

# Pamwin User Group



## Minutes

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2007 at Midland Heart,

Dave Treanor	M3 Housing
Paul Flowers	M3 Housing
David Thorn	M3 Housing
Andrew Bateson	Metropolitan Housing Trust
Rachel Dutton	East Midlands Housing
Mark Bridge	Bromford Housing Group
Helen Sims	South Yorkshire HA
Matt Noms	Midland Heart
Annette Carthy	Guinness Northern Counties
Andy Hume	Arena Group
Karen Sheedy	Gallions HA
Gemma Patmore	Gallions HA
Chandra Doshi	Gallions HA
James Edge	Notting Hill Housing
Gavin Compton	Riverside
John Simmons	Genesis
Lorraine Boyle	Riverside
Nash Khan	NCHA Ltd

### Previous minutes

The user group asked that their best wishes and congratulations be sent to Matt Snuggs, who was on paternity leave following the birth of a boy. Dave chaired the meeting in his absence.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a good record.

### Feedback from bids

Paul outlined events during the bids.

M3 issued a new release with the average sub-regional grants, the grant index, new tabs on the Details screens with all the IMS fields required and their output to the IMS report, and the Economic Appraisal Toolkit. M3 also issued scripts for updating the factors affecting Target Rent calculations.

Pamwin gets exceptionally intensive use during a bid round. The new system (Pamwin Plus) proved much more stable than the old VB system when dealing with large numbers of concurrent users.

Resources at M3 got very stretched during the bids, with large numbers of organisations upgrading to new releases, and the biggest ever demand for on-site training, at a time when we also had to deal with the changes required for the bids. Overall we managed to deal with the pressures successfully.

### **Installation problems**

A number of problems arose during the bids. Quite a few of these were to do with the way the system was installed, and problems in the operating environment. These could have been dealt with well before the bids if the organisations affected had upgraded to Release 2 of Pamwin Plus earlier. Many of the problems were to do with incompatibilities between versions of the operating system, MS Office, .Net, and MS SQL that were installed on servers and/or desktops, and whether service packs had been run on them.

Others were to do with the way some of the new feature were set up for each user, and the impact these had on their appraisals. M3 issued the first major upgrade to the revenue spreadsheet since Pamwin Plus was introduced, and upgraded tailored versions of the revenue spreadsheet.

Gavin asked that information be supplied on the operating environments on which Pamwin Plus has been tested.

For future bid rounds, M3 will write to all organisations using Pamwin, reminding them to upgrade to the latest release of Pamwin at least two months before the bidding round commences. M3 will only maintain the latest version of Pamwin Plus during the bid round.

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Two or three organisations had problems with the scripts for updating Target Rent factors, because their servers were set to use US date formats. Consequently 01/04/07 was interpreted as 4<sup>th</sup> January 2007, resulting in Target Rent calculations being a whole year out.

M3 have stipulated to their programmers and others that in future all scripts must use unambiguous date formats (eg 01-Apr-07). The installation instructions for Pamwin will also require that regional date formats are set to the UK standard. Both would have to fail to cause this problem to recur.

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### **Bug fix releases**

We normally issue one bug-fix release a month, which is ignored by those unaffected by the bug. We notify supervisors if a serious bug is fixed, so they know they can safely avoid installing every upgrade.

But during the bids, any bug that affected the appraisal process was treated as Urgent, and bug fixes were released every few days. This had a number of consequences.

On at least two occasions, fixing one bug caused another. The "Urgent" procedure for upgrades did not include the full regression test (where we compare the new release against the previous release using the same database to look for any unexpected differences). The full regression test takes a couple of days to do, and may have to be run two or three times before a system is passed.

Paul and Dave examined this with Nous on their recent visit to Bangalore, and have introduced a shortened version of the regression test that will be used before any release, however urgent.

Karen asked for better information so that she could decide whether a bug fix release was relevant to them. Gavin asked that the pipeline of known issues being addressed be put onto the website so that he could see if a problem they experienced was an existing one or a new one. David said that M3 would put this information onto the website in the new few months.

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### **Rents on the IMS system**

For Pamwin to display a correct Target Rent, all Target Rent factors and inflation assumptions have to be set correctly. Most users did this successfully.

