed and challenged. The best processes are designed around the customer so that they add value, eliminate waste and duplication and save time.

### 2. **Quality of permissions and customer service.**

'Quality' can be difficult to define and means different things to different people. Most often it is attributed to the design of a building but more and more we are seeing planning services looking beyond this to ask what 'quality' means in terms of good customer service (e.g. is it a combination of efficient processes and good communication?) as well as 'value added' by the LPA in facilitating well-used and well-designed developments and places.

### 3. **On-site delivery**

This relates to the extent to which permissions granted will be *built out* and meet housing targets. The Housing Delivery Test (HDT) introduced in the NPPF2019 means that the speed at which a development starts on site, is completed and is occupied is now part of the national performance picture alongside speed and quality of decisions. This has also brought the discharge of any pre-commencement or pre-occupation conditions or planning obligations into sharper focus.

These three factors are not the end game of sustainable development – but they do affect the real-world outcomes delivered by DM services.

## **What solutions have the biggest impact?**

Efficiency, quality and delivery define whether a development management service can be considered good or not. But what changes or interventions have the biggest impact on each of these? Where do heads of planning services need to start in delivering change and improvement in their authority?

### **Our Research Approach**

To answer these questions, firstly we reviewed national planning statistics published by MHCLG and created a list of authorities who were performing particularly well against targets for determining applications. To capture more nuanced data about the quality of service and the outcomes delivered, we supplemented this data with findings from:

- **A survey** of Arup's UK planning business leaders across each regional office; and
- **A focus group** made up of experts from across the country in both the public and the private sector.

### **The Survey**

The survey identified more than 30 examples of good practice across the country. The common factor in these examples was effective leadership (42% of responses). Linked to this was the empowerment of officers, and their approach to and style of communication.

## The Focus Group

The focus group examined the journey of a planning application from pre-application stage through to a decision, identifying:

- Which aspects of the DM service has the most impact on efficiency, quality, and delivery?
- What changes would have the potential to improve each of these aspects?
- Examples where these changes have been implemented.

This exercise identified several pinch points in the DM process where changes might be particularly effective, including:

- Pre-application advice, particularly related to the design of proposals.
- Validation of planning applications.
- Engagement with departments within the authority and statutory consultees.
- Decision-making and in particular, the 'sign-off' of reports.

Examples of authorities that have implemented changes in the above areas of their service were identified. In common with the findings of the survey, **effective leadership** was highlighted as enabling the changes to be successful, along with the need to empower and increase the pool of talented development officers.

## Results

We found that solutions focused on the following areas of challenge typically have the greatest impact on a council's ability to deliver a good DM service:

- **People** – recruiting development management officers with the right skills, especially to deal with major applications, and officers doing the right level of work.
- **Processes** – designing processes that eliminate waste and duplication and/or create new processes which add value and save time later in the application process.
- **Empowerment** – the extent to which the officers feel *empowered* to use professional judgment to make recommendations, and (although not a primary focus of this report) how members can be empowered to make good decisions.

## 2 CASE STUDIES

### Summary

Each of the 13 case studies focuses on one of the areas identified above (**people, processes and empowerment**), and also reference one or more of the ‘good’ performance dimensions (**efficiency, quality and delivery**) identified in the initial research. The table below cross-references what is covered in each case study. Questions regarding fees and funding emerge in any discussion about development management. We have deliberately included examples that reflect this.

		EFFICIENCY	QUALITY	DELIVERY
<b>PEOPLE:</b> Grow your planners 	LB Southwark - Graduate Scheme			
	Oxford City Council - Trainee Planner Scheme			
	LB Brent - Team Approach			
	Bassetlaw Council - Delivery Officers			
<b>PROCESS:</b> Remove the unnecessary 	Eastbourne Council - Project Zero			
	Doncaster Council - Case Allocation and Key Accounts			
	LB Camden - Officer Reports			
<b>PROCESS:</b> Invest in processes that add value 	Cambridge City Council - Pre-Application ‘RAG’ Assessment			
	Epping Forest District Council Quality Review Panel			
	Cheshire West and Chester Council - Householder Pre-application			
<b>EMPOWER:</b> Yes they plan! 	Copeland Council Leadership			
	West Lindsey Council - Peer Review			
	Coventry Council - Consultee Engagement			

## London Borough Southwark Council – Graduate Scheme

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversify skills across the service</li> <li>• Drive up efficiency and balance out skills and experience</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanded the number of staff at junior grades</li> <li>• New staff now rotate and must demonstrate competencies in each team before moving on</li> <li>• Senior staff given new responsibilities for mentoring and training</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment - attracting new staff - 140 applications for the 10 annual graduate places</li> <li>• Retention - most graduates have been promoted to planner</li> <li>• Active partnerships with several university planning schools</li> <li>• Training benefits all staff, not just new starters</li> <li>• Increased attractiveness of roles</li> <li>• Senior staff free to focus on work appropriate to their level of experience</li> <li>• More capacity for improving the service and innovation</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational and practical implications of getting a large group of new starters up and running on the same day</li> <li>• Ensuring that recruits understand the need to be flexible and prepared to work across different parts of the service</li> <li>• Senior managers need to be seen to be 'championing change' and listening to and helping staff through initial issues and 'bedding in'</li> </ul>

## Introduction

The London Borough of Southwark undertook a range of actions focused on expanding the number of officers dealing with planning applications. This included officers in the planning policy team taking on planning applications. One of the most significant changes introduced was the new graduate scheme.

## What they did

Prior to introducing the graduate scheme, the Council only had five graduate planners and described the team as having a top-heavy structure. Graduates typically start in development management or another team doing fairly basic work. An assessment also found that many senior planner resources were focused on administrative tasks, as there weren't enough junior staff to delegate to.

As well as shifting the balance of experience, the authority also wanted to attract staff from a wider range of different backgrounds - bringing a greater diversity of opinion, experience and dynamism into the authority. The shift of balance of experience across the department has also allowed the service to reduce costs.

Following the graduate appointments, a team leader was given responsibility for running the scheme. Graduates on the scheme either carry out a range of work across the whole planning department or rotate through different teams, typically taking in at least three or four different aspects of the planning service. Either route gives exposure to work across the service.

The graduate scheme is underpinned and supported by a regular schedule of performance management meetings

and a dedicated training programme. The latter is centered on enabling applicants to complete the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Assessment of Professional Competence (APC). Monthly training sessions also help develop professional knowledge, are led by a mix of planning service and external planners and include topics such as design (how to 'read a road'), flood risk (role of the flood risk register) and legal updates from a leading chamber.

Getting eight new graduates up and running at once has its challenges. Some need additional support on the basics of office work and administration, and it needs the understanding and cooperation of existing staff. It is also important to be clear at the recruitment stage about what the programme entails. Recruits need to understand that they will move teams periodically and will be working across different parts of the service, so they need to be prepared to be flexible and embrace the change and challenges.

An initial concern amongst existing staff, was that the new balance of experience in the team may lead to the quality of the service dropping. Senior Managers are aware of this perceived risk and are actively committed to making it work, by supporting and involving team leaders in feeding back how the scheme is working and identifying improvements in their service areas.

## Results and Learning

Initial teething issues aside, the scheme is popular, with 140 applications for the 10 annual graduate places. This has been boosted by active partnerships with several



Southwark Council Offices. Photo © Stephen Craven (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Sheffield University, University College London and Westminster University. Recent joiners to the scheme are given the time to visit recruitment events to present their perspectives.

As with any graduate scheme, some planners do leave as part of natural staff 'churn', but most have stayed at the authority. Promotion from graduate to planner roles is performance based and not automatic. After approximately 18 months of joining the scheme and having completed rotations across the department, most graduates have been promoted to planner.

