



Chief Administrative Officer Performance Appraisal System

CAO Performance Appraisal System Guide

Implemented: November 2025

This document provides guidance to the County of Essex County Council in the conduct of a Performance Appraisal System (PAS) to support the direction and development of their Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). The opening section provides an overview of best practices within the field. The subsequent section serves as a comprehensive guide to implementation of these practices as adapted to Essex County, including details regarding the sequence of steps in the process, roles for participation in the PA process, and critical choice points each time the PAS for the CAO is undertaken.

The Executive Performance Appraisal Process: Best Practices

This opening section outlines the foundational principles for the conduct of a performance appraisal system for a senior executive based on “best practices” established in the field of Industrial Psychology.

The Annual Performance Appraisal System

An annual performance evaluation serves as the most comprehensive review of the CAO’s performance over the year. Annual assessments typically focus on the operational achievements of the CAO, including the successful completion of key projects, financial management, as well as their alignment with the organization’s mission, strategic vision, and long-term objectives.

This evaluation may rely on data such as key performance indicators (KPIs) determined by the CAO and/or the members of Council, audit reports, and any other available data to provide a detailed analysis of the CAO’s effectiveness in the performance of their role. It also presents an opportunity for the CAO to reflect on personal development, set new goals, and discuss overall performance with their council.

When can we do only an annual review?

Stable Performance and Long-Term Goals. If the CAO’s role focuses on long-term goals with minimal day-to-day changes, an annual appraisal is sufficient. This approach works well for municipalities in a steady state where performance is assessed against established strategic objectives.

Clear and Well-Defined Goals. Annual reviews are effective when goals are stable and align with budget or planning cycles. This is ideal for municipalities targeting specific annual objectives, like completing infrastructure projects or meeting fiscal targets.

Less Immediate Feedback Needed. For municipalities where frequent adjustments are unnecessary and the CAO is consistently meeting expectations, annual reviews provide a comprehensive overview without redundant check-ins.

Simplicity and Efficiency. Smaller municipalities with limited complexity may find annual appraisals more efficient, avoiding the administrative burden of quarterly reviews.

Quarterly Performance Evaluation

Quarterly evaluations provide a more frequent and shorter-term assessment of the CAO's performance. These evaluations focus on recent performance trends, addressing progress on ongoing projects, budget management, and adherence to short-term goals.

This practice can include a review of customer service metrics, departmental outcomes, and updates from stakeholders or employees about any emerging challenges or successes. Quarterly evaluations allow for timely interventions and adjustments in leadership strategies. The focus is often on ensuring that the CAO is on track to meet annual objectives and making course corrections if and as necessary. Stakeholder input can also provide valuable insight into specific issues or concerns that may arise during the quarter.

When are quarterly appraisals needed?

Fast-Paced or Changing Environment. Quarterly evaluations are useful when municipalities face significant changes, such as crises, restructuring, or new initiatives, allowing for real-time adjustments to strategies.

High Expectations or Accountability. For roles requiring rapid results or strict oversight, quarterly reviews help monitor progress on short-term targets, such as improving services or implementing cost-saving measures.

Goal Adjustments and Flexibility. When goals change due to external factors, quarterly reviews allow for timely updates to action plans, ensuring continued alignment with priorities.

Development and Coaching Needs. For new CAOs or those needing improvement, quarterly evaluations provide frequent feedback and coaching opportunities to support their growth and ensure progress on development goals.

Ongoing Check-Ins or Update Meetings

Ongoing check-ins are informal, yet essential, interactions between the CAO and Council. These check-ins are typically more frequent than quarterly evaluations and serve as opportunities for real-time feedback and performance course corrections.

Ongoing check-ins provide a platform to discuss immediate issues or concerns that may arise between more formal evaluations. Data sources such as employee data, community concerns, and media coverage can be quickly addressed in these informal discussions.

Ongoing check-ins are vital for fostering open communication, addressing minor issues before they escalate, and maintaining transparency and accountability. These check-ins also allow the CAO to demonstrate responsiveness to evolving situations and ensure that both short-term and long-term goals remain aligned.