There was one exception: when Target Rents were introduced, associations were permitted to set their initial rents in line with existing rent policy, and restructure them to meet Target Rents by 2012. But the Corporation recently decided that Rent Caps were absolute: where a scheme was subject to rent restructuring, their initial rents could not exceed the rent caps. Pamwin permitted users to set their initial rents as a percentage of Target (eg 105%) and applied this to the capped target rent. Under the new ruling, it should have applied the 105% to the Target Rent, and then capped it if this exceeded the Target.

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This meant that in a few instances, organisations were late in spotting that their initial rents exceeded the caps. This only affected the first year's rent, as the revenue forecast was changed to limit rents in future years to the inflated rent caps. So the impact on the NPV of a scheme was limited.

Chandra asked for the IMS Rent field to be put back on the Properties screen. M3 had removed it, thinking this was now irrelevant because its original purpose was to calculate the grant using the grant calculator. But this is still required on the IMS system, so we will reinstate this field.

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Chandra also asked for the specified rent to be displayed at completion values, and to be clearly output to the Appraisal Summary. This was agreed.

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Chandra also complained that when a new property was added, it jumped into a different place in the list – some users then thought it had got lost, and put it in again. Others had not experienced this, and Paul was surprised by it: when the screen was opened it should default to not sorting, and it was easy to sort on any heading with the new grid.

### **General feedback on bids**

MHT ran two parallel versions of Pamwin Plus. Most users were not given the bid release, but Matt checked all schemes on the new release to take advantage of the new Average Grant, and Grant Index facilities.

Riverside had upgraded from the old VB Pamwin to the bid release of Pamwin Plus at the start of the bids. Gavin's view was that this had been remarkably successful given the scale of the upgrade. They had had problems but these had all been dealt with. Lorraine was more critical, and was particularly concerned that some users got different KPIs (still not resolved). But they had managed to assemble all of their bids in time.

East Midlands did not upgrade to the bid release, and had experienced no problems in putting their bids together.

Bromford Housing Group were not going live on Pamwin until April.

South Yorkshire HA experienced a lot of down time in the early part of the bids whilst problems were dealt with. They did not allow new appraisals to be done until each problem was fixed. This has undermined confidence in the system amongst some users. But they had

found the average grant and grant index very useful in assessing their bids. They needed some advice on how to put together the pack of information required by their directors in considering the bids. At present they were finding this on a number of different reports, and having to assemble it to create their own report. This was partly because they were unfamiliar with the reporting options in Pamwin.

Midland Heart had used the new system successfully, and were happy with the way it worked. Any problems were dealt with efficiently. They did not use the IMS.

Guinness Northern Counties had not made the best use of reports in Pamwin because they were unsure where to find the information they needed. So they had used it for the appraisals and then transferred the information into Excel.

Arena had held off from upgrading before the bids. Their feasibilities had worked well in Pamwin, and their finance director was happy with them. They did not feel they were using it to its full potential.

Gallions were new users, and only implemented Pamwin Plus just before the bids, going straight to Release 2. There was some reluctance for development staff to change from their own appraisal system. This was exacerbated by the date problem resulting in wrong Target Rents. But overall it was not bad, and they got all the information through on time. They were keen to get scheme monitoring fully operational.

Notting Hill had had the Dates problem with Target Rent calculations, had also run into the problem with rent caps. But they had overcome these and got their bids assembled in time.

A few other problems were noted:

Where Pamwin is crashed it can leave a duplicate scheme, which then prevents the status being changed on the scheme. Paul thought this was now fixed. But someone thought this also happened where there was no duplicate.

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If you open Excel after starting a long report running, it can cause an error. Better to open it before starting to run the report.

Excel sometimes opens as a blank sheet in Pamwin. This occurs where the desktop and server are not both on the same service pack.

Karen and Gemma gave Dave details of some corrections they need to the Brixx report.

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## **Specification of immediate changes**

The following changes will be released in January as Release 2.3.n.n:

### **Changes to Rents**

A major simplification to rents has been specified, and the programmers expected to complete this by the end of this year.

The Target Rents calculation would be changed as follows:

1. All reference to Benchmark Dates was being removed.
2. A Rent Determinations Table would be introduced, with all the rent determinations laid out in the format provided by the Corporation
3. Target rents would be calculated using the rent determinations, at the completion date of the scheme.

