The PAS development management challenge kit

December 2015

Contents

About the PAS development management challenge kit

This kit is our attempt to write down our thoughts on how councils should try to understand and improve their development management (DM) services. It is based originally on some work we did with high performing councils and then reviewed after a series of sessions with councils of all shapes and sizes[1].

It covers the whole of the DM process, along with some of the overarching issues around leadership & management. Taken altogether it might be quite overwhelming, so it is designed to be approached in smaller parts. The format is very simple, it works by:

- Outlining the practice of good councils and the key issues;
- Posing some questions to challenging current practice in a way *that allows people to do the thinking themselves* to understand how to move towards a better way of working.

We encourage councils to do a quick and light-touch run through of the whole thing before selecting a subset to work through in more detail. We hope you find it a helpful structure to engage with staff, managers, councillors and other stakeholders of the DM service.

We have learned that no process is ever "fixed" and every council has room to improve further. Let us know how you get on, and how this kit has helped. But before you begin here is some crucial advice we have taken from the most successful councils:

- In many projects there is a big gap between "the big idea" and the subsequent HR process of changing job descriptions and organisational structures. This gap can be reduced by involving the affected people in the redesign, and not treating as part of the ongoing day job.
- There is no process that can't be made stupid by treating it too narrowly. It is essential that everyone understands how the department works *as a whole*. Silo working, narrow targets and work being batched into trays is poison to a process.
- It is impossible to design out error. Almost every part of the DM process requires an assessment of risk and proportionality, and councils are often guilty of introducing sign-offs and double-checks after some kind of mistake. Doing 'less' will sometimes mean things are omitted that should not have been, and you need to find a corporate culture that understands (and forgives) the occasional error.
- We encourage councils to be bold and innovative, and you will find some challenges in the toolkit that encourage you to stop or drastically change some core tasks. This needs to be balanced against the support needs of the people who work for you. If you remove too much structure and support too quickly you might expose gaps in skills or confidence. You will need to acknowledge your staff as individuals, and make judgements about how fast each is able to adapt.

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[1] Note that Counties are not well represented in the kit at present. We are considering how this gap might be addressed.

Who is it for?

The toolkit is designed to help councils think properly before taking on change and improvement work, whatever their circumstances or whatever is providing the stimulus for change. It will be particularly useful for:

Authorities designated/in danger of designation

- Identifying the things to stop doing to "get out the hole" and back on track with National Indicators
- Provides the structure for having sensible and realistic conversations about risk with leadership

Cash-strapped authorities

- Helps councils differentiate the "must do" Vs "nice to have"
- Focuses on the big picture and maximising income/reducing cost

'Cruising' authorities

- Guards against complacency and can provide a stimulus to 'shake things up' every now and again involving officers & councillors
- A regular review / pruning of processes helps keep things lean

High-performing authorities

- Complementing the cycle of learning, and keeping staff engaged and empowered to identify and effect change and improvement
- Reinforcing and understanding the culture/purpose of the service

Groups of councils preparing to collaborate

- Councils can often trip themselves up by failing to understand and appreciate differences in approach before combining processes. This toolkit helps draw out these differences so a common process can be agreed.

When to use the Toolkit

There are no hard-and-fast rules about using the Toolkit; it can be used as a sense-check or critical review for current ongoing improvement work, or as a means to stimulate thought and ideas to kick-start a new programme of change and improvement. It will work best where it is used as a 'continuous improvement' tool rather than for 'one-off' projects, and when used to engage staff and other stakeholders in the design of improvements rather than imposing it upon them.

Early feedback suggests that councils intend to use the Toolkit as part of:

regular team meetings – working through the various sections in sequence or concentrating on known problem areas.

team 'away-days' – many councils will take their team away for a day to plan changes and improvements and the Toolkit can proivide a useful focus and structure.

focused, concentrated improvement work – 2 or 3 focused days working through the Toolkit and creating an improvement programme.

geographical groups – facilitated sessions working through common issues and sharing good practice.

