

Top entries - Searches Team of the Year 2024

Here are three high-scoring entries from the 2024 awards for the Searches Team of the Year Award. In publishing these best practice entries, we want to clarify 'what good looks like', to support future award entries.

Each one has been crafted to answer the award questions and prompts. In particular, these entries:

- Reference specific real-life examples where key skills were demonstrated
- Demonstrate commitment, tenacity, proactivity, professionalism and problem-solving skills
- Use proof points to illustrate the impact of the work e.g., increases in speed and efficiency
- Highlight how new ideas and innovations have been deployed and the difference they made
- Show how the team has optimised working arrangements to deliver the best possible outcomes
- Demonstrate how the team embraces and adapts to change
- Illustrate how working collaboratively with other LA teams has improved efficiency and ways of working

Entry 1

Describe a challenge that your team has overcome in the past year.

- How did you approach the challenge?
- What were the key tasks?
- What was the outcome?

In the past year, the Local Land Charges Team successfully addressed a significant challenge related to discrepancies in the Local Land Charges Register. They identified a substantial number of financial charges marked as paid in the Customer Accounts Team but not communicated to the Land Charges Team, resulting in outdated information on the Register. To tackle this issue, the team initiated a comprehensive approach. They generated a report listing all credits for outstanding invoices from the accounts system and meticulously cross-referenced it with the list of Registered invoices. Subsequently, each credit was scrutinised to determine if it corresponded to a credit note, write-off, or payment. Invoices linked to payments or credit notes were promptly removed from the Register. To prevent a recurrence, the team implemented a proactive measure. They established a monthly report listing all payments from the previous month and employed a lookup to cross-verify the invoices against the Land Charges system. This preventive measure ensures the Register remains

consistently updated, preventing the inadvertent display of outstanding charges. As a result, the team not only rectified the existing discrepancies but also implemented a robust system to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the Local Land Charges Register.

What has been your team's top achievement over the past year?

- How did you plan and deliver the work?
- What has been the impact of this work?

Over the past year, the Local Land Charges Team achieved a significant milestone by successfully implementing spatial registration using QGIS. Initially conceived in early 2020, the project faced setbacks due to the COVID-19 lockdown. However, with renewed focus and collaboration with a supplier, the team successfully introduced this spatial capture system. One notable achievement during this period was the registration of a substantial Article 4 covering a vast land area with numerous properties. The use of QGIS proved instrumental in expediting the registration process for the Article 4. Had the team relied solely on manual textual registration, the task would have taken days, if not weeks. This would have inevitably caused delays in processing search requests related to the affected area, impacting stakeholders' timelines.

The spatial capture not only significantly reduced the time and effort required for registration but also enhanced accuracy compared to manual methods. This achievement demonstrates the team's resilience and adaptability in overcoming challenges, ultimately streamlining processes and improving efficiency. The successful integration of spatial registration not only modernised their approach but also had a tangible impact on the timely and precise handling of complex registrations, showcasing the team's commitment to delivering high-quality services in the face of adversity.

Describe how your team has become more efficient over the past year.

- How did you develop and implement new procedures?
- What were the key tasks?
- What impact has it made to your team's efficiency?

Over the past year, the Local Land Charges Team has undergone a transformative journey towards enhanced efficiency through the development and implementation of innovative procedures. Undertaking meticulous auditing, the team compiled a comprehensive dataset encompassing inquiries for both LLC1 and CON29 forms, along with standardised answers where applicable. Rigorous validation with feeder departments ensured data accuracy, and necessary adjustments were swiftly made. Critical to this process was the establishment of refined procedures for cross-referencing and verification, streamlining the data validation workflow. The team strategically collaborated with feeder departments, fostering a culture of transparency and precision. The introduction of standardised formats for LLC1 and CON29

data has been a pivotal step, promoting consistency and coherence in information presentation. These procedural advancements have resulted in a remarkable impact on team efficiency. The refined dataset and standardised formats have significantly reduced errors, mitigating the need for repetitive validations. The streamlined workflow has expedited response times, enhancing overall operational efficiency. The Local Land Charges Team's commitment to accuracy and innovation has not only optimised internal processes but also fortified the team's capacity to deliver prompt and reliable services, ultimately contributing to a more agile and responsive organisational framework.

Describe how your team has improved or maintained the service it offers to its customers over the past year.

What changes have you made to your working practices?

What impact have these changes had on your customers?

Summarise the feedback from your customers.

Over the past year, the Local Land Charges Team has undergone significant enhancements, primarily through the implementation of a meticulous check system within the Local Land Charges Register. This systematic approach is diligently applied during the review of queried charges, supported by a defined set of standards that facilitate the identification of charges requiring attention. These refinements in working practices have fortified the team's efficiency and accuracy in handling land charges. The impact of these changes on customers has been profound. The introduction of the check system ensures a comprehensive and standardised review process, minimising errors and expediting response times to customer queries. By adhering to established standards, the team has elevated the quality of its service, fostering increased reliability and customer satisfaction. Customer feedback attests to the positive outcomes of these initiatives. Clients appreciate the team's responsiveness and the heightened precision in charge assessments. The streamlined processes have not only accelerated service delivery but have also instilled a sense of confidence among customers regarding the reliability of land charge information. In summary, the Local Land Charges Team's commitment to refining working practices through the introduction of a meticulous check system and standardised review standards has significantly elevated the quality and efficiency of their service. The positive feedback from customers reflects the tangible improvements made, showcasing a dedicated effort to meet and exceed customer expectations.

