



# Development Management Review: Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

A PAS DM review of performance management, workload management, team management and officer reports

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# 1. Introduction

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1.1 This Development Management Review is being carried out as part of a package of support provided by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (TMBC). It is a self-contained review into the processes followed by TMBC in delivering its development management function. However, it also forms part of a wider Planning Services Peer Challenge that will be carried out in September 2025. As such it should not be read in isolation, but as an evidence-based report that forms part of the wider peer challenge report. The peer challenge will look at the whole of the Planning Service and look at the broader themes around: vision and leadership; performance and management; community engagement; partnership engagement; and achieving outcomes.

1.2 The overall performance of TMBC's development management service is good when measured against the [Performance Standards](#) set by Government. However, the council would like PAS to look in more detail into the performance of its development management service prior to the wider peer challenge.

1.3 The council in particular would like PAS to consider wider performance issues over and above the performance measured by Government. It would also like PAS to consider whether the staff structure is fit for purpose in relation to workloads, whether the IT set up is fit for purpose for TMBC's requirements and whether enough attention has been given to providing staff with sufficient guidance and management support.

# 2. The review

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2.1 This review of TMBC's Development Management service seeks to identify opportunities for improvement to performance, specifically aiming to highlight ways to enhance decision making efficiency and speed, whilst limiting the risk of challenge. This review was undertaken by Peter Ford (Principal Consultant) and Zain Muhammad (Consultant) from PAS. PAS is part of the Local Government Association (LGA) and provides high quality help, advice, support and training on planning and service delivery to Local Planning Authorities in England.

2.2 The review was based on the [PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit](#). The toolkit aims to provide a 'health check' for Local Planning Authorities and acts as a straightforward way to develop an action plan for improvements to development management. The purpose of this review is not to cover every aspect of the development management service, but to focus on the areas that have been highlighted by TMBC as being of particular concern in relation to performance. TMBC was asked to identify the most relevant of the 15 sections covered in the PAS Development Management Challenge Toolkit. The specific sections selected by TMBC to focus on were:

- Performance Management
- Workload Management
- Team Management
- Officer Reports

2.3 The on-site work was supplemented by a detailed review of TMBC's development management data and guidance. This was based on information passed to the PAS team to review and supplemented by data collected nationally through the [MHCLG Live Tables Dashboard](#). TMBC also provided the PAS team with examples of guidance notes, officer reports and management communications. TMBC has also recently been through a detailed process mapping exercise to plot the processes followed for each stage in the planning applications decision-making process. This provided valuable context for the PAS team in understanding how the processes followed by TMBC compared to other councils in England.

2.4 On the 1st July 2025, the PAS team worked through the relevant sections of the toolkit with various officers involved in the development management process. The recommendations in this report are based on insights shared by officers during these sessions. All those interviewed were friendly, welcoming, and fully engaged in the process. Their honest opinions and feedback are greatly appreciated. Discussions with officers were open and wide ranging, covering several questions under the topics listed, and the report is structured accordingly.

2.5 A development management review carried out by PAS would normally include discussions with representatives of the local community and applicants to ensure that the customer perspective is considered as part of any recommendations to the council. However, as a wider peer challenge will be undertaken in September 2025 it was agreed that it was not appropriate at this stage.

2.6 The recommendations are set out across short, medium, and long-term priorities. TMBC's immediate focus is on better use of performance tools, exploring ways to improve staff retention and overall service delivery in DM. Work is already underway, including the finalisation of the local validation list, while an internal checklist remains under review. In the longer term, a comprehensive review of the current Agile system is underway with a proposed move back to using the Uniform system.

2.7 Additional actions are proposed to improve performance by increasing work process efficiencies and focusing on income generation to support the resourcing of the improvement programme. As such, the recommendations in this report have been prioritised to suggest when and how they should be addressed, based on:

- **Short term** - "quick win" recommendations that could be implemented immediately without taking valuable capacity away from the priority of dealing with the current workload of planning applications.
- **Medium term** - recommendations that could be implemented over the next four to six months, changes that may take some time and capacity from the team to introduce but which will result in a more efficient service very quickly.
- **Longer term** - recommendations beyond the next six-month period, that may take more time as well as some political will to introduce but will create a much more resilient service and help avoid potential maladministration risks. This will further improve performance and the welfare of the staff involved in the service, subsequently improving staff retention and recruitment. Preparation could start now to ensure these changes are achievable within 12 months.