councillor engagement – the Toolkit's has a specific section on political leadership, and covers the councillor role at each stage of the DM process (not just the committee).
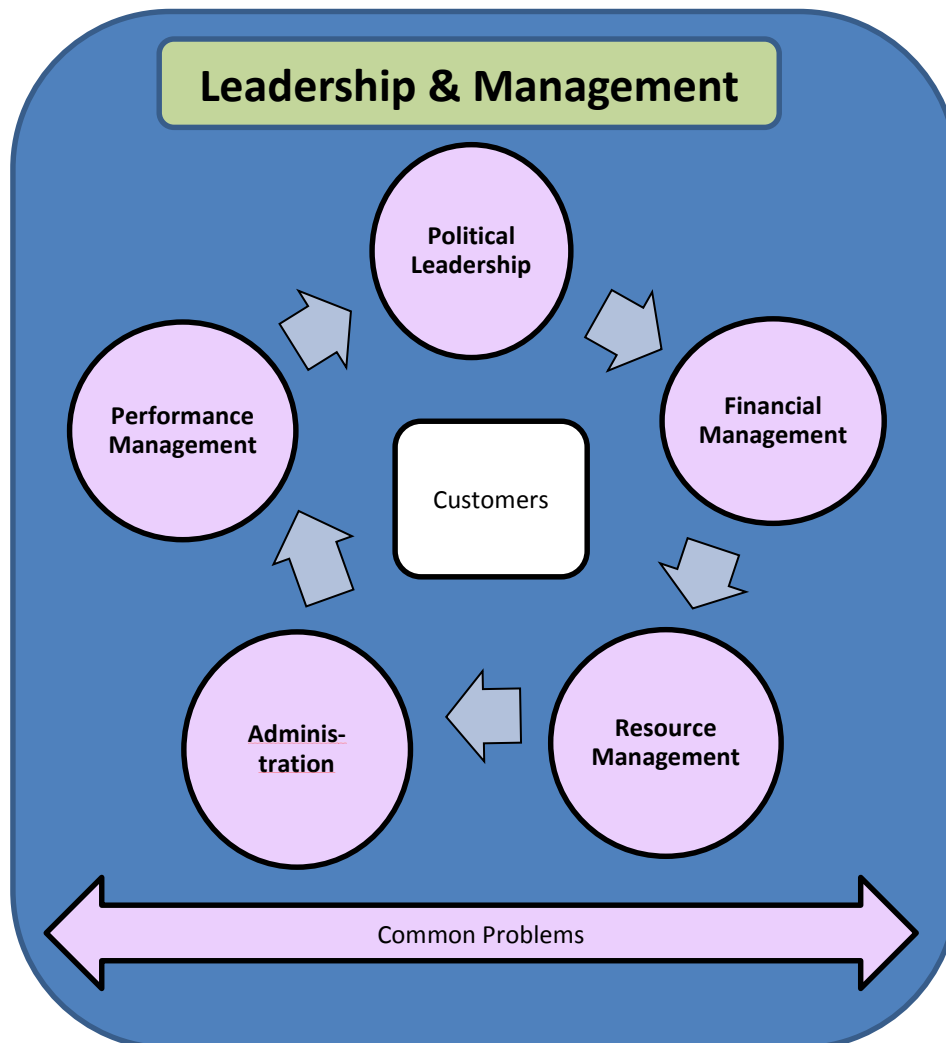
Facilitator's tips

- When working with groups we tend to start with part 2 section 2 (validation). It is a nice, concrete place to begin. The ideas and concepts in part 1 can be a bit philosophical and are best attempted when the group is comfortable working together.
- Not every question needs an answer. The product of the session is not a finished workbook, but a set of areas that people acknowledge need more thought. We find it works best to start with a single, meaty question because discussion always moves people along to the other points naturally.
- As always it is about getting the right people in the room and making them comfortable to contribute. This process works really well with people from different councils – perhaps piggyback on a county group meeting.
- Many issues that people identify can be attacked 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.
- The first half of the kit is numbered, but it shouldn't be considered to be in a particular order. The second half of the kit follows the timeline of a planning application.

For more information & Help

If you would like more information about any aspect of the DM Challenge Toolkit or would like to take part in or organise a faciltated improvement session please contact Planning Advisory Service **pas@local.gov.uk**

PART 1: Leadership & Management

This is about the 'unseen' parts of the service – the management approaches, the systems, the politics and culture that all need to be developed alongside changes made to ways of working.

Leadership & Management

- Political Leadership
- Financial Management
- Resource Management
- Administration
- Performance Management
- Customers
- Common Problems

1. Performance management

A good planning service…

Has performance measures that focus on the right things which will make the service better.

Avoids some of the 'perverse' consequences e.g. last minute decisions and withdrawals which sometimes arise from too great a focus on the statutory 8 and 13 week targets.

Thinks beyond the NI targets and uses a range of measures (beyond speed) as a driver for good, customer-focused performance.

Thinks about quality; defining a single measure of quality is difficult, but ignoring it altogether is dangerous.