4. A checkbox on the Timetable screen would automatically change the “inflate from” date for rents to match the completion date, even if the completion date was changed after a scheme was approved. So rents set as % of Target Rent would always show at the completion date.
5. When a scheme is approved, the user will be asked whether to “Freeze” the rents. If they say yes, these change to “as entered” and the checkbox to inflate from completion is cleared. This means that if the completion date is subsequently changed, the rents will be inflated to the new completion date. If they say no, Target Rents will be affected by any subsequent changes in the rent determination, or in the completion date, so that they always change in line with the IMS system.

Additional fields will be added to the Properties screen, and can be viewed by scrolling to the right:

1. HC Rent at Completion would show the Rent for 52.18 rental periods pa at the completion date. If users used a different rental period, or had set an earlier date for rents to inflate from, they could then see the difference between Initial Rents, and HC Rent at Completion.
2. The method of rent calculation would be moved from the Rent screen to new columns on the Properties screen that could be viewed by scrolling to the right. The options would be reduced to “as % Target”, “as % Value”, or “as entered”, or “as. Rent Points and earlier systems will be removed. On any existing schemes these will be changed to As Entered when the upgrade is run.
3. Where an initial rent calculated as % of Target Rent exceeds the rent cap, the cap will be applied.
4. On LCHO schemes, the HC Rent at Completion would change to show the IMS Rent (as in earlier versions of Pamwin).
5. On LCHO schemes, the Specified Rent at Completion will be added
6. An additional field will show the Value at completion.

A pop-up from the Properties screen will show in detail how the Target Rent is calculated.

In discussion users preferred that future rent determinations be forecast based on the inflation assumption currently used by the Corporation (2.5% pa), rather than being extrapolated. So the rent determination table will show actual rent determinations, which cannot be confused with forecast ones.

### **Changes to Installation and Upgrade program**

An upgrade program will be issued to simplify upgrading Pamwin Plus whenever a new release is issued. The user will browse to find the upgrade files and the version of Pamwin to be upgraded. The program will then automatically upgrade the Pamwin program and run any upgrade scripts on the database. Optional scripts (eg for rent determinations) can also be added. This is being developed by Charles at M3.

A separate install shield has also been developed for installing Pamwin Plus on a server or a desktop. This has been developed for us by Nous.

These will be issued with the next Release, in January.

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## **Forthcoming Releases**

We will be meeting in February to set the priorities for improvements to Pamwin Plus to be developed during 2008.

Two releases will complete the development of Pamwin Plus in 2007: Release 2.4.n.n is expected to be available in February, and Release 2.5.n.n in March.

These will have the following improvements (the % shows how much has already been programmed):

- Make FTBI modifications 0%
- Add ability to search for schemes where KPIs not calculated and recalculate them 100%
- Adding scheme cost calc to project cost calc so the basis can be edited at Project level 100%
- Add handover units sheet to Project Monitoring report 100%
- Calculate KPIs within the system - 0%
- Contractor Monitoring Report across several contractors 100%
- Create negative variations when negative amounts posted 0%
- Customized KPI Format restrictions 100%
- Data maintenance - rates 100%
- Decimal places for cost base 100%
- Fixed cash flow sales issue 0%
- Flag on Accounts with Notes attached 100%
- List users logged in and kick them out 0%
- Maximum Mortgage 100%
- Missing column on Budget Monitoring rept 100%
- New output to suspense account report 100%
- New Package Sum field 100%
- New suspense account, including use for transaction rollback 0%
- Open scheme from project 100%
- Parameterize when capitalised interest starts and stops being calculated 0%
- Project Management features 0%
- Push reports into inetpub 0%
- Regularisation of 'save as' to the new copy remains open 0%
- Rolling out new grids across the system 0%
- Sales Module - user defined fields 100%
- Sales Module - when all account timing items are fixed due to 'Update Cashflow' (e.g. all units have a sold date entered) 0%
- Save As - Outturn Column 100%
- Tidying up navigation inc. tabs 0%
- Track changes and variations to all 0%
- Verifying and backing out transactions 0%
- Flat number added to unit and phase screen 100%
- Shortcut button added to units in properties screen 100%

Paul explained what each of these does. He also demonstrated the new user interface. Instead of opening a new window when you move to a new screen, it opens a new tab, allowing you to pick any open tab. You can also split the screen and have different sets of tabs for each half of the screen, allowing you to choose what you want open in each part of your screen. Users were impressed.

## Requests

The new SORP rules will require the development cost of each unit sold to be determined at the time of sale, taking into account any determinations on previously sold units, and the latest outturn costs of the scheme.

