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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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| Political leadership |



# Introduction

Political leadership forms one of 15 sections of the [PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/development-management-challenge-toolkit). Please refer to the PAS website for information on the other 14 sections and further background to the toolkit.

This section focuses particularly on political leadership in decision-making through the Planning Committee. Are the councillors on the Committee sufficiently experienced and trained to make key planning decisions and is the Chair sufficiently engaged in the process? Are other councillors, not on the Committee, sufficiently engaged in the Planning process? Has probity in the decision-making process been properly thought through to meet the requirements of your Council? Does the scheme of delegation bring the right applications to Committee scrutiny? Are all councillors engaged in pre-application discussion to the degree that best suits the Council and development community? Every Council will engage political leadership in different ways depending on the issues and political makeup of a Council, but the principles below should be consistent for all Councils.

Please consider the statements below that attempt to define what an excellent and poor Planning Authority looks like and then consider some tips to improve performance. The purpose of defining poor and excellent is to be controversial and to stimulate debate within a Council. The tips will work for some Councils and not for others because every Council is different and therefore has different priorities for improvement. The tips are also aimed at getting Planning Authorities to think about solutions and to work through challenges in bite-size ways rather than being overwhelmed by the problems they face.

# How to use it

For each part discuss where you feel your Council sits on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). If you disagree with one another (which you may do) discuss why you have different views as perception is a really important factor in improving how things are done. Ultimately the final score is not as important as what you are going to do about it. However, it is really important to write down why you have either agreed on a score or why you can’t decide on a score. This will help you to understand where you are as a service on the journey between poor and excellent and if you don’t write it down you will have no record of why you came to those conclusions.

Next, decide what score you would like to be. It may seem obvious that you always will want to be a 5 (excellent) but this is not always the case as it depends on where you want to focus your priorities as a service. For example, how important is monitoring performance to your service? All Planning Authorities will want to monitor the speed and quality of decision-making as these are the minimum benchmarks set by Government but you will then need to balance the time spent in collecting information about all areas of the Development Management process against the staff resources you have to deliver an excellent service. Only you will know whether you want to reach a 5 or whether you may be happy to be a 3 or 4. We suggest you note down the reasons why you may not want to score a 5 at this time as this will help you prioritise your actions in any improvement plan.

Finally, look at the ‘top tips’ and actions you want to take from the session. Which tips are you going to take on board and which are you going to dismiss? – it is ok to say a tip is not for you as long as you know why. Then if you decide you want to take forward a tip decide how you are going to implement it. Some you simply need to do and others may involve outside support such as from PAS. Also, consider what other actions have come out of the discussion. Encourage all staff taking part in the session to generate other ideas and actions to help you develop an action plan.

Each section of the toolkit usually takes about an hour to an hour and a half to complete. However, the time you spend on each section very much depends on how much discussion and disagreement takes place – it will sometimes be shorter and sometimes longer. Also, some sections are longer than others so there will inevitably be a difference in time spent on each.

When you have completed the sections that you feel are important to your service you should be in an excellent position to prepare your own action plan of improvement in the format that is appropriate for your organisation. However, it is also really important to use the toolkit to reflect back on the things you are doing well and therefore do not need to change. Do not simply dwell on the negatives but celebrate success and promote best practice within your service. It is really important when Planning Departments are struggling with resourcing and workload pressures to celebrate with staff good practice and a job well done.

# How to involve staff in the discussion

It is important to involve those staff who have an active role in the Planning Committee including the officer who acts as the lead Planning officer. However, it is also important to involve those staff who have day-to-day contact with councillors on individual planning applications.

# Facilitator’s tips

* Ask yourself challenging questions such as: Do we agree with excellent? Do we agree with poor? Are the tips helpful? What do we need to do if anything changes?
* Make sure you have someone to write down your conclusions and check what has been written before moving on to the next session. It is really important to ensure everyone’s thoughts are represented accurately
* The scores are there to help you conclude the effectiveness of your Development Management service but do not spend too long debating the scores, they are only there to give you guidance and to stimulate debate
* As always it is about getting the right people in the room and making them comfortable to contribute. Some staff may feel that their contribution is not as important as others. Make sure it is inclusive and everyone’s views are given equal weight
* Some staff may feel uncomfortable when some topics are discussed. Ultimately you need to decide whether all staff should be involved in the whole session, but the toolkit works best when staff are able to express their views openly without fear of repercussion.
* This process can work really well with people from different councils so that services can learn from each other and suggest ways of working together in future.
* Many issues that people identify can be tackled at a number of different levels. Encourage people to think of what they could just do on Monday, as well as the bigger trickier things that need buy-in.
* It is normal for you to speed up as you get to the end of each section as everyone gets tired and you run out of time. You may well find that you have already discussed a matter that is highlighted at the end of the setion. The toolkit is designed to have some duplication to make sure you don’t forget important aspects of the Development Management service. There are no hard and fast rules so skip over things if they are not so relevant to you or you have covered them earlier.
* Always agree a follow up action plan that will result from the discussions, otherwise the ideas, enthusiasm and momentum will be lost.

