

EMPOWERING CASE OFFICERS: Design Appraisal and Development Tracker

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RELATED RESOURCES	PN009_D_Urban Design Comment Tracker_V1 PN001_Planning Ahead PN001_Pre-Application Checklist PN009_Empowering Case Officers_V1 PN009_A_Majors Meeting Tracker_V1 PN009_B_Urban-Design-Tracker_V1
ABOUT	<p>This resource was produced as part of the Public Practice Research and Development programme and should be read alongside the related resources. Guidance for using the resource can be found below and within the worksheets.</p> <p>This guide has been prepared to accompany the Urban Design Comment Tracker (PN009_D_Urban Design Comment Tracker_V1), a tool developed to assist in provision of design feedback during planning pre-application meetings.</p> <p>Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources</p> <p>Public Practice welcomes feedback to help update current resources and inform future research. If you are interested in contributing to our research please contact us at info@publicpractice.org.uk.</p>

DESIGN APPRAISAL AND DEVELOPMENT TRACKER

This resource has been developed in response to the work Authorities are undertaking to increase design skill capacity within their planning departments and to the challenges faced by officers in communicating urban design advice in clear and measurable terms which benefit both the applicant and the planning authority.

This work builds on the research of Public Practice alumni Rachel Hearn (Cohort 1) and Amanda Rashid (Cohort 2).

Rachel Hearn's practice note, *Planning Ahead: What are the best ways to deliver design-led pre-applications?* explores ways of improving quality by building a design-led approach into the pre-application process and introduces a checklist for local authorities to make the pre-application process more accessible.

Amanda Rashid's practice note, *Empowering Case Officers: How can officers improve design quality through the pre-app process?* addresses limited in-house design skills, team structure and design management, and introduces and tests a design development tracker. This research is focused primarily on the London Borough of Hounslow, which suggests that local context is fundamental to design appraisal; a notion echoed in the 'Planning for the Future' White Paper.

The focus on the import of high-quality design in planning decisions in the White Paper includes a strategy for design quality control, suggesting the development of local, contextual design guides and codes against which development proposals will be assessed. This would necessitate the effective application of skills, resources and tools in design quality control at a local level. This resource aims to contribute towards achieving this goal.

OBJECTIVES

The critical objectives and functions of this resource are:

- To present a single, intuitive tool for planning application design appraisal, pre-application design development tracking, and statement of process for applicants;
- To be nationally applicable, responding to national design guidance, but customisable to local context, allowing Authorities to input content to align with local priorities and/or policy e.g. housing targets, net zero carbon, or conservation areas, as well as site specifics e.g. infrastructure and/or social issues;
- To address a holistic group of key design headings which address all attributes of well-designed places and buildings, aligned with National Design Guide recommendations;
- To address climate response holistically throughout design appraisal;
- To offer capacity for single, two or three-stage review processes, accounting for all scales of development and a variety of application types;
- To guide the applicant on agenda, content and appropriate forms of presentation for design-focused pre-application meetings;
- To combine discursive comment and recommendations with a customisable scoring system, aiming to quantify qualitative discussion into measurable outputs, and;

- To offer capacity for data analysis which may inform the development of local design guidance and/or in-house design management by identifying which design attributes are addressed successfully and which are not in any given authority area.

THE TOOL

The resource, titled 'Urban Design Comment Tracker', has been developed as a Google Sheets file. Our Public Practice research output is a downloadable Excel file to be universally accessible and comes with user guides for both applicants and officers.

It addresses the key design headings of:

- Context and Vision;
- Site Strategy and Masterplan / Site Layout;
- Public Realm and Landscape;
- Built Form, Scale and Massing;
- Orientation, Aspect and Internal Layout, and;
- Appearance and Materiality.

Each heading is given its own 'Climate Response' section to ensure that this issue is addressed holistically.

The resource includes the option of a single, two or three-stage appraisal process. This enables both the applicant and the officer to consider design process at pre-application stage, ensuring that fundamental design attributes are considered at the appropriate time and that the appropriate level of detail is presented for appraisal. The three identified stages, described in more detail within the resource, are:

1. Contextual Analysis, Vision, Site Strategy, Conceptual Design Options;
2. Preferred Design Concept
3. Detailed Design.

The scoring system affords a customisable percentage weighting to each of the six design headings, and a fixed percentage weighting to 'Climate Response'. The weighting of each design heading will change according to site context and/or development brief e.g. Public Realm and Landscape may be more heavily weighted for a neighbourhood masterplan proposal than for a small infill urban site. Conversely, we propose that each 'Climate Response' section is given the fixed percentage weighting of 5%, giving 'Climate Response' 30% of any final score.

Each individual comment is marked between 0 (very poor) and 4 (excellent), and a recommendation is given for improvement if required. These marks combine to give a percentage score under each heading, which then accumulate to reach a final percentage score for the proposed development. It is then up to the LPA to set their own threshold for what makes good design e.g. a 70% or 80% score.

The intention of the scoring system is not to remove interpretive discussion, or capacity for innovation in design, but to offer the LPA clear and measurable terms against which to make design-based decisions. It also ensures that personal preferences and/or interests of individual assessors are balanced, in the pursuit of fairness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We sincerely hope that this resource meets our objectives and proves valuable to LPAs as focus on design quality intensifies. The resource is now available for use by Local Authorities as an Excel file, and for testing and development by the Planning Working Group members of the fourth cohort of Public Practice via Google Sheets.