Entry 2

Describe a challenge that your team has overcome in the past year.

- How did you approach the challenge?

- What were the key tasks?
- What was the outcome?

The project to migrate the LLC register in combination with an LA transformation initiative provided big challenges in 2023. Greater workloads in addition to normal responsibilities and restructuring of directorates were key issues. A key aim was to ensure Local Land Charges services and value continued to be recognised within the organisation despite migration of register and restructuring. The team completed a full review of processes, recognising efficiencies in our daily delivery. Raising our profile, we regularly met with senior management, presented periodically at Executive Management Team meetings, had 121's with our Chief Executive promoting our service and its value to the wider LA, and the importance of accurate and current data. We attended various departmental team meetings including Planning, Building Control, Housing, Environmental Health promoting our service, ensuring our communication was robust and that we were receiving the information we need. The key approach adopted was process mapping, logical analysis, to take the initiative and view change as positive, recognising the need to establish communication to ensure we were not swallowed up by other Departments. The outcome is positive, we are regular fixtures at department and senior management meetings, have a strong service identity/profile and our team is recognised. The original plan to remove LLC and put us with Planning has been scrapped, and we are now recognised independently. Migration project generated considerable workloads /pressures but using rota's, prioritisation, colleague support we are delivering a four-day turnaround without compromising on quality, accuracy, or customer service.

What has been your team's top achievement over the past year?

- How did you plan and deliver the work?
- What has been the impact of this work?

The Local Land Charges team have achieved a four-day turnaround time consistently over the last five years, despite dealing with impacts of Covid and managing the increased workloads and pressure generated by the HMLR migration project. The team have also established a key role within the Local Authority and the service is both recognised and valued by other departments, customers and external bodies. The team participate in a range of LA departmental team meetings including Planning and Building Control facilitating and enabling a close working relationship, sharing our resources and knowledge. In addition, we are working closely with the Planning team regarding quality of data. This includes improving spatial data, accuracy of plotting, ensuring timely notifications from planning and legal of new applications and agreements and that they are fully supporting and taking an active role with migration project. This has enabled the service to retain a strong service identity and role

within the LA, retention of highly-skilled and knowledgeable LLC staff and the sharing of knowledge to wider service areas. This has improved the quality of data, accuracy of data and a strong reputation for excellent customer service. I believe these are our top achievements that as a service we have not just focused on delivering to a high standard day-to-day but have established our role and profile within the wider LA. This is primarily through communication and education, sharing knowledge and expertise, with a drive to improve the quality of data so directly benefitting the customer.

Describe how your team has become more efficient over the past year.

- How did you develop and implement new procedures?
- What were the key tasks?
- What impact has it made to your team's efficiency?

The team focused on efficiency in 2023. We went through a comprehensive review of all processes, including how we access and work with other departments and external bodies. We utilised the help of colleagues in audit to drill down and identify potential efficiencies, removal of redundant / out of date tasks, and implement more effective service level agreements with our external suppliers. We reviewed the systems we used, initiated a project to upload all paper agreement files onto TLC including completing the spatial for each entry to reduce instances referring to paper records that were time-consuming and resource heavy. We uploaded the GGP layer directly into TLC (Single cost for consultant but benefitted by a time saving averaging 4 hours a week which is ongoing). We completed a scoping exercise of our team's roles, skill sets and knowledge, linking this to other LA services. The shared service approach allowed the development of closer working relationships with other services but also utilised and shared skills, knowledge, and staff expertise/time. This resulted in greater accuracy of data, supplied in a timely manner, and strong channels of communication. The review also focused on succession planning addressing long-term recruitment needs and staffing. We provided inhouse training to other services about the importance of accurate spatial data, Local Land Charges and how it relates to their service, how to reduce double handling, and improving spatial data making data retrieval more accurate, achieving resource savings and a more efficient and effective service

Describe how your team has improved or maintained the service it offers to its customers over the past year.

What changes have you made to your working practices?

What impact have these changes had on your customers?

Summarise the feedback from your customers.

The team has maintained an average five-day turnaround time throughout the pandemic, and this year we have delivered an improved average four-day turnaround. This has been due to a full review of our ways of working, developing processes but also re-allocation of resources to address key milestones and goals for our service, whilst dealing with the challenges of the HMLR migration project. We have improved the daily delivery of our service whilst delivering the tasks and requirements of the migration project in line with agreed timescales which has been a challenge for the team but we have risen to this challenge. New ways of working, closer working with other departments allowed the sharing of knowledge and resources more effectively resulting in a speedier response to our customers, more comprehensive cover of both telephones and online channels. Thus, improving the customer experience and ensuring we continue to reduce turnaround times whilst maintaining the accuracy and quality of the data, also the completeness of our search responses in accordance with Law Society guidelines. The key to our success has not only been looking at how we can deliver our daily tasks and roles more effectively but also closer collaboration and working with other departments/agencies to encourage sharing of knowledge and experience, sharing resources more effectively through skills and task analysis whilst maintaining and establishing a strong LLC service identity and role within the wider organisation. This new approach is not only improved the customer experience but overall performance.