The results for existing team members have been similarly positive. A by-

product of the scheme has been an expanded range of training available to existing staff and the opportunity to train and mentor graduates. Initial scepticism has given way to a more positive feeling, now that the scheme is shown to work and make the service more efficient. Team leaders and senior planners are now free to focus on work appropriate to their level of experience. They have more capacity to get involved in improving the service. The capacity to innovate at this level has led to new ideas and better communication, including the Council's ambitious 'tech in planning' focus which includes a new online portal launching this year.

## Oxford City Council – Trainee Planner Scheme

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attract good candidates and provide in-house training</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form a Trainee Planner Scheme including rotation around the service.</li> <li>• Fees are were paid for planning masters course (day release learning)</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attracting the right skills - adapting corporate apprenticeship scheme to attract graduates interested in developing planning skills</li> <li>• Exposure across the service including major applications and committee</li> <li>• Valuable additional resource - increased service sustainability and resilience to risk</li> <li>• Recruitment – 4 graduates taken on full time</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow time for course requirements including dissertation</li> <li>• Initial time investment to train up staff</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Oxford City Council had been struggling to attract talented new planners to their high-performing development management team. Exacerbated by the high costs of housing in the area, managers feared that failing to recruit could pose a potential risk to service delivery. The head of service wanted to find a way to increase resource resilience and ensure service continuity.

### What they did

The Council already has a corporate apprenticeship scheme, but it isn't aimed at attracting graduates with the right skills, qualifications and interest to become planners. So, in 2016 the team set up a two-year Trainee Planner scheme allocating an annual budget to support four apprentices.

The motivation for the scheme differs from Southwark's, being a 'grow your

own' planner scheme as opposed to a service restructure or rebalancing exercise. Applications are invited from anyone with a degree that allows them to get a place on the RTPI-accredited masters' course in Spatial Planning. The Council pays the university course fees and enables day release.

Each trainee rotates around each planning team, covering planning policy, development management, enforcement and design & heritage. This ensures trainees gain experience in all aspects of planning work. During each 6-8-month rotation, trainees are provided with the necessary support and training to contribute to the work of the team.

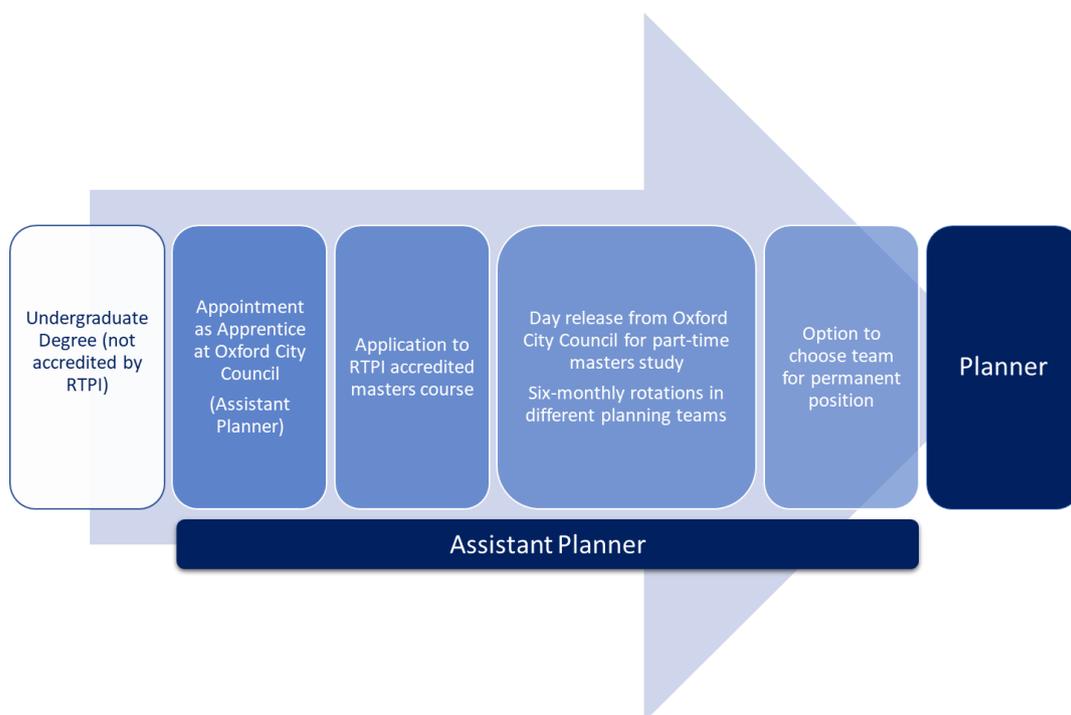
Beyond day-to-day responsibilities, trainees are also taken to meetings on major applications to gain experience in negotiation and design development. They attend planning

committees and inquiries, and support senior staff in their work. This support keeps staff motivated and developing.

Mirroring the experience at Southwark, the team at Oxford City also emphasise the need to allocate time at the start of the training to ensure trainees can be inducted and set up with work.

## Results and Learning

Because trainees are also studying for a degree-level qualification, the demands of their courses (such as coursework and writing a dissertation) can be stretching, particularly when they also have Council work to progress. However, the Council provides flexibility to allow trainees to successfully complete coursework and encourages trainees to benefit from and to use their growing 'on the job' expertise to help with their studies.



Although the Council gave no guarantee that there would be a permanent role at the end of the first scheme, each of the four planning trainees were taken on permanently and have provided valuable extra

resource. A further three planning trainees have recently joined the service to undertake a similar training scheme whilst undertaking a master's degree.

## LB Brent Council – ‘team approach’ to large scale major applications

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build capacity to deal with major planning applications</li> <li>• Create better relationships between case officers and applicants, improving developer confidence</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form ‘project teams’ of a senior officer and junior officer(s)</li> <li>• Split case work according to level of responsibility and experience</li> <li>• Ensure that ‘learning on the job’ happens to grow, motivate and ultimately retain junior planners</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced reliance on temporary staff</li> <li>• Recruitment (natural upskilling of staff) &amp; retention (variety of work)</li> <li>• Improved resilience, continuity and customer service</li> <li>• Better matching of work to experience and workload management</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage the impact of junior staff dividing their time between major projects and their other responsibilities for processing the high volume of minor applications</li> <li>• Building senior officers’ leadership skills and confidence in junior staff is crucial</li> <li>• Successfully transplanting private sector model</li> </ul>

### Introduction

This is one of Brent Council’s responses to the challenge of recruiting planning officers with the skills to deal with complex and often very large schemes. Brent found that the recruitment of temporary staff while posts lay vacant was unsatisfactory and costly.

At the time, and in common with many other authorities, Brent operated on the principle of ‘one case: one case officer’. Across a caseload of several major cases, this approach often absorbs the time senior officers have to support wider team improvements

or the training of other staff. Also, in very practical terms, if the dedicated case officer is on leave, no one else is progressing the application or available to respond to information enquiries. This means there is less resilience if case officers go on extended periods of leave, are sick or leave the authority.

### What they did

To make existing resources go further, Brent decided to borrow a way of working more common in many private planning practices, which is to have more than one person working on a case. They are using this approach to

also place junior planning officers alongside principal planners on larger scale cases to improve efficiency, cost-effectiveness, knowledge transfer, upskilling of staff and resilience.

So far, the team has typically reserved this approach for bigger applications – those in excess of 40 or 50 new homes. Junior officers take a full part in the application determination process – attending meetings, reviewing parts of the application

submission (e.g. technical reports), write sections of the report, check the plans and floor space calculations, collate consultee comments, calculate CIL and discuss the material planning considerations with the principal planner. Each of these processes and tasks can be time consuming and therefore it is beneficial to share the workload. A 'second pair of eyes' also provide additional quality review, reducing the potential for mistakes/things being missed.



