Simple ideas to improve your

Development Management service

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Introduction

Often the best ideas are the simplest both to implement and replicate. Case studies often inspire us with new ideas but many of them simply demonstrate how councils have been successful at doing some basic, common-sense things well.

Case studies can also take a while to read and pinpoint the most interesting part.

So we’ve taken a slightly different approach by putting together a collection of short, sharp and simple examples of how 5 well-performing councils are delivering the individual aspects of the development management service. For each part of the process we asked the councils: ‘*What is the key thing that makes this part of your DM service successful’*? We’ve packaged up their responses so that you can go straight to the part that interests you the most and read the rest when you have time.

Our hope is that, by highlighting a variety of simple ways to achieve good results, you’ll pick up a few new ideas, and also gain confidence by recognising as good practice many of the things you’re probably already doing.

We’ve structured this to complement our [DM Challenge toolkit](http://www.pas.gov.uk/dm-challenge-toolkit) so that the two tools can be used side by side.

PAS would like to thank: *Pauline Cooke, Planning & Business Improvement Manager, ENGIE / N E Lincs: Jane Custance, Head of Regeneration & Development, Watford; Melanie Hale, Development Control Manager, St Helens;* *Tracy Miller, Head of Planning and Regulation, Coventry; Gary Pullan, Development Control Manager, Rutland.*

[Leadership & Management 6](#_Toc437984231)

1. **Performance Management**

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Case officers review their own work. Review decisions that miss the national target times. Get officers to review their own cases asking - why did we miss the target? What could have been done differently? |
| Watford | Monitor performance regularly and aim high. Regularly monitor performance against targets and report as part of corporate KPIs. Set targets in excess of nationally prescribed ones i.e. higher percentage within 8 or 13 weeks. |
| St Helens | **Review work regularly with colleagues & prioritise.** Team leaders review applications on hand at the beginning of each week and discuss with members of the team. Priorities are identified early as a result and timescales and targets for committee are also discussed with applicants on major schemes at an early stage. |
| N E Lincs | Actively manage work allocation & promote a focus on the customer. Use weekly team meetings to discuss performance and re-allocate work in order to meet timescales. Promote a culture of delivering excellent customer service and enabling development rather than controlling.  |
| Coventry | Communicate with colleagues, solve problems, be bold. Holding regular team meetings attended by managers to discuss progress / issues with applications gets problems solved quickly and keeps things flowing. Don’t be afraid to make changes to team structure and reporting lines if they’re not working – means you can respond to work climate before recruiting to ensure the right level of officer is appointed. |

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[2. Financial management 8](#_Toc437984233)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Reallocate & re-invest any under-spent budget. Use opportunities presented by under-spend to invest in bringing in additional short term resources to do jobs that you don’t get time to do but can improve efficiency. We used it to clean up historic records and to enable more public self-service on the web. |
| Watford | Forecast for fee income. Monthly budget returns can be used to plot and forecast fee income i.e. when major applications are expected to come in. This allows you to understand where you will need to allocate resources. |
| St Helens | Forecast, monitor, & keep finance team onside. Predicting the major schemes to be submitted over the financial year will generally predict the overall fee income on the basis that most other development is stable. This helps you plan and resource properly. Weekly monitoring of fee income and spend against expectation keeps a tight rein on things as does a monthly meeting with finance to discuss budget. |
| N E Lincs | Make finance someone’s job. A role of ‘Business Improvement Manager’ can help by having someone focused on managing all of the financial arrangements which leaves the planners to do planning. This ensures that income is tracked regularly and ways to generate extra income can be identified. |
| Coventry | Forecast, analyse & profile. Report monthly on income and compare / analyse with previous year to assist with budget profiling going forward. |

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[3. Resource management 9](#_Toc437984234) (team set up)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Managers allowed to get on with managing. DM Manager does not have a caseload so can focus on management and helping colleagues solve more problems.  |
| Watford: | One team approach. One team deal will the full range of applications across the whole council area rather than separating things out geographically. This helps achieve a more even spread of work. |
| St Helens: | **Two team approach and create opportunities for less experienced staff.** Two area-focused teams with a team leader, senior planning officer, planning officer and planning assistant helps when you focus on the needs and differences across a large area. This set-up also allows us to give less experienced members of staff opportunities to learn in terms of the complexity of the work they do. |
| N E Lincs | Make performance everyone’s responsibility. A “one team” culture helps everyone recognise that every single member of the team has an equal responsibility for maintaining high performance and the service’s reputation. This encourages a good customer service ethic and consistency of approach.  |
| Coventry | **Give teams’ clear responsibilities and reporting lines.** Teams communicate better if they have clear reporting lines so that the service is aware of issues and is able to respond quickly.  |