Entry 3

Describe a challenge that your team has overcome in the past year.

- How did you approach the challenge?
- What were the key tasks?
- What was the outcome?

For over 10 years our team has consisted of 3 people. [xxx] requested to go from 4 days a week to 2 days a week which created a jobshare. A new member of the team joined (main focus being Street Naming and Numbering) in January 2023. The challenge was that [xxx] going from 4 days to 2 days a week would no longer have any capacity to work on the LLC side (just SNN). We essentially have become 2 sub teams (LLC and SNN but all under LLC). The

work that [xxx] did for LLC each week was, registering/amending/removing charges, booking in and preparing Personal Searches, when needed accepting the incoming searches and taking part in verifying LLC for the migration project.

Myself and [xxx] tackled this by looking at what we did and where we had the space to add in [xxx]'s LLC work into ours. I took on the work of booking/preparing PS and registering charges etc, in order to allow myself the time to do this, [xxx] took on the role of every day dealing with the incoming searches (previously done on a rota system) and took the lead on dealing with enquires into our central email account. Our auto-reply on the central email account has as much clear information as possible to signpost them to any answers they needed and to make sure that our webpage reflected that too. Myself and [xxx] made sure we had good communication, we speak every day, use instant messaging for quick communication and we have 1 day a week in the office where we would review any work issues we had.

Our turnaround time has not been impacted in a negative way. We have not received any complaints/questions from customers regarding the change in our service, as all the changes are mainly in the background

What has been your team's top achievement over the past year?

- How did you plan and deliver the work?
- What has been the impact of this work?

With [xxx] moving from 4 days a week to 2, one of the roles that she did for LLC that we had to accept wouldn't happen was her share in verifying the LLCR for the migration project (as myself and Janet were already doing this as part of our weekly tasks). I ran a report to see which type of charges had the highest volume and saw that TPOs and Enforcement Notices were the highest, therefore myself and Janet decided to take one each and work our way through them. We committed to 2 hours each a week and at the start of the 2023 we had approximately 5,500 left to verify. At the time of this submission we have 1912 left to verify and have recently been notified we have been moved from the pre-migration to migration stage. We have a hard copy register that the LR did not take for scanning, but we require this so that we can check the electronic LLCR matches the original paper copy. We only work in the office one day a week therefore Janet and I decided at the start of this year to make this our short-term priority in the office, scanning the hard copy LLCR ourselves. This took approximately 4 months and means that we are not dependent on checking our records only in the office. This not only will benefit us with the migration project but when we are completing searches.

Describe how your team has become more efficient over the past year.

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- What impact has it made to your team's efficiency?

Doing data checking for the LR project I saw we had a high number of debts (some decades old). I had already started to have a discussion with Finance in relation to works in default and I followed it up further by broadening it to all debts that we have on the register (excluding CILs as we already have a close working relationship with the CIL Team). I am currently having meetings with Finance and Environmental Health, we are collating all of the debts all three areas have to then confirm what are the outstanding debts that need to stay/be registered on the LLCR. This will make us more efficient in that our financial charges are accurate, if a search is carried out on a property that has a financial charge, we will be able to deal with the follow-up query quicker which will not hold up the customer. Previously if the originating department or finance does not hold accurate information it has caused delays. This will ensure that any future charges that originate from Environmental Health will come to us in the correct manner/relevant information. It will also help with the migration project as if there are debts that we have on the LLCR that should be removed that will speed the process of verifying. Working closely with Finance and Environmental Health has shown them the value of LLC and has opened the lines of good communication which will be vital once we migrate the LLCR in terms of making them aware of how procedure will slightly change.

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The most common reason for rejecting a search is in relation to the plan either not matching the address or not reflecting the correct number of parcels. We had always adopted the approach that any rejection message should contain as much information as possible to make it clear to the customer why the search has been rejected, however, we have now taken the approach of requesting they do a Plan Check (no charge) which involves the plan being emailed to us before submission so that we can confirm the number of parcels/confirm the address details. Some customers do this on a semi-regular basis for some specific searches, but we are now actively encouraging this for all searches we reject. This is impressing on our customers the importance of making sure address details and plans match in particular for when we migrate as that could potentially impact differences in the LLC1 and CON29 search results.

In terms of feedback from customers, they are starting to take up the plan check route before submission, this can reduce delays when submitting a search. In 2022 we rejected 111 online search submissions. In 2023 we rejected 71 online search submissions. Sending rejection messages can be quite time consuming (in terms of trying to give clear, full explanations etc), which takes time away from working on the searches we have, therefore doing a plan check via email helps us focus on the searches we have.