Brent Civic Centre. Photo © Julian Osley (cc-by-sa/2.0)

This approach is a cost-effective investment in the value of current and future service delivery. It does of course take junior officers longer to get to grips with some elements of the larger scale applications, but the team approach ensures that service delivery is not negatively impacted. However, junior officer's performance is assessed on targets for their main caseloads (minor and householder applications), so they need to manage their time well if they are to be able to devote time to larger scale applications. This type of approach is dependent on having enough staff at this level to be able to support principal

planners, and management discipline to avoid reactive staff diversions in times of peak workload in householder and minor planning applications.

### Results and Learning

The results at Brent Council have been really promising. Staff are now geared up to work together across professional experience levels, and in doing so are avoiding working in silos. It has relieved pressure and stress levels within teams as sharing the workload in this way means officers are more able to keep on top of their work. The project team approach provides better cover and therefore

resilience, as well as giving applicants a wider pool of case officer contacts. Further, if a member of staff leaves the authority, there will always be another member of the 'team' to continue dealing with the case, saving management time in reallocating complex cases to other staff unfamiliar with the case.

While this initiative was driven by recruitment difficulties attracting principal level planning officers with experience on large schemes, it may also help retain (and develop) more junior officers too. The initiative has confirmed the team's view that junior officers are often very skilled and start at the Council with degrees which

bring experience of complex research projects from their university. In this context it is understandable why junior officers may find working just on smaller scale applications boring as they have the capability to deal with larger scale work. The initiative makes the most of this capacity and keeps junior planning officers stimulated. Junior officers have also both enjoyed and learned from being exposed to the political dimension of planning by attending committee meetings. The knock-on effect is to help to plug the recruitment gap at principal planner level over the longer term.

## Bassetlaw District Council – Delivery Officers

Summary 	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet the Government's growth agenda and get projects moving</li> <li>• Break down silos between service areas and between developers / members / community stakeholders</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-focus towards implementation and create a new Delivery Officer role from planning policy / economic development teams</li> <li>• Tasked Delivery Officers to support development management in negotiating S106 agreements and achieving better / quicker outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff empowered and joined-up across teams</li> <li>• Increased income to the authority</li> <li>• Better engagement with communities and developers</li> <li>• Better development outcomes on the ground</li> <li>• Positive effect on developer contribution negotiations</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties in recruitment to what is a relatively new role that does not sit within established Council structures</li> </ul>

### Introduction

In 2015, Bassetlaw Council started to think differently about how to get developments physically off the ground, particularly on larger sites allocated for housing, employment and community uses.

### What they did

The Council looked to their own staff, recognising that officers in the planning policy and economic development teams already had the skills to deal with the implementation of schemes. There was no existing dedicated role in the Council that had this focus, so the service decided that officers could focus on delivery more effectively if they had a defined role with set projects to work on, and created a dedicated 'Delivery Officer' position.

The Delivery Officer role involves close working with the Development Management team on larger scale developments to improve both the speed of the application process and quality of outcomes. They facilitate better working relationships between case officers and other Council teams during the course of the application, for example the open space and housing teams. They also support case officers in negotiating Section 106 agreements with developers, using their local knowledge to help secure the most appropriate outcomes. Their recent work with the developers for the scheme at the Harworth Colliery site is a good example of this; Delivery Officers led a positive negotiation to boost affordable housing provision and to deliver community assets through the Section 106 agreement.

Delivery Officers also have a key engagement role, working with members, the community and with developers. Their role in engaging with parish and town councils during the application process is seen as vital in ensuring that objections do not cause undue delays. Their involvement in consultation events ensures that they understand the needs of the community and developers. This more rounded perspective has been seen to result in better quality outcomes in Bassetlaw.

A key aspect of the delivery officers' role also involves looking out for, and applying for, key external funding opportunities. These help to bring forward much needed infrastructure

and results in income generation for the Council.

### **Results and Learning**

The Council's budget currently allows for four delivery officer positions but there have been difficulties in recruitment given this role is relatively new and does not sit within established Council structures. Bassetlaw Council recognises that this position requires a strong skill set and a forward thinking, proactive attitude. In the context of prioritising delivery to meet the Government's growth agenda, the Council hope that there will be increasing interest in this role, both from existing staff within the Council and also from external candidates.

## Eastbourne Council – ‘Project Zero’ Validation Project

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce validation backlogs</li> <li>• Avoid staff being pigeon-holed into performing repetitive tasks</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a focus and energy around validation by creating a ‘responsibility rota’</li> <li>• Clarify process responsibilities and targets</li> <li>• Keep validation checklist updated and relevant</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced stress and increased job satisfaction</li> <li>• Speed up validation process</li> <li>• Up-front investment has saved on average a week per application in terms of determination timescale</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge of balancing Project Zero work against current/existing workload</li> <li>• Managers had to work closely with already busy officers to build confidence in the system</li> <li>• With hindsight, the system could have been phased in over a longer period</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Prior to budget changes five years ago, validation of planning applications was the responsibility of an administration team, which sat in the planning department. The validation process was rigid and with limited flexibility. At the same time, planning officers across the service were handling incoming telephone queries at all times, distracting from their core job of assessing applications. Following budget changes, the administration team was taken out of the new structure. Attempts to improve validation, such as using an approved agent scheme (whereby certain ‘repeat applicants’ would be ‘trusted’ to self-validate applications) proved ineffective and were still resource intensive to operate. The Council faced a backlog of applications waiting for validation and ever-growing piles of

correspondence created through ‘failure demand’ as applicants chased progress on their applications - creating yet further correspondence and work.

By necessity, the Council’s development management team had to devise ways of ensuring administrative functions (including validation) were integrated into the wider department. Rather than define a specific validation role, the decision was taken to approach validation in a more ‘corporate’ way. This gave rise to the ‘Project Zero’ initiative.

### What they did

Under Project Zero a team of around twelve junior planners and planning technicians are responsible for managing application validation and external communication. These

officers spend about 30 percent of their time working under the 'Project Zero' initiative – the aim being to ensure that the 'group tray' which comprises applications received and still to be validated and incoming correspondence is cleared (and so back to 'zero') each day.

To support this process and aid efficiency, Eastbourne also published a revised local validation checklist. The new list sought to increase the clarity for both the validation officer and the public around exactly what information is required for each type of application.

Officers in the team are assigned to Project Zero duties in four-hour shifts



Project Zero also supports officers to develop a more diverse skillset and broaden their planning knowledge. As the objective is to clear the tray, officers are less able to 'cherry pick' certain tasks and so become more experienced and proficient across a range of planning matters.

Managers work closely with the officers involved to explain the value of the new approach. Officers are supported to and given the confidence to handle and apply the additional responsibility – which can be a lot to take on when part of an already busy workload. With hindsight, the project could have been phased in over a longer period to allow officers to adapt

three times a week. During this time the officer has responsibility to answer any calls that cannot be addressed by the front desk, to clear the group tray and to direct the post. This time away from their case load of applications or current projects creates the space to focus in on getting the validation and correspondence tasks 'back to zero'. This also allows the remaining team members to focus on their 'day job' exercising their professional judgement on tasks associated with dealing with planning applications – being planners! The delegation of telephone duty ensures that those working on determining applications are not distracted.

to the new roles and tasks being asked of them.

### Results and Learning

Overall, the scheme has been a success and there is increased sense of shared responsibility and accountability within the team. Project Zero has also helped to develop a stronger team ethos to take collective ownership to clear the tray and address outstanding issues quickly there and then – no more 'failure' demand.

This initiative has improved both the speed and quality of validation. The Council has an informal service target of validating applications within five

working days. Through the Project Zero initiative, this performance indicator feels more achievable. If the front end of the application process can be streamlined and 'wastage' eliminated, it can have a direct positive impact on the back end. This is evident where on average a week has been cut from application determination timescales.

Experienced officers are now involved in the validation (when on Project Zero duty) allowing them to apply their professional planning judgement to the validation process (e.g. not just checking that a required document has

been submitted, but also that it *any good?*) and to be flexible about what they need to ask for. For more complex schemes, a more senior planner may also be invited to support validation. The result is greater clarity for applicants and the number of applications found to be initially invalid has reduced significantly.