When are ongoing update meetings absolutely needed?

Dynamic or Rapidly Evolving Environments. In municipalities facing constant change, such as fluctuating regulations, public demands, or crises, ongoing check-ins ensure the CAO remains aligned with priorities. These frequent discussions help address challenges as they arise and allow for quick course corrections.

Complex Projects or Initiatives. When the CAO oversees large-scale projects or initiatives requiring close oversight, ongoing check-ins provide a platform to monitor progress, identify bottlenecks, and implement timely solutions.

Building Trust and Communication. Regular check-ins foster open communication between the CAO and Council, helping to build trust, improve transparency, and address concerns early before they escalate into larger issues.

New CAO or Transition Period. For a newly appointed CAO or during periods of leadership transition, ongoing check-ins support the CAO's onboarding, clarify expectations, and provide consistent guidance.

Proactive Problem-Solving. In situations where potential challenges or conflicts are anticipated, regular meetings allow the Council and CAO to proactively address issues and maintain smooth operations.

The County of Essex CAO Performance Appraisal System Process

The Chief Administrative Officer's role is vital to advancing County Council's operational goals and strategic vision. The centrality of this role makes regular performance appraisals of the CAO essential for growth, accountability, and assurance of alignment with County Council's mission and values. This guide is designed to steer the process of evaluating the CAO to ensure that the Performance Appraisal System (PAS) is a fair, transparent, and growth-promoting process that fosters a positive working relationship between Council and their CAO.

Through a structured evaluation process the Warden and Deputy Warden, informed by County Council through their written submissions, can assess achievements, identify areas for further development, and set and evaluate actionable goals that promote the long-term success of their CAO. Toward this end, regular performance evaluation is an opportunity to increase communication between the CAO, Wardens, and Council. The performance conversations provide the CAO with an opportunity to identify their progress on leadership goals that are aligned with

the County's performance expectations and strategic objectives. Finally, in alignment with HR best practices, this process creates a formal record of the performance communications among the CAO, Wardens, and Council.

It is clear from the literature that performance appraisals conducted formally only once per year are an ill-advised practice that almost invariably lead to undesirable outcomes for both the organization and the individuals being evaluated. Indeed, it is a common adage within the field that the formal PA meeting should contain "no surprises" as there has been an ongoing dialogue between employee and employer over the course of the year leading up to this annual formal assessment. Accordingly, this PAS Guide details the steps involved in conducting a formal annual appraisal that is supported by scheduled update meetings for more informal dialogue regarding the performance expectations the Wardens and Council have for their CAO.

Roles in the CAO Evaluation Process: Who does what?

At time of writing, it does not appear that there is any legislation stipulating how or how frequently a CAO should be engaged with a County Council in a review of their performance. Accordingly, "best practices" from Industrial Psychology for conducting PA's for senior executives inform this guide. For executive level leaders it can be challenging for those evaluating their performance to have substantial and meaningful opportunities to observe and assess the CAO across the diverse range of their duties and responsibilities. Accordingly, those members of a Council or Board of Directors who have the greatest regular contact with the executive leader are in a vastly superior position to observe performance across the full spectrum of that executive's role. In the present case, as the Warden and Deputy Warden roles require regular and frequent interactions with the CAO over the widest range of issues and tasks, it is recommended that the Wardens oversee and conduct the PA process with written input from each member of County Council.

It is not recommended that the Human Resources Department or any other employee of the Corporation be involved in the CAO's PA process as it places them and the CAO in an inversed legitimate power relationship. In short, it is recommended that only elected officials play a role in the CAO PA process, and that those most actively involved in the assessment process have ample opportunities to observe and interact with the CAO. In instances where Council might wish or require HR or legal direction to ensure compliance with best practices and/or pertinent labour laws relating to the conduct of the CAO PA, it is suggested that they retain outside counsel for the duration of the appraisal process. This practice helps ensure absolute confidentiality of Council's assessment of their CAO and avoids suspicion and finger pointing at an employee of the corporation should an information breach occur.