## 3. Context to the review

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3.1 TMBC has provided PAS with two team structures under the development management service, one for Planning officers and enforcement and the other for the technical team. Under the planning officers and enforcement structure, there are in total 21 (FTEs), 1 (0.6FTE) and 1 (0.8FTE) based on the assumption a full-time contract is 37hrs per working week. This amounts to 24 members of staff under this team structure. Under the technical team structure, there are 10 (FTEs) with 4 (FTEs) having particular responsibility for the validation of new applications. In total the development management service at TMBC currently has 34 staff in total with one post vacant. The Development Management Manager will shortly be leaving TMBC and the PAS team understands that a replacement has been appointed and due to start in October 2025.

3.2 The current software system being used by TMBC is Agile. Power BI features were highlighted to be of use to support with performance management, however the PAS team understands that this has yet to be fully implemented. It was noted that the service previously used Uniform and there was considerable debate amongst staff about the merits of both software systems. The PAS team was advised that Uniform will be re-introduced as the council's development management software by the end of 2025.

3.3 As of February 2025, following the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework in December 2024, TMBC is progressing work on its local plan. On the 12th February 2025, a local plan update and local development scheme were discussed at the council's Housing and Planning Scrutiny Select Committee. A meeting of the council's Cabinet was held on the 4th March 2025 where a new local development scheme was agreed. The council has highlighted they will be undergoing Regulation 18: Second stage of consultation beginning in October 2025. With adoption of the local plan proposed by quarter 3 of 2027/28.

3.4 TMBC's performance for the year 2024/25 against the Government's performance standards was very good. 96% of Majors (23/24) were determined in time (against a minimum Government target of 60%), 79% of Minors (139/176) were determined in time and 82% of Other applications (518/630) were determined in time (the minimum Government target for all non-Majors is 70%). With regard to quality of decision-making 7.5% of Major decisions within the current assessment period (April 2023 to March 2025) have been overturned at appeal (3 in total) with three quarters of performance data still to be assessed. As the maximum threshold set by Government is 10%, TMBC will need to keep a close eye on appeal decisions as it is close to reaching the 10% threshold. The PAS team understands that performance is now being monitored to ensure that TMBC has a better understanding of up-to-date performance information.

3.5 With regard to enforcement cases TMBC opened 269 enforcement cases in 2024/25 and closed 326, indicating a healthy position with regards to keeping on top of enforcement enquiries.

3.6 Based on performance data from April 2024 to March 2025, shared with PAS, the TMBC Planning Service is exceeding its own performance targets for both speed of determining major and minor applications, and surpasses the target for 'Other' applications by 2%. While performance is good overall, there is a notable reliance on agreeing extensions of time (EoTs) and, in particular, a high reliance on EoTs for Other category applications even though there have been indications from Government that EoTs may, in the future, not be permitted for very

these types of applications.

**3.7** TMBC has a relatively high number of applications that are currently out of time at 337 (as of end of March 2025). The PAS team was not provided with information on the number of applications that have exceeded the Planning Guarantee deadlines, but did note that many applications had been in the decision-making system for a considerable amount of time; one householder application took 406 days to determine against a target of 56 days.

**3.8** A good indicator on how a council is managing its caseload of applications is to look at the number of applications on hand at the beginning of a quarter against decisions made at the end of the quarter. A well performing council should be in parity i.e. registering as close to a ratio score of 1 as possible. At the end of March 2025 the national average was 1.49 and at TMBC it was 1.69 i.e. above the national average. However, TMBC's performance has been very erratic over recent quarters after a very stable and health position before 2022. TMBC is aware of these challenges and efforts are ongoing to stabilise resources and improve resilience across the team.

**3.9** The PAS team was provided with performance figures for individual officers and, in general, no officers appeared to have unachievable caseloads. However, individual performance on speed of determination was very variable. Perhaps the most concerning from the PAS team was a high number of applications that were being determined only a few days after the statutory determination periods. This is an indicator of a council not monitoring effectively their performance.

**3.10** The council's corporate priorities, set out in the [Corporate Strategy](#), are relevant to this development management review and include operating as an efficient and effective organisation. Key performance indicators (KPIs) also cover government targets for major and minor planning applications, as well as customer service standards. According to the 2024/25 [End of Year Report](#):

- TMBC staff numbers (FTE) met or exceeded targets for the year.
- Vacant posts fell short of the target, with a gradual rise from Q1 to Q4, though it is noted that this was due to newly created roles which will require time to fill.
- Government targets for major, minor and other applications were met or exceeded.
- Email response targets (within 24 hours) were achieved, though handled rate and webchat response times were just below target.
- Targets for formal complaints were met or exceeded, though no targets were set for planning appeals or enforcement cases.