The success of this initiative has resulted in the approach being implemented in Lewes District Council as part of the shared services arrangement between Eastbourne and Lewes Councils.

## Doncaster Council – Validation, Case Allocation and Key Accounts

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address validation backlogs</li> <li>• Build better relationships with developers</li> <li>• Broaden case officers' experience</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case officers now receive file from day one, from validation through to determination</li> <li>• Validation team now support on more straightforward cases</li> <li>• Upgrading to better work-flow software to support the new way of working</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of key account officers to ensure consistency of service to frequent applicants</li> <li>• Work flow software highlights critical time checkpoints</li> <li>• Efficiency savings equating to one full time officer's time</li> <li>• A more strategic approach to communication which is less dependent on individual officers</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcoming the limitations of the existing planning software involved investing in an upgrade to the Enterprise system</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Doncaster Council has done a lot of work to re-think the way their development management processes could and should work. They have been supported by PAS and inspired by the 'systems thinking' approach. Managers set about identifying unnecessary 'waste' in the application process and devised improvements. A key area identified for improvement was validation.

Previously, a planning support team was responsible for validation, consultation and allocation of cases to officers, who worked in defined geographic areas. The approach was 'check box', rather than a meaningful evaluation of whether the quality of information provided was sufficient to make a decision. This caused delays which had knock-on effects further

along the process which frustrated both customers and officers. Validation activated the 21-day consultation period prior to the determining case officer seeing the application. Case officers, on looking at an application for the first time, would sometimes find that extra information was required from the developer to make the development acceptable. This new information would also have to be consulted on, triggering another 21-day window. As well as creating extra work, multiple consultation windows made determining a minor or householder application within the 8-week target period challenging.

### What they did

The Council changed the process, limiting the technical support team's role to registering applications. Around 80 percent of applications are

submitted online and so automatically integrate with back-office systems. Recently acquired work flow Enterprise software was used to allocate incoming applications not by geography but by the complexity of the case and the seniority of the case officer, mindful of existing caseloads.

Overcoming the limitations of the existing planning software systems was a challenge. The existing technology was not able to deliver so the service upgraded to the Enterprise system. By thinking creatively, despite coming at a financial cost, the technology improvements have helped to increase business efficiency and productivity leading efficiency savings arising from the changes.

The Enterprise work flow allocates tasks electronically to the relevant group of officers who are encouraged to be proactive and take applications within 24 hours. This also helps to ensure that cases are not allocated to case officers whilst on annual leave which was identified as a source of 'dead time' in determination.

Crucially, officers who have been involved in pre-application discussions on a development proposal are automatically allocated the resultant application to ensure continuity. A 'traffic light' indicator is built into the system, which flags if an application is a day (amber) or more (red) overdue being accepted by an officer, so that corrective action can be taken straight away. The system also automatically collects and reports key performance indicators.

Case officers now receive an application on the same day it arrives, and are familiar with the case and the applicant where there have already been pre-application discussions. This

approach to validation ensures the information needed is correct from the outset. Officers get to use their professional judgement to validate applications more effectively along '*get what you need to make a decision*' principles. This early sight of schemes also means case officers start to write reports at an earlier stage of the process.

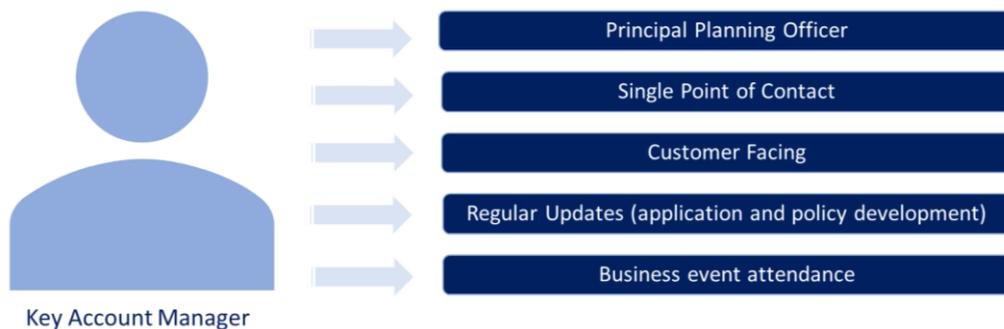
This new way of working required a change in culture. Doncaster Council encouraged early staff involvement in the change process. Involving staff in the design of the process led to greater engagement in, and acceptance of the changes.

When Government mooted the possibility of introducing competition for handling planning applications, the Council felt that they needed to adopt a more business-like approach. This was the key to keeping in the 'driving seat' on applications in their authority area and keeping the application a 'customer' of the service. The aim became continuous customer (applicant or agent) engagement, with representation from all teams involved from the Council.

The authority feels that its investment in technology improvements have helped to increase business efficiency and productivity leading to efficiency savings and supporting the broader 're-thinking' of their service approach. It has supported a reduction in the number of withdrawn applications, which in turn avoids the wasted time and cost of handling re-submitted applications and results in a faster service for customers. It has enabled the technical support team to be more effective and add more value to the overall planning service. Overall, the efficiency savings are believed to equate to one full time officer's time.

The success of the case allocation and back end system improvements was challenged as officers were no longer working to geographic areas and so agents submitting applications were no longer engaging with the same officers they were used to working with. This was felt to be affecting client relationships and negatively affecting the speed, quality and delivery improvements.

In response to this challenge, the service introduced the 'key account' scheme for developers and their agents who engage frequently with the service. Planning officers are allocated one customer account to manage and deal with all enquiries related to that customer. This approach is informed by engagement with developers and agents, local property forums and Doncaster Chamber, who are supportive of the approach.



When the key account manager scheme was launched the council gave developers and agents the opportunity to opt into the scheme (meaning it was voluntary on their part) and to also highlight any preference for a particular officer to be their manager.

### Results and Learning

Now up and running, all planning officers have an "account" to manage and aim to deal with their schemes on a 'cradle to grave' basis. One example of this working well is an expanding business who are regularly submitting applications for development on their site. They have been allocated a single point of contact – a principal planning officer who knows the customer and their site well. The relationship has been strengthened, and there are efficiencies in handling cases. Importantly, managers are pleased that they have succeeded in "humanising" the process.

Although there is potential to improve this scheme further, it been shown to be effective for both officers and customers and avoiding perceptions of a 'faceless' systems and the risk of becoming buried in the management language of work flow at the expense of the 'day job'. The council has been proactive in sending planning officers out, to give them a face in the community, and in keeping systems continuously under review to ensure they work as desired.

At Doncaster, it is felt that continual assessment of its processes to improve and make the service as efficient and as effective as possible is of great importance. Equally, Doncaster is committed to shape what they do with their customer's in mind - listening to customer's views and learning from best practice to deliver a value for money service.

## Camden Council – Officer reports: keeping them proportionate

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce time spent writing reports based on risk aversion</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create templates / protocols for different types of applications; and streamline reports for smaller scale applications</li> <li>• Use a more detailed report for refusals and complex cases recommended for approval.</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources better utilised elsewhere in the process</li> <li>• Improved quality and conciseness of report writing</li> <li>• Risk reduced as the approach is guided by both the complexity and contentiousness of a scheme</li> <li>• Highlighted a more efficient use for informatives</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A proportionate approach can still deliver the same value</li> <li>• Not all decisions require a report</li> <li>• Full involvement of and cooperation with legal team was an important factor in assessing the risks and exposure to the potential of appeal and judicial review</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Camden Council reviewed their development management service, looking at their processes and how work flows through the department, where they add value and with an objective of limiting waste. One issue identified that, in some cases, officers were spending too much time on report writing for schemes that simply did not warrant it.