Sources of Performance Appraisal Data

CAO Self-Evaluation: Approximately ten weeks prior to the date of the formal PA (or at a point determined by the logistics of Council workflow), the CAO should be directed to complete a self-assessment of their performance over the preceding year using the CAO PA Form. The CAO should address each established responsibility, noting achievements, challenges, and areas for improvement. They should be encouraged to provide documentation and examples (such as

specific project outcomes or efficiency initiatives) in support of their self-assessment. This self-evaluation is ultimately reviewed and assessed by the Wardens and Council Members in relation to their experience of the CAO's performance and any available objective data.

Council: Given that County Council oversees the CAO, feedback from Council on the CAO's strategic leadership, decision-making, and overall performance in meeting assigned and emergent objectives is a crucial source of data. To provide meaningful input, the Wardens will receive the CAO's PA Self-Evaluation and electronically distribute it to all members of Council for their review and written commentary. Council Members input should take the form of comments on the performance criteria rather than numeric ranking. Upon completion, each member will then return their completed PA forms to the Wardens who will collate and integrate all Council Members' written input.

Employee Surveys and Stakeholder Feedback: Feedback from municipal employees can provide insights into leadership effectiveness, workplace morale, and internal communication. Anonymous employee surveys or facilitated focus groups can be deployed in this regard. Extreme caution must be exercised if these avenues of data gathering are to be deployed as the development of fair and valid surveys or the conduct of focus groups is far more complex than those untrained in the field typically assume. Moreover, even when done correctly, there are a myriad of ways in which the survey process or focus groups can be usurped by disgruntled leaders, staff, or union representatives. This form of data generation should only be considered when there are substantial concerns regarding the performance of the current CAO and there are no other reliable means of generating performance data. If such is not the case, it is highly advisable that these mediums of data generation not be implemented.

Audit Reports and Financial Reviews: Reports from internal or external auditors and budget analyses can shed light on financial management, resource allocation, and accountability practices under the CAO's leadership.

External Agency Input: If the municipality works closely with external agencies (e.g., provincial oversight bodies, planning agencies, or community organizations), performance data from these agencies can garner insights into inter-agency collaboration and CAO responsiveness to external demands and requirements. For reasons similar to employee and stakeholder input, a degree of care should be exercised to ensure that the solicitation of such input is not skewed by the representative of an external agency who might be motivated to use the opportunity to unfairly tarnish the reputation of the CAO.

Media Coverage and Public Relations Materials: Reviewing media articles, press releases, and public communications can contribute to assessing the CAO's capabilities with respect to managing the County's public image, generating transparency, and fostering engagement with the community through the media.

Steps in the Performance Appraisal Process

Overview of the CAO Performance Appraisal System

The Performance Appraisal System outline in this guide is cyclical in nature and should, when possible, be roughly aligned with the fiscal cycle of the Corporation. The process itself is grounded in five recurring steps that incorporate best practices for the performance evaluation of a senior executive (the CAO) by the oversight body (County Council).

1. The CAO completes the PA Form on their performance for the preceding year and submits it and any supporting documentation to the Wardens for their review and distribution to all members of County Council.
2. Council Members review the CAO's Self-Assessment, provide their individual input, and return their completed PAs to the Wardens. The Wardens then collate and synthesize the Council data, taking the core themes into account when drafting the CAO's PA.
3. The Wardens deliver the CAO's PA in an initial meeting. The CAO has opportunity to review the performance feedback and request a follow-up meeting with Wardens for further dialogue.
4. Wardens finalize and submit the completed CAO PA.
5. Ongoing Performance Appraisal Update Meetings between Wardens and CAO are scheduled and commence every three months for a newly hired CAO or every four months for an experienced CAO. This cyclical process repeats on an annual basis.

CAO Self-Appraisal

The CAO completes a self-assessment based on the agreed-upon goals and criteria as outlined in their job description and as captured in the CAO PA Form. This self-evaluation provides insight into the CAO's own perspectives on successes, challenges, and areas for professional development.