Understands (and acts on) what customers say about the service.

Has a performance management system that provides evidence that leads to action; it provides access to good quality data and involves a process of regular review that asks: what is the data telling us about the service?', and 'do we need to take action'?

Ask	Notes
1.1 How do make sure that everyone is clear about the purpose of the planning service? E.g. is everyone clear about the balance between encouraging good development, making quick decisions, and being efficient?	
1.2 As well quarterly NI statistics, what other measures do you regularly report on or information do you collect to help you understand if you are delivering a quality service? How much of that data is used?	
1.3 Do you have a regular review of the service's performance, using data to identify what's working well, issues, and any action required? Who is involved?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- Performance measurement done properly: *Planning Quality Framework*
- Managing complex planning applications: *PAS Project Management Guide*
- 4 councils share their improvement stories June 2014: *Planning performance and improvement case study*
- 3 councils share their experience of Systems Thinking for planning: *Re-thinking planning case studies*

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

2. Financial management

A good planning service…

Understands the break-down of income and expenditure and has a forecast of how it might look over the next 3 years.

Challenges the value received and cost of corporate/inter-departmental re-charges and associated service level agreements.

Is able to articulate the direct and indirect impacts of planning on the area; making links to income for infrastructure, jobs created, etc.

Is up front, transparent and consistent when fees over and above the application fee are required (e.g. viability assessment). It's good to share these facts up-front and to work with developers to reduce the burden (e.g. by agreeing to share a study rather than "theirs" checked by "ours").

Ask	Notes
2.1 Do you have the data to understand the different types of income the service receives/generates and where it originates from?	
2.2 Is there a similar system in place for departmental expenditure and external recharges/costs?	
2.3 How do you ensure you get value from expenditure e.g. do you have service level agreements in place, and/or hold regular reviews with internal/external suppliers?	
2.4 What things do you have in place to help you understand and articulate the direct and indirect impacts of planning on the area?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

3. Resource management

A good planning service…

Recognises the impact that unexpected changes in headcount (e.g. leave, sick, people leaving) can have and has back-up plans (e.g. with neighbouring councils, staff agencies, internal departments, work prioritisation) in place. Small teams are especially vulnerable even to small changes.

Considers having 'routines' that encourage closer working between DM and policy staff e.g. some places have policy planners working one day /week in DM as a matter of course, during busy periods, or periods of leave e.g. summer holidays.

Factors in the different types of work planners do when monitoring the output of planners' caseloads. Planning applications are not all the same sort of thing, and other work such as pre-application, PPA's, and appeals also need to be factored in.

Regularly reviews the impact of its work-allocation method e.g. places that allocate work to officers with the fewest live cases can un-wittingly incentivise people working slowly and hoarding cases.

Recognises the recruitment and retention challenge and actively seeks to attract, keep and develop staff e.g. by investing in their skills, ensuring interesting and varied work, having arrangements about 'poaching' with neighbouring authorities, and 'growing your own'.

Ask	Notes
3.1 Do you understand the variety of demands on the service and what resources you require to deliver it properly?	
3.2 How do allocations of cases to officers work? When does it work well and when does it cause problems?	
3.3 How do you cope with unexpected levels of demand or changes to your resources – is there a contingency plan?	
3.4 Are there any 'routine' resource sharing arrangements do you have e.g. between different parts of the service/other councils or at certain times of year?	
3.5 What is your approach to recruitment and retention, what does it involve, and what has been most successful?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- Productivity – using headcount, caseload and cost: PAS Productivity Tool 2015
- Maximise potential and capacity: National Competency Framework for Planners

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

4. Processes (generally), IT and administration

A good planning service…

Recognises that planning is a professional and political process and works best when officers and councillors deliver it together, understand their respective roles and are appropriately involved (e.g. in engagement, decision making).

Has processes that are clear to, and focused on helping applicants and others.

Keeps processes under constant review; always asking: 'why?', 'is there a better way?' and 'who does this help'? Processes are often subject to checks and balances put in place as a response to past problems or an isolated incident – it is prudent to review if these are still appropriate/serving a purpose.

Acts straight away if something isn't working or can be improved e.g. doesn't wait for a "better ICT system" or some other upgrade.

Enables and equips its staff to work remotely (e.g. from home, on-site).

Makes sure IT supports and does not hinder the delivery of the service by regularly reviewing the use and effectiveness of IT and management system(s) e.g. supporting staff to do their jobs and providing access to management and performance information.