### What they did

The answer was not to scrap report writing! Instead, a more proportionate approach has been adopted, guided by both the complexity and contentiousness of a scheme. For small / simple cases without objections, reports granting permission include the assessment of the scheme as an informative with the decision notice. It is a condensed version of

the officers' reasoning instead of a separate and unduly lengthy report. More complex cases recommended for approval and referable to the council's members' briefing panel or committee have full reports. The same is the case with recommendations for refusal where a fuller report is prepared in order to deal with the potential for an appeal. In practice, Camden also found that a small proportion of cases didn't need a report, and that informatives on decision notices suffice.

Not all reports are the same of course. They vary in length depending on a scheme's composition and complexity; but officers are encouraged to keep their reports concise. Some committee reports can still be quite lengthy, but this reflects the scheme of delegation which means that only complex and

contentious major applications go to committee. Thus, longer reports are limited in number.



Camden Council Offices.

Photo © George Rex (cc-by-sa/2.0)

## Results and Learning

In making this change the most significant 'push back' came from the council's legal services team. They

were initially concerned about the risks of challenge and wanted every decision to be as robust as possible in case of judicial review. The DM team worked with the legal team to assess the risk and it was determined that **designing an approach on every application's worst case scenario was not efficient.**

Challenges are quite rare. By the end of discussions together, the legal service were content with this balanced approach, and that it achieves a good blend of robust decision making and resource efficiency. The management team provides guidance on *how* to structure the informatives on decision notices – ensuring officers take a consistent approach. Informatives can still be quite time consuming, with case officers being required to write a very concise summary that covers everything.

This focus on report writing more generally has driven up the quality of reports, including those to committee. council's 'Driving Up Quality' training programme run by officers. Monthly training sessions keep up momentum. Management find that the team continue to look at ways to prune their reports.

## Cambridge City Council – Pre-Application ‘RAG’ Assessment

Summary 	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address feedback from developers that implied inconsistent and unclear pre-application advice</li> <li>• Reduce lack of continuity between pre-application and application stages</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce a RAG assessment to prioritise issues and to ensure the main messages are communicated clearly to developers</li> <li>• Train and empower staff to make the RAG assessment</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearer identification and solving of issues between pre-application and the subsequent submission of the application</li> <li>• Improvement in the quality and detail of pre-application submissions</li> <li>• Approach adjusted and simplified for use on smaller schemes</li> <li>• Positive impact on the quality, speed and delivery of the service</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve internal consultees in the process early on to resolve issues upfront; and to build officer confidence around the issues</li> <li>• Need confidence in rating red – provide greater detail on suggested amends</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Cambridge City Council identified issues with their pre-application advice following feedback from applicants which highlighted inconsistency and lack of clarity of advice as the key issues. A review of the system uncovered that issues identified during pre-application had sometimes not been resolved and would reoccur at the validation stage.

Unpicking things further it was found that, following pre-application discussions, applicants receive lengthy letters with extensive detail which often hid the key advice and messages, leading to challenges by applicants

following submission. Ironically, the extensive detail was often included due to a fear that things would be challenged at a later date.

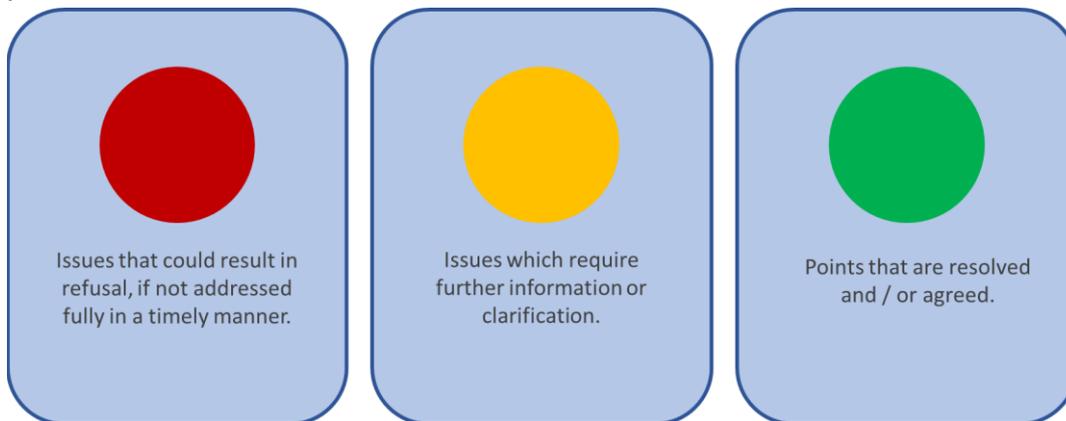
### What they did

Managers were keen to improve the process and create a clearer and more useful link between the pre-application advice and the subsequent submission. Senior officers assessed a number of applications (that had received pre-application advice) to identify where issues had been ‘lost in translation’ and prevented the outcome both parties needed at submission stage. The Council also spoke to applicants and their agents to discuss

their views on how pre-application advice could improve. This identified a series of potential solutions involving communication and organisation, such as shortening letters, or creating a meeting note structure. However, these were all viewed to be more laborious than the current system and not necessarily supportive of the main objective, namely to simplify the process and ensure advice was

consistent and focused on the issues essential to improve the quality of the scheme.

The service finally landed on a solution that involved a ‘traffic light’ assessment format for pre-application feedback. Each issue discussed at pre-application stage is rated as red, amber or green (‘RAG’):



This allows the main messages to be communicated clearly and enables a focused discussion with developers on the areas where changes to proposals are required. A programme has also been introduced to signify the next stages and direction of the pre-application, including meetings and presentations. This creates a clear route map for applicants, scheduling time for discussions on red or amber issues to support them.

The RAG approach has facilitated a more collaborative process, helping the council work more effectively to deliver the schemes that support their local plan objectives. The system has led to a planning achievement award. The RAG system also allows the Council to track and record progress on an application, whilst providing greater certainty for the applicants. Clarity and consistency is a two-way street – it saves officers time and gives developers a framework for response.

Training helped DM staff adapt to the new approach. Getting the specialists on board for consultee comments posed a different challenge, as they need to think differently and articulate their views in ways that case officers can translate into the RAG assessment. Engaging with the development management officers *and* the specialists concurrently on the changes identified is key to ensuring that everyone ‘buys in’ to the rating given.

### Results and Learning

The council has noticed an impact. The greater focus on identifying and resolving issues from the beginning has improved the quality of applications submitted following pre-application advice. It has also led to a more efficient and timely application process due to the consistency of advice. The Council found that the quality and detail of pre-application

submissions increased as applicants generally would want to avoid getting 'red' indicators to feed back to their clients.

Cambridge City Council continue to improve and expand this approach. Initially limited to use on large scale

schemes, it has now been adjusted and simplified for use on smaller schemes. As the authority joins with South Cambridge District Council to create a shared planning service, this approach will be expanded to operate across the new shared service.

## Epping Forest District Council – Quality Review Panel

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve quality of new schemes – particularly within the context of strategic growth agenda</li> <li>• Ensure decisions are in line with national policy and guidance</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a Quality Review Panel</li> <li>• Create guidance and policy to support its implementation</li> <li>• Employ staff to project manage the Panel</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated urban design advice for applications of a certain type / size</li> <li>• Generates income to support a better service overall</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusses on design but could be used in other areas</li> <li>• Internal and external resource models exist</li> <li>• Outsourced models require some internal management of the panel</li> <li>• Early engagement is key – these schemes will generate ‘push-back’ from some applicants</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Epping Forest District Council is planning for significant growth, particularly as part of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, but also with several large strategic masterplans coming forward as allocated in the emerging local plan. Due to the scale of growth across the district, it is a priority for the council to ensure that the design and delivery of these key developments is of the highest quality. High quality design has therefore been given renewed attention and resources.

Additional technical resource is needed to help drive forward a strong design agenda, underpinned by the creation of ‘Quality Review Panel’ for larger or contentious schemes, and for the proposed development within Harlow and Gilston Garden Town.