**3.11** There are clear concerns regarding the current Agile system, particularly the need to make better use of Power BI to track officer performance and improve internal processes. The process maps shared with the PAS team by TMBC are detailed and provide step-by-step guidance across a wide range of application types and development management tasks. A further process map is planned for Section 106 procedures. Whilst these process maps are very helpful they are extremely detailed and, in some cases, very complex. For example, the process mapping for validation is described in enormous detail for a process that is, fundamentally quite straightforward and is very similar to the majority of other councils. By mapping the processes to such a detailed extent, the PAS team does question whether it will create unnecessary work in updating the mapping when, inevitably, day-to-day refinements will be needed to fine-tune the processes and whether, in reality, all staff are following the procedures to the level outlined in the process mapping work.

# Recommendations

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## Over the short term (i.e immediate)

**R1** Review the current forms of communication within the development management teams to understand why staff are not responding effectively to management directions and guidance. In particular consider the way that the Planning Business Manager can be used to improve the way that the planning officers and technical team can work more effectively in a team approach.

**R2** Undertake awareness training in the use of Power BI so that all staff can appreciate its use as a project management tool and to enable all managers to use it to monitor performance within the development management teams.

**R3** Review the current guidance provided to staff on their day-to-day work in development management and internal communication channels to inform staff of procedural matters. Included in this should be a consistent approach between managers on how communication is carried out across all teams. This should involve all staff to ensure it meets the needs of everyone involved in development management work.

**R4** Introduce a process for monitoring the time taken to validate applications so that there is a better understanding of how validation is impacting on performance management and procedural efficiencies.

## Over the medium term (i.e within 4-6 months)

**R5** Ensure that the action plan is delivered that has involved a skills audit of all staff across the two teams to identify specialist expertise, service-relevant skills, knowledge gaps, and individual development goals. The implementation of the action plan should include all members of the service and serve as an ongoing reference point. It also presents a valuable opportunity to support future resource planning, as this work will facilitate improvements to internal communications and workload balance.

**R6** Review the current approach to providing pre-application advice and Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) to create a more customer-focused service. This should be linked to a consistent approach to dealing with amendments to live planning applications. The review should use [PAS Guidance on Pre-Applications and PPAs](#).

**R7** Consider with neighbouring Planning Authorities the merits of holding joint agents' forum meetings, where there are issues of common interest such as approaches to pre-application discussions and invalid submissions. This is also an opportunity for the service to work with local agents to limit the use of EoTs.

**R8** Keep the revised officer scheme of delegation under review to monitor how effective it is in allowing pressure to be taken off managers to sign-off all applications. Where appropriate this should be accompanied with further training for affected staff to ensure it is easing workload pressures and improving the quality of service to customers.

**R9** Introduce a learning through experience process whereby the teams can learn from customer feedback, both positive and negative, so that the council can continuously learn from feedback received and improve the service it provides to customers accordingly.

**R10** Prioritise the migration of the changes in the software systems from Agile to Uniform to allow a more stable and consistent approach to workload management and to maximise the benefits of the use of Power BI

## Over the long term (i.e 6-12 months)

**R11** Review officer report templates so staff can take a more proportionate amount of time to prepare officer reports. This should include streamlined reports for more straight forward decisions using the [PAS Best Practice in Officer Report Writing](#) for guidance.

## 4. Performance management

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4.1 TMBC recognises the importance of performance management, and the PAS team observed evidence of regular reporting. Statistics on appeals continue to be shared with committees. At the time of the review, there was a reasonably high backlog of applications undetermined, but the volume of applications being received was manageable based on the staff numbers. In addition, TMBC appears to have a high number of Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) ongoing for a relatively small two-tier district council with 20 PPAs quoted (no details received). In addition, a persistent theme raised by staff was the inefficiency of the Agile software system since its introduction in 2023 in supporting the development management service in monitoring performance.

4.2 Power BI has been introduced and is viewed positively by some in leadership roles, yet feedback remains mixed. Most staff at the workshops appeared unaware of the value of Power BI in managing performance. While most were aware of the existence of the system, some were unclear about its purpose or how it is being applied. However, the Development Management Manager advised the PAS team that monthly performance data is sent to staff and staff have access to live data through Power BI. It would appear that there is a significant communication issue within the teams and the PAS team heard about staff unnecessarily using their own processes to monitor their performance. This is creating additional, unnecessary, duplication and inefficient use of staff time.