Ask	Notes
4.1 Outside of the day-to-day delivery of the service, when do officers and councillors work together e.g. improvement planning, scrutiny?	
4.2 How do you know your processes are clear and understood by applicants and others?	
4.3 Do you / how often do you review processes to ensure continuous improvement?	
4.4 Do you regularly review your use of IT and management system(s) e.g. is it effective in supporting staff to do their job, is it even necessary for everything?	
4.5 Over and above the day-to-day use of your IT and management systems, do you have the skills in the team to interrogate management systems or do you rely on your system suppliers when something new is required or you want to experiment?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

5. Political leadership

A good planning service…

Ward councillor role

Makes the most of local knowledge: ward councillors play an important role in providing local knowledge and a steer on local opinions and likely support for/against some developments.

Has good, two-way communication between councillors and officers.

Has a clear call-in process that is understood and applied consistently.

PAS have published a guide: 'probity in planning' which sets out the basics (see tools section below).

Governance role

Understands that councillors have a governance role and a duty to challenge complacency.

Has councillors and officers working together to establish what performance management information is needed and in a format that enables councillors to do their job.

Has councillors that play an active role thinking strategically about the future, and ensuring that decisions about budgets are consistent with decisions about service.

Committee role

Has a planning committee that demonstrate robust and fair decision making in front of investors and the public.

Uses committee resources to focus on the strategically important applications and makes sure that low value applications can be dealt with by officers.

Makes sure officers and councillors are clear about their respective roles and maintain good, polite working relationships between officers and councillors in the preparation for and during the committee meeting.

Involves planning committee at pre-application stage: presentations are a good way of delivering a reliable pre-app service.

Has regular and mandatory training.

Understands that Committees have an important role mediating design. This can become quite subjective and councillors will need support to help ensure that design decisions are well founded (e.g. design review panel).

Ask	Notes
5.1 How does the planning service keep ward councillors aware of planning applications in their area and what arrangements are in place for ward councillors to feedback/comment?	
5.2 Are there training arrangements in place for committee members and ward councillors? Is committee member training regular and compulsory?	
5.3 How effective are your call-in arrangements? E.g. When were call-in arrangements last reviewed? How are call-in arrangements communicated to councillors? Are the procedures followed consistently/what happens when they aren't followed?	

5.4. What official and unofficial processes are in place that allows the council's political leadership and councillors to 'hold planning to account'? E.g. Does overview and scrutiny have a place? Do you survey councillor's opinions on service delivery?	
5.5 What performance management information is provided to councillors and how do you know that they find it useful? Is there a process that allows them to request, ask questions of, and challenge the data?	
5.6 How do councillors and/or the portfolio holder get involved in service planning, budget setting and improvement work for the planning department?	
5.7 How do you make sure that councillors that are on and/or attend planning committee follow the correct procedures and protocols in terms of their input, conduct and behaviour?	
5.8 What arrangements are in place that allows regular reflection on and review of, the effectiveness of planning committee (from a councillor and the public's perspective)?	
5.9 What steps are taken prior to committee to ensure that committee time is well used, focuses on the important cases/issues and for councillors to understand the officer's assessment of applications?	
5.10 What are the opportunities for councillors to get involved in pre-application discussions on applications?	
5.10 How do you make sure that your councillors understand the issues and expectations around design so that they can positively contribute to and influence design?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- Learning from PAS Committee Peer Reviews **–** Contact pas@local.gov.uk
- PAS suite of councillor support
- PAS probity guide
- Hastings design training for councillors

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

6. Common Problems

A good planning service…

Keeps everyone up to date with national policy, guidance and legal cases.

Has regular training and updates (for officers and councillors).

Keeps its eye on the big strategic applications: the high volume of straightforward applications can obscure the much smaller number of high impact applications that deliver "place".

Has a slicker routine and process for the high volume cases, and varies it for the less predictable.

Applies a risk-based approach to some of the processes for high volume work e.g. minimal validation requirements, no site visits – often linked to an incentive for agents to submit 'good work'.

Has a culture of learning, improvement and development. Change and improvement should be ongoing rather than saved up for "projects". The most motivated staff are often those empowered to challenge the status quo and make changes where they see issues.

Understands that the nature of planning means that workloads regularly go up and down which creates regular and predictable backlogs that are not crises. The trick is to spot the real crisis e.g. a consistently growing backlog trend over a significant period.

Understands that Planning's professional culture can create a tension with the council's corporate culture. Some planners can think that their employer is a "local planning authority" which is somehow different to the council.

