



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

Cambridge City Council – Pre-Application ‘RAG’ Assessment

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

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.

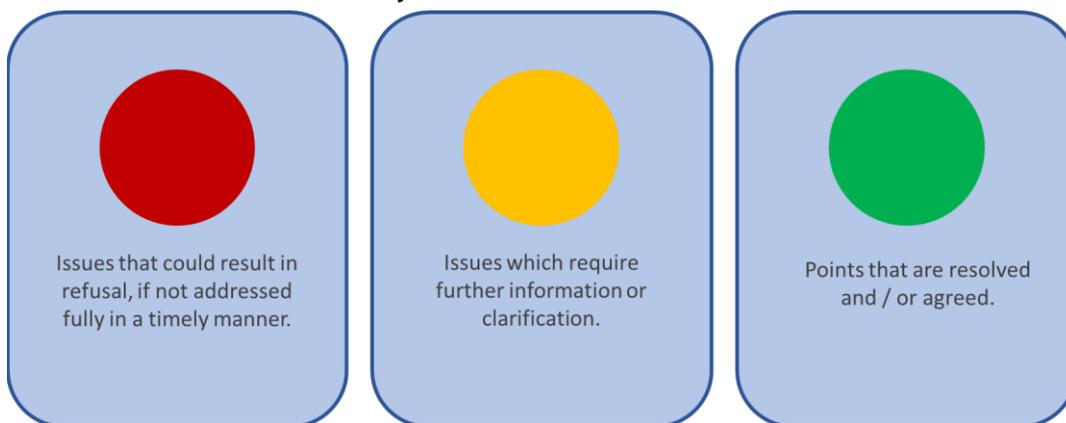
What they did

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 specialists concurrently on the changes identified is key to ensuring that everyone 'buys in' to the rating given.

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 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.

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.