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4. Resource management (how work is allocated)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Automate using your back office system . Automate the work allocation process as far as possible so it can be completed by the validation team and avoid using team leader resources that can cause delays. |
| Watford | Allocate work by specialism. Certain officers have been assigned to deal with major applications in the pipeline and major applications are directed to them. Other work is allocated on basis of previous case officer/ workload. |
| St Helens | **Team leaders keep things flowing.** Team leaders allocate work on the basis of case load, experience and involvement in pre-app discussions. Others will pick up elements of the process during absences such as annual leave.  |
| N E Lincs | Automate, communicate and empower. A caseload management system is used by validators to allocate cases and this is supplemented by ongoing communication across the team to understand each officer’s caseload. This empowers the administration and validation teams and helps keep them engaged in the service they help to deliver. |
| Coventry | **Ensure continuity whenever possible & group geographically for site visits.** Principal Officers allocate work with a focus on case officer continuity, caseloads and commitments (e.g. annual leave), and grouping applications geographically to make site visits more efficient. |

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[5. Use of IT 10](#_Toc437984235)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Keep (IT) under review It is possible to achieve good performance despite poor IT and software. Software suppliers are kept under review and asked to find the software that meets our needs and delivers our objectives like going paper-light and electronic consultation. |
| Watford | Review processes & systems together. Reviewing systems and processes together allows you to make sure that the IT supports the process. If moving to a new arrangement / new supplier you have a great opportunity to review and achieve as much automation as possible without affecting customer service. |
| St Helens: | **IT serves us, not the other way around.** IT is used to deliver the requirements of the service i.e. IT fits around a process that works rather than the process fitting around the IT system. This is an ongoing discussion every council should have with its IT supplier.  |
| N E Lincs | In-house is best. A system externally hosted but administered in-house is more responsive – it allows the flexibility to constantly and quickly improve processes. IT systems should allow as much work as possible to be done electronically, offer excellent public access for our customers and help with monitoring performance.  |
| Coventry | Getting the best out of what you’ve got. Many services are waiting for new systems to help improve and streamline the service. In the meantime make the best of what you have; make sure you are talking to your IT supplier to make sure you are using all of the functionality that is available to you.  |

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**6**[**. Political leadership**](#_Toc437984236)**/relationships**

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Change, improvement and transformation needs councillor support. Good relationships with councillors are absolutely critical to achieving service transformation. Councillor support makes implementing new ideas and change less difficult, helps with communication to customers, and make it easier to address inevitable issues and risks when trying new approaches.  |
| Watford | Good engagement with Chair of DM and Portfolio Holder. Having good lines of communication with the Chair of DM Committee and the Portfolio-holder ensures that the service is supported politically at the most senior level.  |
| St Helens | **Involve councillors in pre application meetings, and brief/train/review outcomes with them regularly.** Councillors should be encouraged to take part in appropriate pre-application meetings with developers (subject to a protocol). Briefings for the committee Chair and Portfolio Holder particularly around Planning Committee time are useful ways of getting the best out of the process. Setting a training programme for the municipal year in discussion with the Chair helps ensures the committee is fit for purpose, and include a review of completed developments. |
| N E Lincs | Train all councillors including Parishes. Officers regularly train members and visit Parish Councils to answer any questions that may arise. This helps foster excellent relationships between the councillors and the regeneration partner Engie so that all are working towards the same outcomes. |
| Coventry | **No deferrals.** Maintaining a ‘No.1 position’ ethos means avoiding deferrals. Carry out site visits early with members where necessary and respond to members requests in a timely manner to avoid last minute hitches. Quarterly training seminars are held where improvements to the reporting and committee process can be discussed. |

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[The DM process 14](#_Toc437984238)