### What they did

Prior to the new approach, there was of course ‘standard’ consideration of proposals against design policies through the normal planning process, but there was no specific process set up for a design review. So the council invested in bolstering its design expertise by appointing an Urban Design Officer, who was an associate from “Public Practice” – a social enterprise ‘job matching’ company.

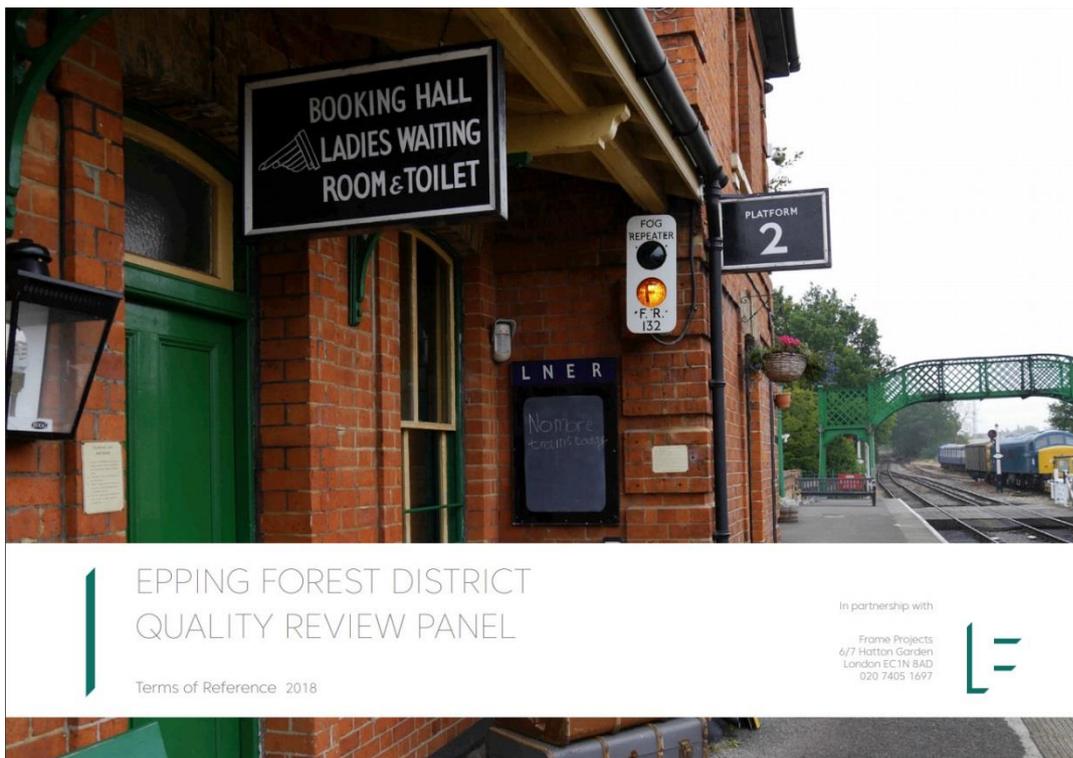
The creation of the Quality Review Panel is in line with national policy and guidance. Design reviews are also supported as good practice by the Design Council and professional bodies such as the RTPI, Landscape Institute and RIBA. When establishing

the panel, the Council evaluated existing good practice guidance in the form of CABE's 2013 'Design Review' guidance note as well as a range of local authority-based design review services to assess their governance arrangements, funding provision, and terms of reference.

The Council commissioned Frame Projects (a design-focused consultancy) to assemble and manage the panel. Consideration was given to setting up an in-house managed panel (like LB Hackney and LB Croydon), but resource requirements and access to in-house expertise made an external arrangement the most effective route. Frame Projects' design panel review is paid for directly by clients. It has a roster of 18 built environment experts across a range of disciplines including master planning, sustainability, architecture, transport and landscape.

The Quality Review Panel has an advisory rather than decision making role. It reviews the scheme and provides advice for both the applicant and case officer on how the scheme (or any conditions that might be considered) should be changed. Importantly, the objective is not for the panel to make a recommendation and then for the applicant to automatically change the scheme in line with this. Rather, the objective is for discussions between the planning officer and the applicant to continue with the advice of the panel in mind. This recognises the often-subjective nature of design advice.

It is obviously more beneficial for schemes to go to the panel at pre-application stage so that the recommendations and comments from the panel can influence the scheme earlier on in the design process.



The panel set-up is formalised by standard terms of reference which set out the different types of review session, the costs, the process, panel members and their expertise. The Panel produces a report with 10 working days following the panel session. This is signed off by the chair of the panel and can be used as a material consideration in the planning application decision. The fee for the first formal design review costs up to £6,600. Repeat reviews of the same scheme come at a reduced cost, and there are also options for a chair of the panel review and a surgery review (the latter is the cheapest option, at £1,560). These other review services are often recommended to provide further advice and the scale of the review broadly corresponds to the scale of the scheme.

The emerging Epping Forest District Council Local Plan has strong design policies which include policies specifically relating to the Quality Review to ensure its effectiveness and to create 'triggers' for its use for: (a) contentious sites, (b) sites of 50 or more residential units, or (c) 5,000 sqm of over of floorspace. This is felt to be important in creating consistency across applications and schemes. A planning officer will identify when a review is necessary and an officer acts as the point of contact with the Panel Managers. Integrating the role of the panel into the work of the wider planning department is also crucial to its success. To support this the team are producing an internal protocol note, and have undertaken officer training, to help manage the process internally and raise awareness of the Panel and what it can be used for.

## Results and Learning

The Quality Review Panel is a relatively new process within Epping Forest District Council and is still being

improved and developed. There are of course challenges; it takes investment – even outsourcing the project management required some internal management of the panel.

The introduction of a formal design review service can also generate push back from some applicants. To counter this, the Council found that early engagement is key, allowing quality and design issues to be ironed out with key officers, avoiding having to alter designs and / or re-consult at application stage, and so avoid the abortive work and costs associated with this. The Council have used developer forums to keep applicants up to speed with the process of the Quality Review Panel, and to encourage this early engagement.

## Cheshire West and Chester Council – Pre-application support for householders

Summary   	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address the disproportionate level of officer time used on householder applications post submission</li> <li>• Increase the take up for householder pre-application advice</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove charges for pre-application advice to householders</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages applicants to work with officers from an earlier stage</li> <li>• Provides an opportunity to higher quality schemes that are more likely to gain approval</li> <li>• Reduced the delays and costs associated with validation issues</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost/ benefit analysis showed the initiative to be beneficial, despite it seeming counterintuitive</li> <li>• It requires frontloading work, but this is generally offset by avoiding time that would normally be spent after submission on bringing the scheme up to standard</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Cheshire West and Chester Council found that a disproportionate amount of resource is used on householder applications post submission to ensure that they meet validation requirements; contributing to an already strained workload. This presents challenges to quality and delivery as the fee charged for householder application does not come close to reflecting the time that can be spent on them.

Previously, householder pre-application advice was charged for, the take up was low and a high proportion of applications were invalid or refused. Applicants are generally reluctant to change their scheme following submission.

### What they did

To address this, Cheshire West and Chester have stopped charging for pre-application advice on householder applications. The objective is to encourage applicants to work with officers from an earlier stage, before they are too advanced in their proposals. This early engagement also gives a stronger 'quality of service' message to applicants.

The new approach gives the service an opportunity to work with the applicant to create a higher quality scheme that is more likely to gain approval. The greater take up of the 'free' pre-application service has also reduced the delays and costs associated with validation issues. It requires frontloading work, but this is generally offset by avoiding time that would normally be spent after

submission on bringing the scheme up to standard. In addition, the frontloading is likely to be more effective in improving quality as applicants are generally less resistant to making changes pre-submission (before they have paid the application fees and submitted final drawings etc.)