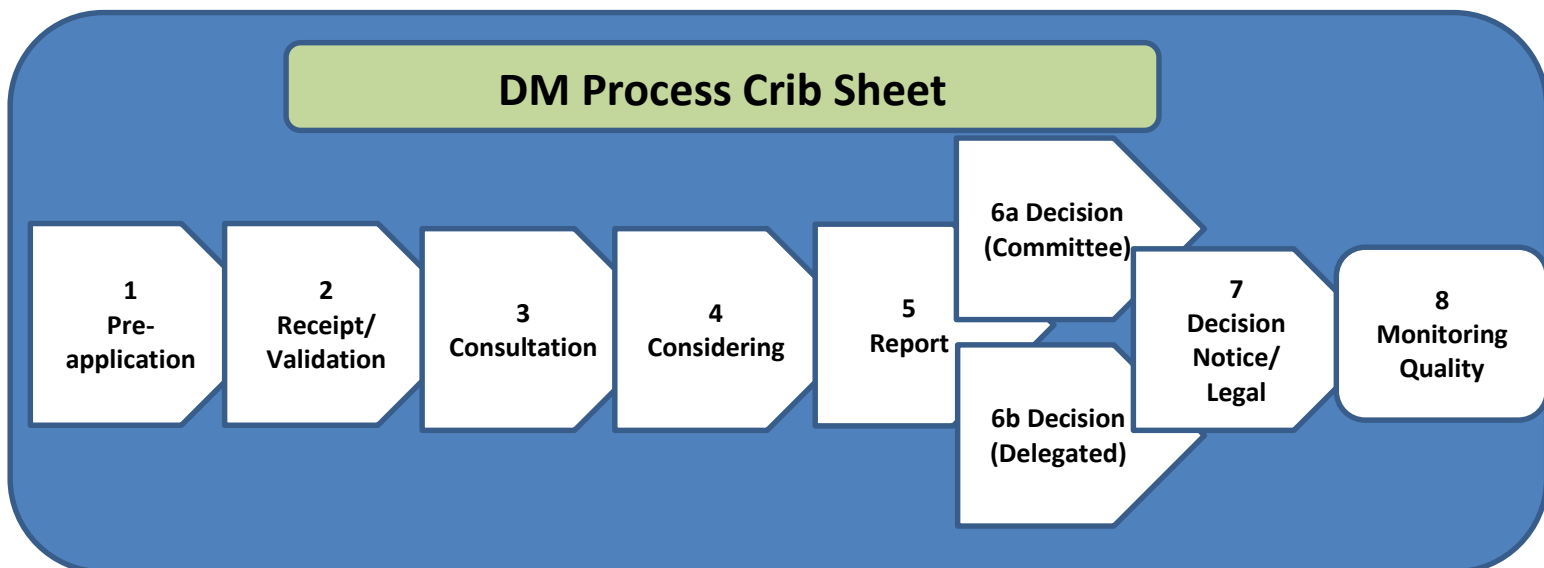| Ask	Notes
6.1 What formal and informal support and training is available to officers to help them stay abreast of changes to the planning system?	
6.2 Do you vary the approach/processes you follow handling different types of applications e.g. to reflect complexity or volume?	
6.3 How often to you review the efficiency and effectiveness of your processes e.g. to identify waste or bottlenecks?	
6.4 If continuous improvement were defined as: '*an ongoing cycle of positive change and employee involvement*', how close to that definition would you say your approach to improvement is?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk*)*

PART 2: The DM process crib sheet

This is rooted in the day-to-day aspects of the planning process as planners deliver and customers experience it. It is often based on the legal requirements of the Development Management Procedure Order (DMPO), which is a surprisingly readable and straightforward document.

The DMPO sets out what is required by law: April 2015: SI 2015 No. 595 - The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015. Note the planning jungle website maintains a consolidated version.

DM Process Crib Sheet

1 Pre-application → 2 Receipt/Validation → 3 Consultation → 4 Considering → 5 Report → 6a Decision (Committee) / 6b Decision (Delegated) → 7 Decision Notice/Legal → 8 Monitoring Quality

1. Pre-application

Good pre-app improves the quality of applications submitted to the council in the longer term. It enables early involvement in the evolution of a scheme and resolution of issues (or progress towards) prior to submission.

A good planning service…

Has a good and well-publicised pre-application service which acts as effective branding for a council that is open for business.

Provides a pre-application service at zero cost when recharged to applicants; it reduces costs to the council at application stage, can lead to fewer refusals and appeals and also turns away "no-hope" applications at very low cost for all.