[1. Pre-application. 15](#_Toc437984239)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Be positive planners. Be positive when responding to customers. Focus on what will bring a scheme forward . Help bring about the changes needed to developments to make applications acceptable and more straightforward. |
| Watford | Offer a range of services. Give customers as many options as you are able to resource and that are helpful e.g. drop-in duty officer service; paid for pre-app service; planning performance agreements. |
| St Helens | Development Team Approach. Major and complex projects are dealt with through a Development Team Approach (DTA). Planning officers lead on giving advice, but the process (arranging meetings, feedback etc.) is dealt with by a consultant (based in the office). This is generally where most of the work/discussion takes place and is the basis of good performance. |
| N E Lincs | Performance managed pre-app. This is a valuable part of the planning process and should be performance managed in a similar way to the formal process which helps to maintain a high level of performance across the whole process. |
| Coventry | Know your customers, provide value. Recognise the need and importance of pre-app but also recognise that you should ‘cut your cloth’ accordingly and only provide and charge for pre-app advice if you can guarantee a good service.   |

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[2. Receipt / validation. 17](#_Toc437984240)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Single point of contact. Only one person touches the application at validation stage to ensure consistency and avoid delays. |
| Watford | Validation team. Dealt with by in house validation team that are experienced and offer a consistent approach. |
| St Helens | **Flexible approach, set targets, use national list.** Technical support team validate most applications but majors are done by case officers. Expect a 3 day validation target for 95% of applications submitted and monitor performance monthly. Don’t use a local validation checklist – use national checklist for most applications, specific requirements for majors/complex proposals are discussed and agreed pre-application through a Development Team Approach. |
| N E Lincs | Promote the Portal / accredit agents / invalidation triage. Approximately 60% of applications come through the Portal, and are actively encouraged. This reduces administration time entering information and scanning documents into a database. Validators liaise with officers before invalidating applications to reduce unnecessary invalidation. An agent accreditation scheme fast-tracks applications through the validation process. |
| Coventry | Officers validate. Cases are receipted by admin team and validated by officers which enables early identification of any issues, ensures consistency and avoids delays.  |

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[3. Consultation & allocation. 19](#_Toc437984241)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Clear guidance for the validation team. A consultation guide and a publicity guide helps the validation team understand who to consult and what publicity is needed. This helps the team understand what are common requirements and where they can be flexible.  |
| Watford | Consultations sent out by technical admin team.  All consultations and neighbour letters are dealt with by the technical administration team allowing a consistent approach and allows officers to focus on managing the responses and negotiating.  |
| St Helens | **Understand the issues and then decide the consultation approach**. Taking time to properly understand the issues presented by applications early makes sure that the right consultees are approached and can save time later in the process.  |
| N E Lincs | Validation team trained and trusted. The validation team are trained to know who needs consulting so all consultations go out before the officer receives the application.  |
| Coventry | Consultations are sent out by the administration team, automation is the future. Administration team carries out all consultations and sends neighbour letters. Aim to make as much of the consultation process as possible automated in IT system – this will make things more streamlined and consistent service with less likelihood of missing key consultations. |

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[**4. Considering (including visiting, negotiating, thinking) 21**](#_Toc437984242)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | The first fortnight is crucial. Decide early. Officers carry out a desk top review on receipt and a detailed review following an early site visit so they normally know the outcome within the first 2 weeks. Revisions required are initiated within the first 2 weeks. |
| Watford: | Team approach. Case officers will use the regular team meetings to discuss difficult cases and get advice on helping make schemes acceptable when problems occur or revisions are required to the application. |
| St Helens: | **Negotiate early and avoid conditions.** Issues are identified at the earliest opportunity and negotiations entered into (agents that submit applications regularly appreciate this type of feedback). Site visits are also carried out as early as possible with the aim of resolving as many issues as possible without resorting to conditions. |
| N E Lincs | Talk, don’t email. There is a proactive mentality within the planning team and constant discussions between officers take place to ensure consistency and that the right approach is taken. During negotiations, face to face meetings and phone communication is encouraged rather than relying solely on email communication. |
| Coventry | Seek to approve and create a working environment that helps officers make good decisions. Officers negotiate to achieve an acceptable scheme where possible, but be straight with applicant if resolution of issues unlikely.  Agile working enables officers to work away from the office giving them thinking time away from interruptions. |