4.3 TMBC currently has a relatively high number of applications that are out of time, with the total standing at 337 at end of March 2025. Although the PAS team was not provided with data on how many applications have exceeded the Planning Guarantee deadlines, it was evident that several had been in the system for extended periods. The continued reliance on EoTs has been attributed to delays from statutory and other internal consultees. Several staff members also expressed concern about delays in receiving information from applicants that is causing delays in the validation of applications. The PAS team was informed that there is no monitoring carried out on days to validate applications and so these delays were based on anecdotal evidence provided by members of staff. It was unclear to the PAS team why this monitoring was not taking place as it is a task that would routinely be carried out by a council's administration / technical support team.

4.4 The service does not currently operate an agents' forum, and reporting on appeal decisions is inconsistent. While appeal outcomes are shared with both members and officers, there is limited structured engagement around these decisions. There is limited engagement with agents regarding performance matters, and the absence of an agents' forum has been noted as a missed opportunity by members of the teams. Establishing such a forum could support better communication and help improve the quality of submissions.

4.5 It was noted that the service does operate a formal pre-application service, however, the PAS team was told by staff that it is not being prioritised due to staff sickness and vacant posts. During one of the discussions a member of staff even stated that the technical team is advising applicants not to make a pre-application submission because of the low priority it is being given. This approach was challenged by the Development Management Manager who explained that pre-applications are now being given priority. The PAS team was also told that pre-applications cannot be registered on the Agile system. PAS strongly supports the prioritisation of pre-applications as a way of positively engaging applications to overcome issues prior to the formal application process and to both de-risk and speed up the decision-making process. The PAS team was also very concerned at the mixed messages that appear to be being sent to applicants about the priority given to the pre-application service. More guidance can be found on the PAS website on the benefits of pre-application engagement.

4.6 The self-serve process on the council's website redirects applicants to the Planning Portal, which is considered best practice, but this also means enquiries are not formally logged or tracked. The PAS team discussed the merits of allowing amendments to planning applications during the determination period and there appears to be no consistent process followed by officers in allowing amendments even though this is key to managing performance. The council's website outlines clearly its policy on amendments under the heading [view and comment on planning applications](#). However, TMBC appears to contradict itself on the website by also stating ["we operate a no amendments policy on applications that do not have a Planning Performance Agreement in place"](#). This indicates a significant communication issue within the teams whereby staff appear to be unsure of what approach to take on matters of procedure. Many councils limit the number of times an applicant can amend an application and instead focus resources on providing a customer-focused pre-application service. However, in TMBC's case this would be difficult to implement if, as some staff have indicated, the pre-application service is not being prioritised.



## 5. Workload management

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**5.1** The PAS team was told that it is difficult to consistently schedule one-to-one meetings, which limits opportunities for staff to monitor workloads in collaboration with managers. We were also told that the use of one-to-ones across the service is inconsistent, reducing the effectiveness of one-to-ones as a tool for performance support and staff development. However, this was challenged by the Development Management Manager who understands from team managers that one-to-one meetings are being held at least every fortnight. Persistent challenges with staff retention and periodic reliance on agency workers also impact the stability of workloads within the service. Even short-term absences, such as sick leave, can have a noticeable effect on capacity. The PAS team was also advised that when experienced team members leave, they are often replaced by temporary or agency staff, which can lead to a loss of continuity and affect overall service quality.

**5.2** The service currently operates with very rigid job roles, which limits flexibility in managing workloads across the Planning teams. For example, technical support staff are given limited opportunities to progress into Planning Officer roles and there is limited overlap or collaboration between the policy and development management functions. However, we were told of some notable exceptions where staff have been able to progress careers and undertake relevant training. The limitations and inconsistency in career progression was a recurring theme during the review and was identified as a key factor affecting staff morale and retention. Concerns were raised that former staff had moved to neighbouring authorities in search of more specialised roles and clearer progression pathways. Additionally, the PAS team was told that there is little co-ordination between the policy and development management teams to enable effective management of workloads between teams; for example, through policy staff helping with planning applications and development management staff helping with policy work.