Has a 'menu' of offers, and is proportionate with different options for different scales of development.

Supports councillor's involvement (sensibly) in pre-application discussions without pre-determining themselves.

However

It can be neglected by officers also trying to complete applications against statutory targets.

It can be neglected by applicants who don't value the early engagement or who find the service of little value.

It can frustrate applicants when pre-application advice is compulsory (e.g. or the council will refuse to negotiate), or when it is simply a re-statement of plan policy.

Introducing charged-for pre-application (and PPA) merely as a means to generate income is a dangerous game; charging creates expectations on performance that can damage reputations if not met, especially when the charges are insufficient to bring in additional resources to handle the work.

It is important to understand how to calculate "full cost" charges.

In some places charging is viewed as contrary to the aims of encouraging regeneration.

Some places divert simple enquiries about whether something needs planning permission to a certificate of proposed development, which may not be in the best interests of the customer.

Care needs to be taken to balance applicants' occasional need for confidentiality against authorities' need to be transparent.

Might there be issues presenting a "joined-up" view to the outside world (politically or otherwise)?

Do residents and their advocates understand and trust a more proactive approach by the council?

Ask	Notes
1.1 What steps have you taken to make sure that your pre-application service reflects the needs of your customers?	
1.2 What steps have you taken to make sure that your pre-application service is priced correctly and recovers the cost of delivering it?	

1.3 How do your officers balance the need to hit NI targets and the need to give good service to pre-apps? Are pre-apps considered a core part of the workload or an add-on?	
1.4 To indicate and understand demand, you should be asking these questions: How many applications have had pre-app? How many would usefully have had pre-app but didn't?	
1.5 To indicate value and quality, what processes do you have in place to help you understand how pre-app has impacted: The rest of the process (e.g. improved decision times, more positive decisions, fewer conditions to discharge)? The quality of development (e.g. how has the service influenced the design, deliverability or outcomes)?	
1.6 The planning department is often only one of a number of players involved in significant developments. How have you tried to bring council departments and consultees together to help applicants?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- PAS has researched and published a Pre-Application Suite

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

2. Receipt / validation

Aside from any pre-application advice this is the first encounter that an applicant has with the council. It's important to get it right to start off on the right foot. The validation step is important because it is when 'the clock starts ticking' for measuring 8 and 13 week targets. High numbers of invalid applications indicates an issue and represents additional cost to the council and applicants.

A good planning service…

On declaring applications valid, begins working on them at the earliest opportunity.

Does not use the validation process to 'manage' demand.

Deals with validation within a few days of receipt (or shorter). Where it has validation 'targets' (e.g. 3 days) it takes care that this approach is not adding unnecessary delay to 'good' applications / or causing other 'perverse' outcomes in order to meet targets.

Finds a balance between being helpful and proportionate but without doing rework for poor agents at public expense.

Has clear guidance available and engages proactively with regular applicants to make their expectations and standards clear.

Trims its validation requirements to the minimum, really questioning whether an extra set of information will add value to the consideration of the proposal.

Applies a risk-based approach to some of the processes for high volume work e.g. minimal validation requirements, no site visits – perhaps linked to an incentive for agents to submit 'good work'.

Uses common sense for example if they can see at validation stage that something is unacceptable, will advise applicants at the same time as letting them know about an application being valid/invalid.

Ask	Notes
2.1 Is the local validation list regularly reviewed to make sure that it is relevant and necessary (e.g. Do we use all of the information that we routinely require?), or to look for ways of reducing the amount of information automatically required (e.g. by moving it into a discretionary category?).	
2.2 A good registration and validation service is delivered by staff that understands the elements of the local list that are always required, and where they have some flexibility. The opposite can be said of a service where staff rigidly apply the requirements of the local list on all occasions or wilfully apply their 'own' rules based on personal preference. What is your approach?	
2.3 The way that the service is structured and resourced can affect the number of hand-offs, applications queueing and bottlenecks. What have you done to mitigate against this?	

