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| Planning Advisory Service |
| PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit |
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| Receipt and validation |



# Introduction

Receipt and validation form 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.

Councils manage the registration and validation of planning consent applications in different ways based on the team structures and software used. Sometimes it is an administrative function, or there is a designated officer (s), or it will be undertaken by the case officer, or a combination of these options. The key to providing an excellent receipt and validation service is to undertake the task quickly and accurately so there are no further delays in the consents process.

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

The staff directly involved in the receipt and validation process will need to take a lead role in the discussion with other officers and managers ready to challenge the processes followed if appropriate.

# 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 to change?
* 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****.**

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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| There are no clear processes for validation and it is carried out by different staff depending on workload demands. The Council does not know how long it takes to validate applications, but generally speaking, applications get moved up the list if an applicant complains about the time it is taking. | There is a clear performance target to ensure that validation is carried out in a timely way (normally within an average time of 5 working days) and there is a process in place so it is clear who does what with regard to the roles of technical support / validation team / case officer. Performance targets are regularly monitored and if missed then this is reviewed and changes made if necessary. The managers can clearly see where delays have occurred e.g. type of application delayed, particular member of staff slow etc. | 1. Have a clear set of process notes for validation. Decide who is going to do the validation (e.g. case officer or technical officer or combination) and then ensure it is consistently implemented
2. Set realistic performance targets that can be achieved, but are not too generous. Commit to more challenging targets when processes have settled in
3. Consider incentivising online applications and Planning Portal applications by committing to faster validation times
4. Generate reports that give you detailed information about validation so it can be effectively monitored
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| **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?** |
| A local validation list has been produced in the past because legislation requires it, but it has not been reviewed as required by the NPPF (every two years). Agents regularly complain that it is too onerous and consultees complain that it is not sufficiently comprehensive. | There is an up-to-date local validation list that has been tested with consultees and local agents so that it is clear what information is required, but is not overly burdensome for the applicant. There is a process by which officers can use their discretion to validate an application that does not meet all the local validation requirements and this is backed up by a clear audit trail to explain the reasons. | 1. Use feedback from both agents and consultees to inform the review of the local validation list
2. Assign the review of the local validation list to officers who are both senior enough to make decisions but close enough to validation to understand the problems experienced in the current version
3. Benchmark with other Councils to ensure the right balance is achieved on validation requirements
4. Consider the introduction of an accredited agents scheme (a fast-track process for trusted agents) with local agents to see if it has any mutual benefits
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| Validation is inconsistently applied depending on the officer. Agents know that if Officer A carries out the validation then almost anything will be allowed whilst Officer B will reject most applications. Applications are often appealed due to non-determination because of the frustrations that applicants have with the validation process | Relevant officers have had training on validation and there is a consistent approach that ensures that the Council is helpful wherever possible by not strictly following a ‘tick box’ exercise but equally not allowing poor applications to be validated first time. | 1. Monitor validation performance and ensure staff are sufficiently trained to take a consistent and proportionate approach
2. Have a clear set of process notes to aid consistency
3. Include validation as a regular item at relevant team meetings
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| **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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| **A poor Development Management Service (score 1)** | **An excellent Development Management Service (score 5)** | **Top tips** |
| Applicants are aware an application is invalid through a standardised letter that is generic for all applications. The applicant is given no contact point for follow up enquiries. The Council keeps the application until the applicant responds and some applications have been held for many months.  | When an application is invalid the applicant is clear about the reasons why, what is required to make the application valid and who to contact for any follow-up discussions. They are also clear about the expectation of the Council to make the application valid and the implications of not providing the information within certain timeframes.  | 1. Publish on the website the Council’s policy for returning fees
2. Monitor invalid applications through regular reports so that managers can discuss reasons for delays with case officers
3. Consider retaining part of the fee if an application has been returned due to the time spent in validating the application
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| **SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO FOLLOW UP** |