**5.3** The role of the Planning Business Manager appears to be under-utilised within the service. In other local authorities, this role is central to managing workloads and facilitating internal communication. For example, one member of the technical support staff told the PAS team that they were unaware that pre-application fees had increased, despite the member of staff being managed by the Planning Business Manager. Concerns were also raised about the communication of fees and annual increases more generally, with staff appearing to be unaware of changes, even though we saw clear evidence from emails that the new fees information had been communicated to staff through emails. Again, this is a task that the PAS team would expect to be carried out by the Planning Business Manager.

**5.4** The Agile system appears not being used effectively to monitor and manage workloads in a meaningful way even though it has the ability to do so. The PAS team was told that many of these monitoring inefficiencies are due to the planned transition back to the Uniform software system. As a result, officers have adopted their own tools, such as Excel spreadsheets to duplicate processes and maintain oversight of their caseloads. There also appears to be bottlenecks being created in the signing off process for issuing decisions with a lack of co-ordination between case officers and managers, leading to applications slipping over time or getting very late management input. Clearly, the uncertainty of a preferred software system and delays in fully utilising the benefits of Agile and Uniform are creating additional work for staff and impacting on staff morale.

## 6. Team management

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**6.1** A very positive management tool used within the development management service is the use of a strategic development panel to enable senior managers to be forewarned of development proposals and to ensure that there is a strategic steer for case officers on the approach to be taken in the consideration of such applications. It was unclear from the discussions how well this panel was being used and how this is being communicated to case officers.

**6.2** Development Management service meetings are held approximately every 6–8 weeks, focusing on legislation, policy and procedure updates. The Development Management Manager explained that these are compulsory for staff to attend even though some staff were less clear about how useful they found the meetings. Regular team meetings (at least monthly) are also identified as a key objective for team managers. However, staff told the PAS team that these are typically brief, lack clear communication, and are not supported by a consistent agenda. The PAS team saw evidence of regular communication from management both through meetings and email communication, however, it is not always effective. This has contributed to mixed levels of engagement and clarity across the teams. It was



also noted that team leaders have differing management styles, with staff tending to approach different managers depending on the issue. This suggests a lack of consistency in leadership and highlights the need for greater clarity around roles, responsibilities, and organisational boundaries.

**6.3** At the time of the review, a considerable amount of guidance was available, however it was not centralised and instead spread across various notes and email communications. This makes it difficult for staff to access consistent information when needed. The PAS team understands that this information has now been centralised in a shared folder for staff to access. Many councils have created a manual for all aspects of the development management function that will be held as a single document or shared folder of information. This would consist of both "how to do it" procedural matters as well as setting out a clear direction on the cultural approach that the council will take on all aspects of delivering a development management service. The PAS team will be able to point TMBC to best practice from other councils.

**6.4** Appraisals were reported as taking place, but some staff questioned the priority given to appraisals to support staff development and performance management. Appraisals can be a very effective way to understand the untapped skills and ambitions of staff and can be used to both retain and motivate staff to progress their careers within a council.

**6.5** The PAS team was told that new staff often face significant backlogs when joining the service, which can affect their ability to settle in and contribute effectively. This situation is perhaps inevitable when staff leave and therefore caseloads build up. However, some of the most successful planning teams will have a strict policy of not overloading new members of staff. The PAS team heard that this has been the case at TMBC for recent appointments to support staff and help with retention. This is very encouraging to hear and we suggest that this approach is continued to help with the retention and motivation of staff, whilst also addressing operational needs. This also links to the reference to consistent communication and guidance. It is really important, particularly for new members of staff, that they are not introduced to bad habits by a lack of understanding on the 'right' way of carrying out their development management responsibilities.

**6.6** The PAS team was advised that the development management service undertakes complaint handling effectively and there is not a significant issue with complaints being upheld. However, there appeared to be limited feedback to officers unless a complaint was upheld. The best learning councils will include a learning through experience feedback process whereby officers can continuously learn from customer feedback, both positive and negative. In this way managers can ensure that processes and culture can be reviewed when there is negative feedback, but equally staff can be praised and recognised when positive comments are received.

## 7. Officer reports

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**7.1** TMBC has a good set of officer report templates that are used for different types of applications and includes a simple, tick box template for the simplest applications. However, the PAS team was told that the templates are poorly integrated into the Agile system, which results in unnecessary duplication of effort and additional administrative work. Also, staff reported that they do not always follow the template format. We were also told that there is limited guidance provided on how to write reports, and concerns were raised about the lack of clarity around formatting and content expectations.

**7.2** Feedback indicated that there is a lack of consistency in report writing, both in style and structure and this was confirmed with the PAS team's review of a selection of reports. The PAS team was informed that a small team of officers took responsibility for designing the report templates.