E.g. do registration / validation staff process applications through to decision? Do planners register and validate their own cases?	
2.4 Good councils try and prevent validation issues holding things up by working to the minimum legal requirement; phoning or visiting applicants to sort out issues (rather than using a letter or email as the default communication); asking themselves what else can be progressed while waiting for missing information. How closely do you follow these approaches?	
2.5 Do you 'performance manage' the validation process? E.g. do you know: How much works comes in valid and therefore ready to be worked on? Whether validation is an issue that affects all types of applications or just certain types? What is the standard time for an invalid application to pass through this stage?	
2.6 Do you regularly review or invite feedback that helps you understand: What the common validation issues are and the types of application they are associated with? What problems applicants are having submitting valid applications? What can be done to help them get it right first time?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- The national validation requirements are in planning guidance

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

3. Consultation & allocation

Consultation (for many applications) is a step required by law. It involves making people aware of the application and then inviting them to make comment on it. This includes neighbours of the development, parishes (for some councils) and (for a subset of applications) statutory consultees. Statutory consultees are under a requirement in the DMPO to produce annual reports detailing their performance.

A good planning service…

Uses its Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) to set out its consultation policy and complies with it.

Has a checklist that means that decisions about the process of consultation can be taken quickly and consistently.

Works with stakeholders to get timely consultation responses.

Ensures consultees know who the case officer is and have access to them to facilitate discussions.

Reviews how effective the different consultation methods are and make the most of the more effective methods e.g. many councils are reviewing how they use the media and letters in favour of site notices.

Ask	Notes
3.1 It is stressful and unproductive to have too many open cases at the same time. This can put a management focus on throughput and lead to the quality of casework being neglected. How do you ensure that officers have manageable caseloads and that work is distributed fairly? How do you ensure that officers are supported to do quality work?	
3.2 A good consultation process is conducted in plain English and makes it clear what is in or outside scope to change. It is done by staff who understand what is always required and where they have some flexibility. The opposite can be said of a service where consultation is often unclear about the issues at hand and/or that often without good reason goes beyond the requirement of the Law, perhaps due to staff applying their 'own' rules. How would you describe your approach?	
3.3 Are the results of consultation shared with applicants immediately? It can play a part in reducing the need for conditions if an applicant has time to consider and respond to issues identified.	

3.4 Do you understand what consultees are typically concerned about, and when they get concerned? Most of the time you'll be consulting the same consultees about the same things; a little understanding on both sides can help to anticipate and address issues earlier and more proactively, and should lead to better and more timely responses.	
3.5 Consultees (including statutory ones) can represent a risk and a bottleneck to planning decisions. Do officers work proactively and engage with consultees on concerns prior to producing the committee report?	
3.6 Do you have measures or processes in place that allow you to understand how much time and resources are spent on consultation?	
3.7 Do you have any feedback mechanisms that allow you find out what consultees say about your approach to consultation?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- Planning Practice Guidance: Statutory Consultees
- DMPO directive duty to respond to consultation: annual reports

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4. Considering (including visiting, negotiating, thinking)

A good planning service…

Recognises that most planning applications are submitted by professionals and are approved quickly without any need to alter them.

Has a flexible and proportionate approach: many councils go through a standardised approach for every application e.g. visiting the site and considering the application against a wide range of issues. This is because of a perceived need to be "bullet proof" against challenge.

Knows the issues that are regularly the subject of negotiation and considers whether particular policies (e.g. viability) are causing trouble without benefit.

Works with applicants (avoiding where possible quick refusals) when problems occur or revisions are required to the application and only refuse schemes that are clearly unacceptable and not fixable. Note that quick refusals can lead to "free go" applications.

Only use extension of time agreements and planning performance agreements when appropriate; not as a default way of bypassing NI targets.

Works with other parts of the service or council to ensure a co-ordinated and joined up approach.

Ask	Notes
4.1 What criteria do you use to decide on whether a site visit is necessary on an application? Are there alternatives (e.g. Google Earth or similar, or applicant photos?).	
4.2 Do you have an early triage process that makes a decision about whether an application will ultimately get there or whether the kindest approach is a quick refusal? Do planners feel able to ask for help or a second opinion?	
4.3 Do you work with consultees to understand if there are issues that are typically/regularly the subject of negotiation so that you can address these concerns specifically?	
4.4 How closely do you work with other parts of the service (e.g. policy, design, enforcement, heritage) to look at opportunities to address issues that regularly occur as sticking points in negotiations?	
4.5 How is time managed at this stage e.g. is there a process that prompts for action on cases that are about to 'expire'? How 'old' are cases once they get in front of an officer?	

4.6 How do you ensure that extensions of time and planning performance agreements are used properly i.e. in cases that genuinely need more time to approve?	
4.6 Do you carry out any performance management of this part of the process to understand volumes and where problems might be focused? e.g. Volume of free goes per application type Volume of withdrawn applications per type Volume of open applications per officer	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

Not much is written down, but a good start is to challenge processes by visiting other LPAs.

