

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

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

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

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.