# For more information & Help

If you would like more information about any aspect of the Development Management Challenge Toolkit or would like to take part in or organise a facilitated improvement session please contact the Planning Advisory Service[**pas@local.gov.uk**](mailto:pas@local.gov.uk)**.**

To help you progress your action plan there is a range of support available on the PAS website along with links to other helpful sources of information. Please visit the website at <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas>

| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
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| Membership on the Planning Committee is not reviewed unless there is a change of political control and little thought is given to the types of interest and experience that individual can bring to the Committee. | Members of the Committee have a wide range of skills, responsibilities and local knowledge to cover the broad range of issues that will be brought to the Committee and not just based on the political make-up of the Council. | 1. Encourage as many councillors as possible to undertake Committee training. This should include likely subs and councillors who are interested in planning or have major planning issues in their ward 2. Have regular officer / Chair / Portfolio discussions on the make-up of the Committee |
| **EVALUATION QUESTIONS**  **What score have you agreed on?**  **Why have you given it this score?**  **What score would you like to get to?**  **If this isn’t a 5, why is it lower?**  **What top tips are you going to take up?**  **What other actions have you identified?** | | |

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| Ward / Parish councillors refer constituents to the Planning Department general number if they have a Planning issue and rely on Planning Committee Members because they are the ones who understand Planning. Committee members are the only ones who attend training. Ward / Parish councillors do not really understand the referral process so just phone the Planning general number when they are asked. The only time they contact a Planning Manager is when they have a complaint that needs answering. | Ward councillors understand how to refer a planning application to the Committee and have at least a basic understanding of the Planning process. Those not on the Committee have still attended basic training on Planning and the Committee process so they can explain this to their constituents. They have a good relationship with Planning Officers and the Planning Managers so they know who to speak to if they have a Planning query and feel comfortable doing so. | 1. Ensure there are clear protocols in place for Ward councillor engagement and that is properly communicated to all councillors and forms part of councillor induction 2. Encourage councillors to look up new applications when they are submitted and show them how to do this on the Council’s website 3. Ensure case officers let councillors know when a potentially contentious planning application is submitted and invite them to discuss it directly with the relevant councillors. Extend this to pre-applications if confidentiality protocols allow 4. Consider having case officers focusing on particular wards so that the ward councillors get to know specific officers |
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| There is either no Probity in Planning document or one was prepared many years ago and is clearly out of date. Therefore, at any councillor training event reference is made to national guidance. Probity issues regularly come at the Committee and these are dealt with through the Monitoring Officer who refers to the Council’s Constitution. | There is an approved Probity in Planning document. This has been written following guidance from the LGA and PAS. The authors have included relevant Planning Managers and Planning lawyers in consultation with key councillors including the current Chair of the Committee. The Probity in Planning document is regularly reviewed taking into account lessons learnt from issues that have occurred at the Planning Committee, the Council’s constitutional issues, good practice from elsewhere and changes in legislation. | 1. Planning managers should consider having debrief sessions after each Committee with the Chair and log any probity issues as part of an ongoing review 2. Involve all Committee members in the review of the Probity in Planning document by having a bespoke training session at the draft stage so that they can input their comments 3. Involve relevant officers in the review by asking them what works well and what does not work well. Ensure they are briefed on the final version 4. Use the [PAS guidance](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/planning-committee/planning-committee-support/planning-committee-protocols) and national best practice to inform your probity review |
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| The scheme of delegation has not been reviewed for many years and a large number of applications go to the Committee that are not contentious, but need to be referred because they are not delegated to officers. As a consequence, the agendas are too long for Members to deal with in one session and often result in adjournments or reconvening the next day. Members and officers regularly complain that they are having difficulty concentrating because the Committees last for so long. | The scheme of delegation has been developed with Committee members taking account of best practice throughout the country. It means that only those applications that require being made in public are on the agenda and over 95% of applications are delegated to officers. Meetings very rarely exceed 3 hours | 1. Assign suitable officers to review schemes of delegation using the [PAS guidance](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/planning-committee/planning-committee-scheme-delegation) and other council benchmarking. Involve councillors in the review 2. If agendas are getting too long review the reasons for the referral with the Chair to consider in hindsight which ones perhaps did not require public scrutiny. This can help to inform any review 3. Consider including some agenda items that only have discussion / officer presentation by exception e.g. employee applications |
