



planning advisory service



# PAS DM Challenge Toolkit

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PAS

# Background

- Updated version of 2015 toolkit
  - 15 sections dealing with every aspect of DM
  - Trying to help LPAs define poor to excellent
  - Practical tips for improvement plans
  - Based on my practical experience as Head of DM, seeing good practice from around the country and feedback received from pilot Councils
  - Piloted on: Harborough, Redbridge, Plymouth and S Hams / W Devon
  - PAS has now carried out facilitated sessions with 22 Councils to date
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# The toolkit in a nutshell

- A health check on how you manage DM
  - You use it how you want to use it
  - Each section is self contained and you don't have to complete a section
  - Helps you *debate* poor to excellent
  - *Suggests* some top tips
  - Helps you structure an improvement plan
  - Helps you to discuss issues in a group on a non hierarchal basis
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# Who is it aimed at?

- **Authorities designated/in danger of designation**
  - **Cash-strapped authorities**
  - **'Cruising' authorities**
  - **High-performing authorities**
  - **Authorities that need specific support**
  - **Groups of councils preparing to collaborate**
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# When to use it

- **Regular team meetings**
  - **Team 'away-days'**
  - **Focused, concentrated improvement work**
  - **Geographical groups**
  - **Councillor engagement**
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# Things to do before you start

- Do you understand why you are doing it?
  - Are you clear about the sections you want to include and why?
  - Does everyone understand why they are there?
  - Have you got the right people involved?
  - Who is going to chair it and who is taking notes?
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# Things to do before you start

- Have you left enough time?
  - Is it a one off or series of sessions?
  - Venue? Better to be in person rather than online
  - What are you going to do with the information?
  - What are the timescales for action?
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# The dos and don'ts

- Do encourage everyone to participate
  - Do allow honest and open debate
  - Do make sure that you properly record your findings
  - Do discuss what you are going to do next
  - Do allow enough time
  - Do make sure you focus on what is important to you
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# The dos and don'ts

- Don't try and do every section (or certainly not all in one go!)
  - Don't let individuals dominate
  - Don't tell anyone they are wrong
  - Don't worry if you disagree
  - Don't get hung up over the scores
  - Don't worry about addressing every statement if it is not important to you
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# When to involve PAS

- We can help facilitate a session, but we will charge unless you fall within the DM grant criteria
  - We can answer questions and queries – feel free to give me a ring or email
  - We can take on board comments and suggestions for next version
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# **A case study from Epsom and Ewell**





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# Worked example – The Officer Report

A poor Development Management Service (score 1)	An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)	Top tips
<p>There might be a generic officer report template that was prepared a number of years ago but it is not really fit for <u>purpose</u> so case officers normally create their own structure and as a consequence they include different information depending on who is the case officer. When an appeal is lodged officers normally <u>have to</u> write a separate appeal statement because the officer report is inadequate.</p>	<p>The officer report follows a template and the template changes depending on the type of application and the decision made. Reports for householder applications are very short unless the decision is to refuse or a Planning Committee item. Major application reports include additional information such as S106 requirements. If an application is being refused it is usually written in a form that can be used as a written representations appeal statement or sent to the Planning Inspector without any further additional information</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use best practice to design a <u>number of</u> templates for different types of applications and decisions</li> <li>2. Consider just having a tick box report for very straightforward householder application – will anyone <u>actually read</u> them?</li> <li>3. Include standard wording to ensure officers include key information <u>e.g.</u> housing supply, Equality Act, Human Rights Act etc. <u>However</u> make sure that officers actually check that the standard information is correct e.g. have they assessed against the Equality Act?</li> </ol>

SCORE:  (out of 5)

Why this score?

What score would you like?  (out of 5)

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Why this score?

There is an officer template that is updated when issues arise. It tends to change on a reactive rather than proactive basis and there is only 1 template to cover all application types. The reports are used to defend appeal s but a separate statement is usually required

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Why this score?