The CAO begins by reviewing the goals and action plans set in their previous appraisal. They then reflect on their progress, documenting the extent to which each objective was achieved and provide relevant evidence. It is important to note that the CAO should not assign a numeric rating to themselves on the rating scales in the CAO PA Form. To do so is to set the stage for an unproductive layer of tension and/or conflict should the CAO and Wardens arrive at numbers on opposite sides of one or more scales. The assignment of a number tends to be perceived as a strong assertion of one's assessment that can impede constructive dialogue.

While reflecting on their past performance, the CAO should also identify areas for growth and propose goals for the upcoming period. The CAO can suggest new objectives that align with the County's strategic priorities, areas of improvement from the current evaluation, and any new challenges they foresee. This step ensures that the CAO takes a proactive role in planning for their continued success, and it allows the Wardens to have a clear starting point for discussions during the formal appraisal process.

Performance Appraisal Input from Council Members

Council Member Input. Through their completion of the CAO PA, Council members provide written input regarding the CAO's performance based on their observations, experiences, and other relevant sources at their disposal. To generate a balanced assessment, Council Members should provide specific examples of the CAO's accomplishments or any concerns they might have regarding their performance. Council Members should limit their input to written responses and avoid assigning numeric rankings on the various appraisal criteria.

Council Input Compilation and Integration. The Warden and Deputy Warden compile the Council assessments they have received through the above outlined process. An in-camera Council meeting may be held to discuss the draft PA, or Council may choose to entrust the PA process to the Wardens. The Wardens may choose to review the CAO's Self-Appraisal document before or after they complete their draft of the PA. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, and it would be judicious to discuss which of these two options will be adopted by the Wardens at the outset of the formal PA process. As the final step in the draft process, Wardens assign a numeric rating on each of the appraisal criteria.

Formal Evaluation Meeting with the CAO

Delivering the Formal CAO PA. It is recommended that only the Warden and Deputy Warden meet with the CAO to review the draft PA. It is important to have a second party with the Warden during the meeting, but more than two people present typically creates a psychological space that inhibits constructive dialogue. This meeting should be supportive, open, and allow the CAO to respond to feedback at the time, but with the opportunity for them to take the PA away for reflection and subsequent discussion with the Wardens. If such is the case, a subsequent meeting should be conducted to further the discussion such that a common understanding of the way forward for the CAO and the executive members of Council is reached. If there are disagreements between the CAO and Wardens' on any content of the PA, there should be dialogue among the three regarding these discrepancies to ensure clarity, whether the Wardens choose to change one or more ratings in light of additional information provided by the CAO, or they choose to leverage their legitimate power and retain the original assessment and numeric ratings.

Action Plan and Goal Setting. Based on the final PA, the CAO and Wardens should generate a go-forward plan building on the CAO's acknowledged strengths and addressing areas for development. A detailed action plan should be developed that includes specific steps for addressing the identified areas for improvement (Action Plan Components: *Who will do what by when using what resources?*). Measurable goals and objectives for the next evaluation period should be established through this process, ensuring alignment with the County's mission, values, and strategic objectives.

Documentation and Final Reporting

The Wardens prepare the final CAO PA which will contain the evaluation findings, an outline of objectives for the coming year, and agreed-upon action plans. This final PA report is shared with the CAO and Council Members and should be filed for future reference and used as the baseline for the commencement of the next performance appraisal cycle.

Ongoing Performance Appraisal Update Meetings

Regular PA update meetings should be scheduled and conducted throughout the year to monitor progress towards the CAO's performance goals and ensure their accountability to these goals. For a relatively new CAO the Wardens may wish to conduct informal reviews quarterly, while for a more seasoned CAO, they might choose to reduce the frequency to every four months. In those rare instances where there are substantial concerns regarding the CAO's performance, the Wardens may choose to increase the frequency of update meetings beyond quarterly.

These sessions provide an opportunity to review the CAO's progress toward achieving the set objectives and addressing areas for improvement identified during the annual formal PA. If circumstances evolve or additional feedback is received, adjustments to the action plan or goals can be made to maintain alignment with the County's priorities and ensure continued adaptability as situations and circumstances warrant.