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| The Council does not have time for pre application discussions generally speaking and when they do take place there is often confusion over confidentiality. As a consequence, there is often tension when an application is submitted, either because there has been no pre-application engagement or the pre-application is perceived as officers agreeing on things in private behind closed doors | Officers encourage applicants to engage with councillors at the pre-application stage and to help ensure there is effective public engagement before a formal planning application is submitted. Councillors understand the pre-application process and help the applicant overcome the concerns of the public. | 1. Have a very clear pre-application engagement policy and publish this on the website 2. Discuss the pre-application process with applicants at local agents' forums to get the best balance of engagement 3. Include pre-application engagement as part of councillor training 4. Have a protocol to agree on when pre-applications should be made public 5. Use the [PAS guidance on pre-applications](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/pre-application-advice-and-planning-performance-agreements-ppas) to help inform councillor engagement |
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| The Committee Chair and key officers do not work effectively together. There may be a Chair’s briefing prior to the Planning Committee meeting, but this is quite ad hoc and unstructured. The Chair and officers do not discuss items in any detail outside of the formal Committee process itself and there have been frequent incidents where an item has either had to be deferred or gone against officer recommendation because new information has come to light at the last minute. | The Committee has a Chair who works well with officers and in particular the officer lead and legal advisor. There is a structured Chair’s briefing session prior to the Committee and the Chair keeps in regular touch with officers on Committee business so there are no surprises at the Committee meeting | 1. Ensure the engagement with the Chair is clearly spelt out in the Probity guidance 2. Ensure that there is an effective vice Chair who can work with the Chair and substitute when the Chair is unavailable 3. Ensure there is always a debrief with the Chair after the Planning Committee to discuss what has gone well and why things may not have gone so well 4. Encourage the Chair to meet with officers outside of the formal Committee environment to discuss officer / councillor relationships |
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| Committee members do the minimum necessary to sit on the Committee if training is mandatory and new Committee members get a briefing from different officers depending on who is available. If the training is not mandatory then not all councillors turned up to any training that is offered as it is not required. Councillors keep their own records on the training they attend as there is no central training register. Other training is carried out in an ad hoc way only when the Committee is told it has to be trained because a problem occurs e.g. appeal goes against the Council, a Judicial Review is lodged or a complaint is upheld. | All Committee members are trained annually using a set training programme that is delivered by competent people either within or external to the Council. In addition, there is an annual programme of bespoke training to update councillors on topical Planning issues plus an annual training day that includes a site visit to see good practice. The training requirements are outlined in the Probity in Planning document and a training record is maintained so that councillors are reminded when further training is needed. | 1. Use the web resources on councillor training from the [PAS website](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/councillors/planning-committee/planning-committee-support/making-defensible-planning-decisions) 2. Have a library of presentation material that can be used for training which is updated when required 3. Diary in training when you know it is needed e.g. after Local Plan adoption or when legislation comes into force 4. Keep a training record for every councillor that is shared with Committee support officers 5. Invite councillors outside of the Committee to training so they can be future substitutes or simply to widen their understanding of Planning 6. Use external facilitators (such as PAS) on occasion to get a wider perspective of Planning issues |
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| Planning performance is communicated through statutory Government returns and only discussed with Planning Committee Members when there is a problem e.g. costs are awarded against the Council or when directed to do so by the Secretary of State or the Local Government Ombudsman | Planning performance information is regularly reported to the Committee and time is taken at the Committee for a discussion on performance including lessons learnt so that the Committee can acknowledge good performance and challenge poor performance as part of a programme of continuous improvement | 1. Include performance as a standing item on Committee agendas e.g. appeal decisions and enforcement performance. Periodically include speed and quality of performance e.g. every quarter 2. Use a standard template for reporting performance information so that Committee Members understand and recognise the information 3. Use graphs to illustrate performance that compares current performance with previous years and Government targets |
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| **SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO FOLLOW UP** |