Would like to produce a variety of templates and for more frequent reviews of structure and wording. Training required for staff to avoid need for additional appeal statements for delegated written reps minor applications.  
Will follow up tips 1, 2 and 3

A poor Development Management Service (score 1)	An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)	Top tips
<p>Every officer has their own way of doing things depending on their own <u>particular interests</u> and experience. Some write in a very chatty way whilst others write formally in the third person. The reports include unnecessary information and tend to ramble.</p>	<p>The officer report follows a logical order that tells a story to explain the <u>decision making</u> process. For example it starts with a <u>description</u> of the development and consultation responses, then ends with a conclusion and reason for the decision. Whilst each application is considered on its own merits the language and structure <u>is</u> always the same so a third party would not be able to tell which individual officer wrote the report.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Carry out training for all case officers on the approach to report writing. Let all staff debate the best form of report writing so that the service challenges itself on the report structure</li> <li>5. Look at how other Councils write reports and learn from best practice</li> </ol>

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<p>Case officers are not overly concerned by the quality of their reports because someone else will spot their mistakes and if it is a <u>Committee</u> report there are normally a number of managers who will look at it. If there is an error in an officer report it is difficult to pin 'blame' on it; the case officer says that the line manager should have spotted it, the line manager thinks the senior manager should have spotted it and the senior manager thinks that both the line manager and case officer should take greater ownership of the report.</p>	<p>The case officer takes ownership of their report and ensures it makes clear logical sense, covers all the relevant issues and is written in a professional manner. There is oversight by a manager who agrees the final <u>decision</u> but the case officer is responsible for providing a clear recommendation and for ensuring the report covers all the essential analysis.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Introduce a checklist for officers to follow to ensure that they write consistent and comprehensive reports</li> <li>7. Have a clear protocol for signing off reports to ensure it is clear who is accountable</li> <li>8. Encourage managers to risk assess applications and brief case officers on the level they need to review their reports well in advance of case officers producing the final version</li> </ol>

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The consistency of report writing has been improved with the training and officers do write good quality reports. However all Committee reports are checked by the team manager and then the Head of DM and even delegated reports are often checked and double checked.

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Why this score?

There needs to be less checking by managers. However the Council's performance at appeal is poor and therefore at the moment there is a need for a relatively high level of management scrutiny.

Tips 6 and 8 are very helpful. Tip 7 already happens

A poor Development Management Service (score 1)	An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)	Top tips
<p>Members are not happy with officer reports but do not feel able to challenge back on the quality of the reports as they are not the professionals and so there are parts of the report that they either do not understand or do not understand why it is included.</p>	<p>The Members of the Committee are encouraged to feedback to officers on the quality of officer reports in terms of layout and content. They point out when a good report has helped them understand an issue <u>and also</u> when they have found the report confusing or overly complex. The officers use this information to regularly review the way reports are written and ensure that it is clear, concise and in Plain English.</p>	<p>9. Use the Chair's briefing to check with the Chair that the officer report is properly laid out and whether anything needs to change either before the Committee meeting or as an ongoing learning process</p> <p>10. Use the annual Member training to review the officer reports so that Members can better understand why information is included and Members can challenge officers on content</p> <p>11. Review how other Councils write reports to continuously improve</p>

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Why this score?

Members often complain that they don't understand the reports but not in any structured way. When they raise something then officers change the wording. There has never been any structured review of reports with Members. The recent training only involved officers and lawyers.

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Why this score?

This is an area of focus that has been neglected in the past and needs to be taken forward. All 3 tips to be taken on board. In addition there are a couple of Members who have come up with really good ideas on Plain English and they will be used as a sounding board for reviewing report language.



## Actions to follow up and tips you will you be considering?

Which tips are helpful?

1,2,3,6,8,9,10,11

### Actions to take forward

1. Design a series of officer templates that will be proportionate to the application being considered. For example prepare a much simpler tick box template for simple householder applications that are delegated, recommended for approval and have no objectors
2. Introduce a section in the officer report on Equality Act and Human Rights to ensure that it is clear that these matters have been properly considered by the officer.
3. Improve the procedure manuals to help guide officers in report writing.
4. Rethink the manager sign off processes to reduce duplication of work, avoid unnecessary checking and create clarity for officers.
5. Encourage the Chair to comment on the language and structure of the officer report so changes can be made for the final version.
6. Use the Planning Committee annual training programme to enable Members to suggest changes to the officer reports. Introduce a more structured communication for Cllr Pedant and Cllr Mrs Colon to feed back issues on officer reports to the Head of Development Management.
7. Head of Development Management to contact PAS to find out if there is national best practice to follow on officer reports.
8. Head of Development Management to develop these ideas in the form of an action plan alongside actions from sections ....