**7.3** The staff reported that they found writing reports through the Agile system problematic which has created additional work for officers and reduced levels of consistency.

**7.4** The PAS team looked at a selection of committee reports, many of which were extremely detailed reflecting a cautious and risk-averse culture aimed at minimising the likelihood of legal challenges. Applications that are either recommended for refusal or are likely to be refused through a committee overturn will need to be detailed to ensure that ensure that any appeal can be robustly defended. However, officers also suggested that there is a lack of trust between members and officers and this contributes to the increasing length of reports. Committee reports, in particular, are written for an audience who are not Planning specialists and so it is particularly important that they are accessible in terms of length and language.

**7.5** Listed below are a list of positive and negative points that the PAS team observed when reviewing a selection of officer reports:

### **Straightforward delegated reports**

Positives:

- The target date for determination is clearly identified;
- There is a clear section on the status of the Local Plan;
- There are simplified report formats for the more straightforward reports, such as householder applications and prior notifications; and
- There is a clear format that 'tells a story' starting with the principle of development.

#### Areas for improvement

- The planning history is not filtered so includes planning history that is not relevant to the application;
- Some of the most straightforward applications are unnecessarily long;
- There is no section on: The Equality Act; Human Rights Act; and financial considerations; and
- There is no proactive working informative – a requirement from the Planning Practice Guide

### Committee reports

#### Positives:

- The reason for the call in is clearly identified;
- A link to the recommendation is given at the beginning of the report;
- There is a clear explanation on the publicity that has taken place;
- There is a section on determining factors that is very helpful;
- The reports conclude with a summary of the planning balance; and
- Some of the longer reports have an executive summary.

#### Areas for improvement

- Some of the very long reports do not have an executive summary;
- No target determination date is identified;
- Representation of consultation responses is inconsistent – sometimes written in full and sometimes summarised;
- Some of the longer sections have conclusions, but this is inconsistent; and
- Conditions are not separated under pre-commencement, pre-occupation etc.

7.6 PAS has produced [Best Practice Guidance](#) on both delegated and committee officer reports.

## 8. Conclusions

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8.1 The development management service provided by TMBC is not a cause for any concern nationally with the council easily meeting the nationally set standards on speed of decision-making and no immediate concerns about the quality of decision-making. The staffing levels appear sufficient for the workload, but with some usage of agency staff to address staff absences and a staff structure that would appear to adequately manage the demands in development management. A software system that is used by many councils is in operation even though it is not popular with many of the staff.

8.2 There is a concerning issue with communication within the development service with staff and managers, at times, providing contradictory information to the PAS team on policies and practices within the service. The role of the Planning Business Manager also appears to be under-utilised in comparison with other councils with similar posts and who use their business managers as a key conduit for communication within the teams.

8.3 TMBC's development management service is grappling with a number of structural and operational challenges, particularly in relation to staff support, procedural consistency, and the effective use of systems. It is evident that performance management is not currently seen by some staff as being given sufficient prominence and is identified as a cause for hindering both individual development and organisational improvement, especially for new staff to the organisation.

8.4 Another challenge is inefficiencies arising from the use of the Agile system. Although Agile is used very effectively by other councils the system's limitations are being identified by staff as reasons for unnecessary administrative burdens and restricted flexibility. These technical constraints are compounded by inconsistent practices, such as the varied use of templates and differing approaches to report formatting and content, which reflect a wider lack of standardisation across the service. A proposed move back to the Uniform needs to be progressed urgently to avoid continued inefficiencies.

8.5 It is also apparent that decision-making processes are being identified as causes for time pressures and operational demands placed on managers.. This responsibility is being seen by some managers as limiting their

capacity to scrutinise work effectively and contributes to a large backlog of applications.

**8.6** The culture of the service appears to be marked by caution and a desire to reduce risk, as evidenced by the length and detail of officer reports. While this approach may serve to mitigate legal challenges, it also reflects an underlying tension between officers and members.

**8.7** This review has been written without the benefit of any discussion with councillors or the users of the planning system at TMBC and, therefore, should be used as an evidence base to the wider planning peer challenge that is taking place in September 2025. This peer challenge will explore some of the themes raised in this report in much greater depth and with the benefit of discussion with a wider audience.

## 9. Next steps

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**9.1** This development management review will form an annex to the planning services peer challenge that is taking place in September 2025 and the recommendations outlined in this report will be revisited and refined as necessary once the final planning peer challenge report is agreed.