### Results and Learning

Before removing the charge, a cost/benefit analysis was undertaken to compare the money received from the householder pre-application fees and the cost of work involved in resolving issues with householder applications. As the pre-application uptake was low, the money received from the fees does not cover the additional work often needed.

Removing the charge for pre-application advice seems

counterintuitive in the current funding context and the team acknowledged difficulties in convincing those higher up in the Council to provide a service free of charge. This will be a discussion that continues as the approach is kept under review. Up-to-date evidence on the types of applications coming in and the processing time helps to decipher the real benefits of providing (or indeed not providing) the service, which can be used to explain to others in the organisation to get them on board.

For now, in Cheshire West and Chester, the evidence suggests that this *is* working. The approach is delivering better schemes more aligned with the Council's objectives and is helping the Council to forge better relationships with its customers.

## Copeland Borough Council – Leadership in planning

Summary 	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve planning performance – corporately, planning was not given a high standing which affected performance</li> <li>• Set performance within the context of potential major schemes in the pipeline which were a corporate priority</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new management positions including ‘Manager of Development’ position with a mandate to drive improvements</li> <li>• Task new managers to focus on weekly monitoring against targets, combined with investment in existing staff</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A transformation in how planning is perceived and a raised profile for planning within the authority</li> <li>• Improved performance - applications determined within the target timeframe jumped from 58% to just over 90%</li> <li>• Greater demand on the service has resulted in increased resource (new principal and graduate planner posts)</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Started with PAS planning peer review</li> <li>• Support from senior management team and Leader of the Council is crucial</li> <li>• Managers have to be “trusted to get on with the job”</li> <li>• A focus on building the capacity of officers to lift their performance helps with morale</li> </ul>

### Introduction

In 2015 Copeland Borough Council’s planning department was under performing against government targets for determining applications. Under-staffing and outmoded processes meant that in some categories of application, only 58% were being determined within the target timeframes.

### What they did

The change at Copeland Council started at the top with the election of a Mayor with a strong growth agenda,

and recognition of planning’s integral role in delivering that. The Chief Executive was given the political remit to invest in the planning department’s staff resources, but this was not at the core of the change.

Leaders also recognised that the profile of planning needed raising as a way of facilitating improvement and a culture change across the department. The Chief Executive, a chartered town planner, set about raising the profile of planning and gave the service a clear brief; Copeland was to be a top performing authority, through meeting

government timescale targets and by raising the bar on the quality of development outcomes.

To meet this challenge the service needed qualified professional staff with the right level of expertise and experience. A review of the management structure led to the creation of a specific 'Manager of Development' role, who would report directly to the Chief Executive and also resulted in the creation of managers for the 'Planning Policy' and 'Nuclear' service areas. This recognised the need for management at the right level, and the operational integration of these functions.

The creation of these new posts and the additional resource was undoubtedly a factor in the service improvements that followed. But, at the heart of this change was the empowerment of key staff. The newly appointed Planning Development Manager was briefed by the Chief Executive and then "trusted to get on with the job". There was autonomy and limited interference in operational matters – it was the 'end result' that mattered. This was also combined with support in the form of regular meetings to communicate and share information.

The manager started with an analysis of performance, supported by PAS, which identified scope for improvement. Recommendations to expand the type and number of schemes that could be dealt with under delegated authority and carrying out more active engagement with developers became priorities.

Individual team member performance also became a focus. A series of weekly one-to-one meetings are held to discuss application timescales and targets, reviewing cases, and looking

intelligently with officers at applications at risk of going over the target timescale.

Crucially, this focus on individual performance was twinned with a renewed focus on staff development. Officers were switched to career-graded posts allowing progression through different levels of seniority and providing a financial incentive to attain RTPI qualifications and develop as a professional. This focus on building the capacity of officers to lift their performance helped with morale and continues to do so.

The Council's communications team now actively promotes and publicises good development management team performance; for example, showcasing favourable appeal decisions or successful enforcement prosecutions. The morale of the team has been improved by the decision to promote and celebrate planning successes. Officers received thanks and recognition from the Mayor and the Chief Executive as the Council's performance against Government targets increased. Positive publicity in local media has also energised the team.

### Results and Learning

The culture change didn't happen overnight. The new planning development manager was an internal promotion of a principal planner who carried a caseload alongside their new management responsibilities while their previous post was filled. This was demanding, stressful and required support, drive and commitment. In this sense it was more important than ever to focus on the most important things – improving the performance statistics – and with lower priority matters dealt with but within slower timescales.

There are always budgetary constraints and replacing one manager with three had financial implications. However, the structural change was across the whole Council, which meant that savings in some areas enabled investment in others.

The cultural change started at the top by the Chief Executive boosting the profile of planning, its role and its capacity to leverage investment into the authority. This transformed the way it was perceived and raised its 'place' within the authority.

With a renewed sense of purpose and confidence, the planning team worked

hard to drive up performance to a position whereby the proportion of applications determined within the target timeframe jumped from 58% to just over 90%.

The improved performance and the results of engagement with developers (leading to greater service demand) has in turn led to the team being expanded further with increased resource (new principal and graduate planner posts). The team drove the change and deserves credit for the way it has turned its service around but at the heart of this was a change in culture of the organisation set by strong, focused leadership.

## West Lindsey Council – Peer review and sign off officers

Summary 	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce bottlenecks in process by reducing senior officer time taken up with application sign off</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established planning peers system where senior and junior officers can sign off others' reports</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up-skilling of junior officers</li> <li>• Staff more confident as a result of being trusted with more responsibility</li> <li>• Improved consistency of approach benefits customers</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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</li> </ul>

### 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.



*West Lindsey Council Offices. Photo © Jonathan Thacker (cc-by-sa/2.0)*

## Coventry Council - Effective engagement with stakeholders

Summary  	
<b>Wanted to...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve efficiency of internal consultation – reducing time and excessive paper trails</li> <li>• Improve efficiency of external consultation in the longer term</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage face-to-face engagement and a focus on ‘so what’ issues</li> <li>• Automate reminders to consultees</li> <li>• Explore how system upgrades might improve internal and external consultation in the longer term</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Performance managing’ consultees helps all parties understand what causes delays</li> <li>• Reduced use of ‘extension of time’ agreements</li> </ul>
<b>Learning / risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation has become a more focused process, quickly homing in on issues</li> <li>• Extension of time agreements should not be used as the default tool to manage delays due to consultation responses</li> </ul>

### Introduction

Coventry Council is consistently top of the planning statistics tables for the average speed at which they determine applications. However, one issue that was particularly problematic for the Council was the timeliness of responses from internal stakeholders and external statutory consultees. Responses were often slow coming back – sometimes outside the 21-day consultation window – and because the authority were reluctant to determine the application without a response from the most relevant consultees, this led to delays overall.

### What they did

Complex applications and / or the development context require considerable dialogue with internal consultees. In Coventry, it’s important to consult regularly with the highways and drainage teams. A lot of time is

lost in processing written responses between council teams and the time involved in understanding those written responses. Therefore, face-to-face meetings are now encouraged as a means of talking through the consultation responses before the consultees send through their written outputs.

This makes the process more efficient and dramatically increases the speed at which applications can be processed. The case officer can understand if there are any ‘show-stoppers’ and then focus straight away on the relevant aspect(s) with the applicant whilst waiting for the written response to ‘follow on’.

This approach also saved time and effort; a relatively quick discussion takes less time and fewer iterations than sending emails back and forth. It

also builds better relationships and understanding between officers.

Challenges remain around late responses from external consultees (for example the Environment Agency, Highways England and Historic England). Coventry is looking at new ways to address this issue through their engagement processes, such as sending automated reminder emails at key points during the consultation process to save case officers' time in monitoring the receipt of responses and having to write emails chasing advice or to make follow up telephone calls.