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[5. Writing the report 23](#_Toc437984243)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | No objections; no problems; no report. If there are no objections and the matter is delegated no report is needed. |
| Watford  | Monitor for success. Monitor and keep the report writing process under review. Look for opportunities to achieve more consistency and to streamline by using technology e.g. to automate as much of the production as possible and use more standard paragraphs especially on common application types.  |
| St Helens | Write reports as soon as possible and be clear where there are objections. Reports are written at the earliest opportunity (particularly with straightforward applications) – this is good customer service and keeps things flowing. A set layout is used for delegated and committee reports. It is important that reports set out and discuss the issues, particularly where the decision is delegated and there are objections. |
| N E Lincs | Be proportionate. Reports should cover all issues but must also be proportionate to the scheme. Officers communicate with each other to ensure that consistency in report methodology and conclusions, but are not stifled in terms of their personal writing styles so that there is some ownership over the reports. |
| Coventry | Keep reports short, use templates and automate. Agile working assists with report writing, short, concise delegated reports written by officers signed by principals.  Committee reports are more detailed but are streamlined as much as possible using standard templates.  |

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[6. The decision (delegated or committee) 24](#_Toc437984244)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Keep committee focused. Work as closely as possible with the Portfolio Holder to ensure the scheme of delegation is comprehensive and that committee only deal with matters that need a committee decision. |
| Watford | Delegation is the default. Maintain a high level of delegation. Make sure that the delegation scheme is well understood and communicated and only the appropriate applications go to Committee. |
| St Helens | Keep committee focused and communicate. Only the most controversial and important applications go before Committee. Officers are encouraged to discuss where it is finely balanced. |
| N E Lincs | Go to committee as last resort!. High levels of delegated applications is achieved by working with all stakeholders to address any concerns and not just refusing or sending to committee once a problem arises or objections are received. Even if that is eventually where the decisions end up, it will never be from our lack of trying to negotiate and get issues resolved first and quickly.  |
| Coventry | **Make members aware of target dates.** High level of delegation in constitution; 4 weekly daytime committee meetings – frequency is an aid to meeting targets.  Officers and Members aware of target dates and all work together to avoid applications going out of time. |

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[7. The decision notice (and legal agreement) 25](#_Toc437984245)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland | Avoid conditions wherever possible. Stop using conditions that are not essential and stop using conditions requiring further details that will cause more work and delay going forward. |
| Watford | Use templates and automate. Decision notices are sent out electronically and case officers have templates for unilateral undertakings (which is a paid-for service by applicant) so no need to involve legal in majority of cases. |
| St Helens | Issue ASAP and minimise conditions. Issue decision notices at the earliest opportunity. Minimise pre-commencement conditions through negotiation (and thus minimise additional submissions later on) and only have a s106 where issues cannot be dealt with by conditions.  |
| N E Lincs | Clear and automated process, limit conditions and talk to legal early. Automate as much of the process as possible and address issues throughout (not at the end) the application process to minimise the use of conditions. Instruct legal as early as possible to manage delays and liaise with all stakeholders to manage expectations. |
| Coventry | Automate, clearly set out conditions and reasons, keep under review. Decision notices created, checked and sent out electronically by Principal Officers. Keep formats under review to make them easier to understand with clearer conditions and reasons.  |

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[**8. Monitoring, quality  26**](#_Toc437984246)

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| Council: | Key to success |
| Rutland  | **Discuss Design.** Team meetings called by case officers are a good way to review applications in detail ideally at pre app stage to ensure that all issues are addressed and that the quality of the proposal has been improved. |
| Watford | **Monitoring cost, income and quality.** Having a CIL/s.106 officer helps make sure that monitoring is efficient. Building for Life assessments are used and the results included in annual monitoring report. Design panel reviews are also carried out where possible. |
| St Helens: | Focus on the important. Monitoring takes resources so it is important to focus on what is important e.g. the applications and developments that are the most sensitive/controversial. |
| N E Lincs | **Promote, monitor and share**. Actively monitoring, promoting and reporting (to members) the value that the service has added to schemes provides a useful focus and learning for staff and members. |
| Coventry | **Review appeals.** Regularly reviewing of appeal decisions and sharing the findings across the team and with Planning Committee is an effective learning tool. A summary report also goes to committee quarterly. |

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