Guidelines for Completing the CAO Performance Appraisal Form

The included CAO PA Form is derived from and fully reflective of the CAO Job Description that has been revised through this process. The format of the document embodies best practices counterbalanced by the need for a clear and usable form for the purposes of conducting regular CAO performance assessments.

CAO Self-Assessment

Each section of the form is dedicated to a broad objective (e.g., *Cultural Objectives*), its performance areas (e.g., *Culture of High Performance*), and the different aspects under that area (e.g., *Holding Self Accountable*). The CAO will be evaluated on each of those aspects separately.

The CAO does not rate themselves numerically but will express their level of performance in the comment section, supported by relevant evidence. Using the success criteria and measurable outcomes established in the previous appraisal, the CAO should provide comments on how effectively they have met the goals. The CAO may also attach documents to serve as evidence of effective performance. If the CAO's achievements fall short of expectations, an explanation should be provided in this section.

CAO Goal Setting

Two types of goals can be incorporated into Action Plans: Outcome Goals and Process (Behavioural) Goals. Depending on the specific area of performance and the nature of the goal, either outcome or process goals, or a combination of both, may be most relevant.

Outcome Goals. Outcome goals focus on the end results or the ultimate achievements that align with organizational objectives. These goals are typically measurable and tied to specific deliverables or performance metrics. For example, an outcome goal for a municipality's CAO could be "*Increase community engagement communications in the coming year by 10%.*" Outcome goals therefore define what success looks like.

Process (Behavioural) Goals. Process or Behavioural goals focus on specific actions, habits, or interpersonal behaviours that a CAO should demonstrate to achieve specific outcomes and support

effective leadership and organizational success. Unlike goals tied directly to measurable outcomes, behavioural goals emphasize the *how* of performance.

Process goals focus on specific actions or methods necessary to achieve a larger outcome. While they contribute to outcomes, they represent ongoing efforts or progress toward an outcome goal. For example, on a long-term infrastructure initiative the process goal might be "*Submit update reports to council on project progress on an annual basis*". This is a process goal in that it outlines a series of steps contributing to an Outcome Goal.

CAO Rating Scale

In the *Performance Scale* section of the form, the Wardens can decide if the CAO's performance is *Exemplary*, if it is *Consistently Effective*, if the CAO is still *Developing* in that area, or if the CAO *Needs Support* to be able to engage in the expected actions.

Performance Scale Descriptors

Needs Support (0-1): This behaviour is rarely demonstrated, even when the opportunity arises. The individual may lack the necessary skills or knowledge to engage in the expected behaviours and move toward the goal. They may not fully understand the importance of the goal or may lack the motivation to pursue it effectively. No substantial progress is observed toward the goal.

Developing (2-3): This behaviour is occasionally observed, but it tends to be more reactive than proactive. It is demonstrated only when absolutely necessary and not consistently. The behaviour may depend on the situation, with some indicators being shown at times, while others are missed or only partially displayed when needed. Only some indicators of goal achievement may have been attained, and those that were met might not have reached the pre-established standards.

Consistently Effective (4-5): The behaviours are consistently demonstrated, with the CAO taking proactive steps to engage in them, going beyond the bare minimum. All expected behavioural components and goal success indicators are reliably achieved according to pre-established standards and criteria. This consistent performance reflects the CAO's strong commitment to excellence.

Exemplary (6): This behaviour reflects a level of dedication and effort well beyond the typical expectations of the organization. It has been both influential and inspiring to others, distinguishing the individual from their peers in this role. The CAO may have sacrificed personal time, resources, or interests to achieve this outcome, further demonstrating their commitment. Such actions highlight exceptional strength, showcasing dedication even in the most challenging circumstances. This behaviour is particularly evident during critical moments when staying true to one's duties is difficult, emphasizing the individual's exceptional perseverance and leadership.

Finalized Appraisal Form

After the Formal Evaluation Meeting with the CAO the appraisal form will be finalized, with agreed-upon performance ratings and articulation of the current and future action plans. Action plan revisions may be requested by either the CAO or Wardens prior to the next scheduled appraisal. If revisions are necessary, they will be added to the form under the "Action Plan Revisions" section, along with rationale for the changes.