With the implementation of a new IT system, Coventry Council are aiming to monitor the response rates of consultees. This will allow them to share data with those consultees and look for ways to improve the timeliness of their advice. The Council are also looking at ways to provide access to their 'back office' information to consultees in order to speed up the response rates. For example, they are considering how an 'app' might allow external consultees partial access to their back-office system to pick from the Council's standard conditions suite.

When experiencing delays in consultation responses, local planning authorities may use formal extension

of time agreements to extend the target determination timescale for that application. This means that as long as application is determined within the agreed timescale, it is not classified as running 'over time' in the performance statistics. At Coventry Council, the use of extension of time agreements is carefully monitored, with a view to their use being discouraged. These agreements require an officer request and explanation, followed by sign off by managers. These agreements are generally used only in instances where officers are not able to get critical consultation responses back from external consultees.

## Results and Learning

There is strong direction at management level that using extensions of time for other scenarios is unacceptable as applications will inevitably keep coming in and will build up. There is a case officer resource 'drag' associated with having more applications running concurrently. This approach has been fundamental in ensuring that the number of 'in hand' applications does not get out of control. This firm line has had measurable outcomes in terms of getting the majority of applications determined within target timescales, thus also ensuring the faster delivery of schemes.

## Key Lessons

The experiences of the authorities, both the successes and the challenges along the way, contain some important learning points for any DM service looking to improve performance. They underline the need to:

- Assess and understand your Development Management performance.
- Critically examine your approaches to recruitment and work allocation and *how* you will 'grow your planners'.
- Review development management processes; remove aspects that do not add value or create new processes which can save time and costs down the line.
- Empower your development management officers – empower them by giving them the freedom and support to plan effectively – and communicate their successes and the value of their good planning.

## Good DM; Good Outcomes

The effectiveness of DM services directly impacts on whether England's cities, towns and villages have well-designed homes and places of work *and* how well these are served by important infrastructure such education and transport facilities. Getting development management right is important for ensuring that the best possible outcomes are delivered for places.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS; DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS ARE INNOVATING – JOIN THEM**

#### **Summary**

This report showcases an impressive range of initiatives being undertaken by local planning authorities across the country for recruiting and retaining people, designing better processes and empowering staff. This is happening despite the challenges of funding and changing policy frameworks.

Improvement and innovation efforts *are* having a demonstrable and measurable impact on the **efficiency, quality** and **delivery** of planning services. Collectively, this is generating important learnings for the way we ‘do’ development management now, and how we might do it better in future.

The case studies presented in this report have hopefully given you a flavour of some of the improvement projects pursued – and some creative and intelligent ways of working. But expect to see even more innovative development practice emerge over the next year. Supported by the Future Cities Catapult’s *Future of Planning* Programme and MHCLG, a number of authorities are also exploring the ways that they can make better use of digital technology.

The impacts of the Public Practice Programme in local authorities is also being seen, generating fresh perspectives that have the potential to reinvent development management as a digital process - empowering planners to boost efficiency, quality and delivery.

#### **Evaluating and Improving Your Service**

##### **Step 1 - Assess your performance**

The framework of case studies presented in this report provide an accessible starting point for you and your management team to evaluate and improve your service. The first step is to decide what aspects of your service are important to understand and measure to assess how you are performing on efficiency, quality and delivery. Then, by drawing on available data (or collecting new data), the experience of your team, and your knowledge of other authorities trying to achieve similar goals, you can build a much more meaningful picture - are you failing, average or exceptional against each of these measures?

Once you establish how you are performing consider how you can improve by changing the way you recruit and manage people, design your processes, and empower your teams.

##### **Step 2 - Focus on your people**

Drawing on the experiences and learning points from the case studies presented in Section 2, we’ve put together below some key questions to discuss and explore with your team to help you identify ways of improving the efficiency, quality and delivery capacity of your service.

Critically examine your approaches to recruitment and work allocation:



- What level and type of skills are needed to deal with the profile of applications your authority has? The answer may be to fill roles at a more junior level to increase capacity and re-orientate the work of existing senior staff. Or it might mean creating a new position such as a Delivery Officer working alongside the Development Management team
- New starters, apprentices and graduates require time and help to settle-in. This means everyone from the most junior team member upward has a part to play. What actions are needed to prepare for this and to support staff in playing their part? How will you engage and involve existing staff from the outset and throughout?
- How will you involve existing staff in the design and delivery of new recruitment or training programmes? How will you support them and make sure they can also benefit from training or other measures that support new starters?
- How can you provide an interesting and challenging workload for capable junior staff? How can you use work allocation to give junior officers more exposure to and opportunities to assist on large scale major schemes to help develop their skills and aid retention?

### **Step 3 - Now look at your processes**

Constantly review your processes and ask 'why are we doing this' to see where they can be amended or ceased altogether to help you perform better:

- At each stage of a process, question whether activities are proportionate or even necessary e.g. what can we stop doing/do differently to release capacity? What parts of your processes are creating bottlenecks? Can you eliminate these or replace them with more efficient ways of working?
- Understand your operating context before 'blindly' following practice from elsewhere. Remember that solutions to problems work because they have been applied to a specific set of issues within a specific context. While there are some types of common innovation that emerge with a 'systems thinking' approach, they are not the same and the benefits of the systems thinking approach is that appreciation of context.
- Sometimes changing and adapting processes (e.g. pre-app, validation, consultation, report writing), especially at the front end, can feel as though you are adding time to a process. However, keeping all stages of the process under constant review will ultimately lift the quality of applications – and the likelihood of implementation post permission. This type of upfront investment can also increase speed and efficiency later in the application process. Is there value in adding new processes that improve quality or save time down the line?



Technology has the capacity to transform (and even eliminate process) but it needs creative thinking and should always be the 'enabler' of what we do rather than the 'driver'. Poorly designed and executed processes are rarely improved by technology

(often it just makes a poor process quicker). Once you are clear about how technology can assist your processes you'll start from a much better place to consider using emerging IT, systems and digital technologies to support your service. You don't run a change programme and then end it because staff also change or leave. Change and improvement have to become the 'norm'. By creating a culture that empowers staff and encourages and supports change (and learns from rather than punishes mistakes) you can ensure that new and existing staff see continuous improvement as the normal way of working.

#### **Step 4 - Empower your people**

It's not just about having "more planners" in the team or even streamlining process, although both of these are important. Your officers need to feel empowered to plan:

- Change starts at the top within the wider organisation or your development management team. How can you show the value planning brings and leverage support for the service from politicians and the executive team in the authority?
- A high performing culture is underpinned by an active and supportive management. What changes are needed to the way you manage teams to develop and motivate staff?
- Change, innovation, and decisions on the way the service is delivered is the responsibility of the whole team - not just managers. Use the talents and capabilities across the team to deal with problems and delays. The whole team should take responsibility and have a stake in resolving issues and should all feel the benefits of success. How will you use your team members to drive changes?
- Let people know that planning matters, in the community, corporately and most critically your development management team. What actions can you take to increase the profile of planning corporately, and supported by communications officers, in your community?



#### **Step 5 - Don't forget Members – they have an important role**

Although not a primary focus of the cases studies presented, it's essential to bring your elected members on any improvement journey with you. All of the authorities we spoke to in the course of producing this report work with their members to improve efficiency, quality and delivery dimensions of the service. Change and improvement projects ultimately affect the service to the community - without the support, understanding and buy-in of members, change and improvement projects will often fail or not reach their full potential.

#### **Support from PAS**

Getting planning right is important for councils. It allows them to manage development, ensuring that the best possible outcomes are delivered for places. It requires political and technical leadership and engaged communities. The Planning Advisory Service is funded by MHCLG to provide support to councils.

Contact the team [pas@local.gov.uk](mailto:pas@local.gov.uk) if you would like to discuss how they can help you improve your development management service.



Planning Advisory Service  
18 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3HZ  
Telephone 020 7664 3000  
Twitter [@pas\\_team](#)  
Email [pas@local.gov.uk](mailto:pas@local.gov.uk)  
<https://local.gov.uk/pas>