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5. The report

There is no requirement for a report in the DMPO, although reports can be used as a "dry run" for the requirements of the decision notice. This is a very useful area to focus on as it will increase capacity.

A good planning service…

Thinks about the audience and the purpose of the report (delegated, committee) and adjusts the content accordingly.

Ensures that reports set out the decision-making logic, accepting that these can vary widely in length, detail and approach depending on the complexity of the application. Even so, still make sure that the report is clear, focussed and relevant.

Is aware of risk and challenges to decisions.

Ask	Notes
5.1 Who decides what form a report should take and how long it should be? What criteria are these decisions based on?	
5.2 Is there inconsistency among officers e.g. do different officers follow different rules (for the same types of cases)?	
5.3 Report templates are often tweaked as a result of a perceived gap in a particular case. They can become longer and longer over time and represent a burden to everyone. When were they last critically appraised?	
5.4 Are officers clear about what the reports are for? Who the audience is? And do reports have any subsequent use?	
5.5 Do you ask councillors for their views on committee reports – are they meeting the needs of the committee?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

(Help us build this section – tell us about your good practice and become a PAS exemplar Council – contact martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk)

6. The decision (delegated or committee)

Decisions are made by a Planning Authority. In practise almost all decisions are made by planning officers under delegated powers, leaving a few important, strategic or especially contentious applications for planning committee.

A good planning service…

Has a clearly understood and accepted delegated agreement that enables decisions to be taken at the right level.

Is clear about the purpose of every single report, and tailor the task according to its audience and risk profile.

Makes sure that the reasons for the decision are clear and well communicated.

Ask	Notes
6.1 How do you make sure that the triggers for call-in to committee are clear, well communicated and understood, and are regularly reviewed to reflect the needs and priorities of planning in your place?	
6.2 Good planning committees spend their time on important work. How do you make sure that the right work is getting in front of them?	
6.3 Have you considered alternative ways of getting a political steer on applications that is short of being called-in by committee?	
6.4 Are there any measures in place to help you understand and manage the work of the committee e.g. Count of applications going to committee Time taken for committee to make decisions (cf deferrals) Counts of overturns	
6.5 Are there any processes in place to get feedback e.g. What do committee members say about how committee is serviced by officers? Do your customers understand your decisions?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

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7. The decision notice (and legal agreement)

A good planning service…

Aims to issue a 'shovel-ready' permission so minimises later work e.g. pre-commencement conditions; recognises the cost to applicants and risks to development of these conditions.

Minimises the number of conditions to those that are essential.

Has already discussed with applicants the conditions required and has agreed Heads of Terms for legal agreements.

Minimises jargon to the legal minimum and makes sure that the decision is clear and well communicated

Keeps up to date with the requirements of the DMPO; many people's knowledge is out of date.

Ask	Notes
7.1 What actions are undertaken by the council that go beyond legal requirements? Do they add value?	
7.2 A decision notice can be attacked in various ways. Permissions can be JR'd, and refusals appealed. These represent risks to the council, but how often do they happen and is the 'bullet-proofing' proportionate?	
7.3 Performance – do you count the number of pre-start conditions you issue?	
7.4 Are there any processes in place to get feedback from customers about their experience and understanding e.g. do your customers understand your decisions?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

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8. Monitoring, quality

After the decision notice, good councils monitor and learn about their work.

A good planning service…

Takes the planning committees on post-decision site visits to see how schemes turned out and to assess particular issues that they'd considered or acted on.

Ensures its planning officers can continue to "own" the development and deal with any problems or questions as they arise.

Monitor what doesn't start on site, and works with land owners and developers to resolve any planning related reasons for delays.

Has a well-resourced enforcement service that can help with monitoring and then enforcement breaches, and works to an enforcement plan.

Ask	Notes
8.1 How does the service monitor and learn from what developments get built?	
8.2 How does the service monitor and learn from schemes that do not get built or have stalled?	
8.3 Lots of quality assessment is focussed on finding problems or mistakes. Does the council notice and celebrate success?	
8.4 Is there an agreed enforcement plan that sets out and explains how enforcement is targeted and prioritised?	
8.5 How well is enforcement resourced e.g. do resources reflect the priority?	
8.6 Do you monitor complaints and record feedback from customers (e.g. using surveys)?	

Useful tools, good practice and support:

- PAS, in conjunction with NAPE, has published an advice note: 'Towards a proactive enforcement service'. See also the notes and feedback from the PAS November 2015 Enforcement event series.
- Building for life is sometimes used or adapted by councils as an assessment of development quality

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