Dave will consult with Karen (Gallions) and Annette (Northern Counties), and also with PFP and Notting Hill, and write a consultation paper on it. The solution we are considering involves showing the development cost of each unit on the units screen, and freezing this

when the unit is marked as sold. The development cost would be calculated using the same factors as are used by the cost calculator (on the appraisal screen eg per hab room for Acquisition, and per sq metre for Works), with on-costs including interest apportioned by the total of acquisition and works. Users should be able to overwrite this cost where a scheme has been marked as Sold. It will be output to the marketing report, handovers report, and to the Sales monitoring reports.

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## Database administration services

Paul asked if any organisations would like a contract whereby M3 (working with Nous) looked after all the housekeeping on their databases (regular backups, shrinking etc). Midland Heart, Gallions, Genesis, and Bromford Housing Group might be interested.

Paul will cost the service and get in touch with them.

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## Benchmarking

Dave illustrated the results of the benchmarking exercise. Some users were unaware of it – details had been sent to all Pamwin supervisors when the report was released in October.

Those that had seen it found it very valuable.

Users agreed that site and works costs were usually affected by discounts, often relating to planning gain. It would not be possible or even very useful to try and identify schemes that were unaffected in this way. There were other sources of typical build costs and for site costs. It was agreed to drop works costs and site costs from future benchmarking reports. This would reduce the workload in creating the reports.

But users would like grant information added. Dave had not done so because he thought the sub-regional grant figures were more useful. But he will add it.

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The revenue assumptions, and economic assumptions were very helpful.

It took quite a long time to create the report, and the user group was asked how M3 should charge for this. All agreed that the bigger the sample, the more useful the report would be, and did not want to exclude organisations that did not pay for it. So it was agreed to take this into consideration in reviewing the increase in annual licence fees.

## Annual licence fees

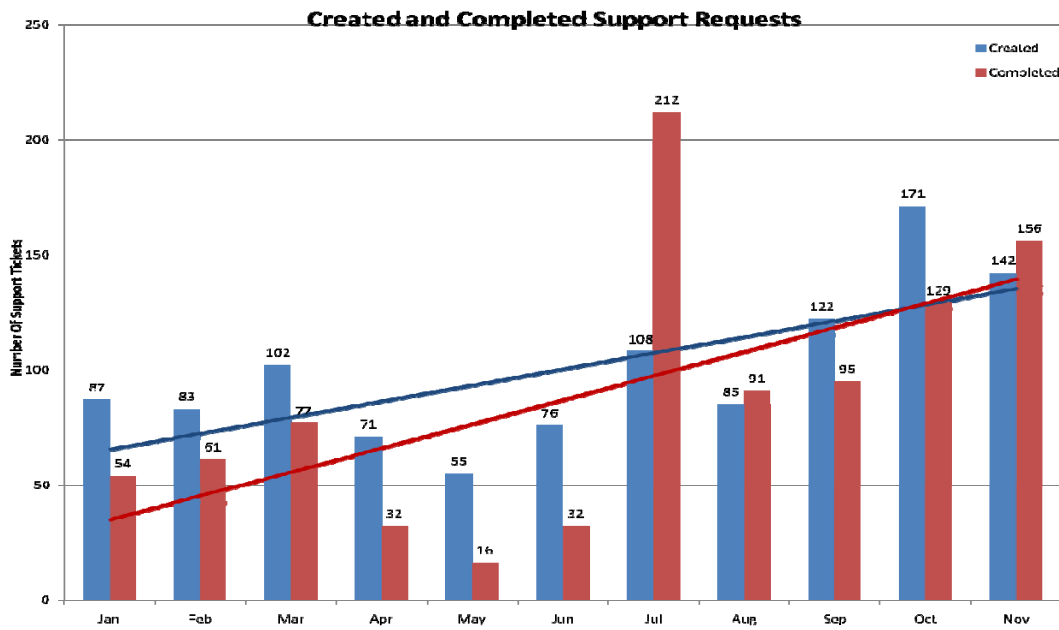
Dave warned users that annual licence fees would be going up from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008. They were last increased in 2004, and the increase was likely to be around 10% (roughly the same as the RPI). The functionality of Pamwin Plus has grown considerably during that time. The volume of support activity had also increased, and the Pamwin team had grown from three to seven people.

Members of the user group agreed that it was better to have small regular increases, than sudden larger ones. Dave agreed to consider more regular small increases in future. He would be writing about this to all Pamwin clients during December.

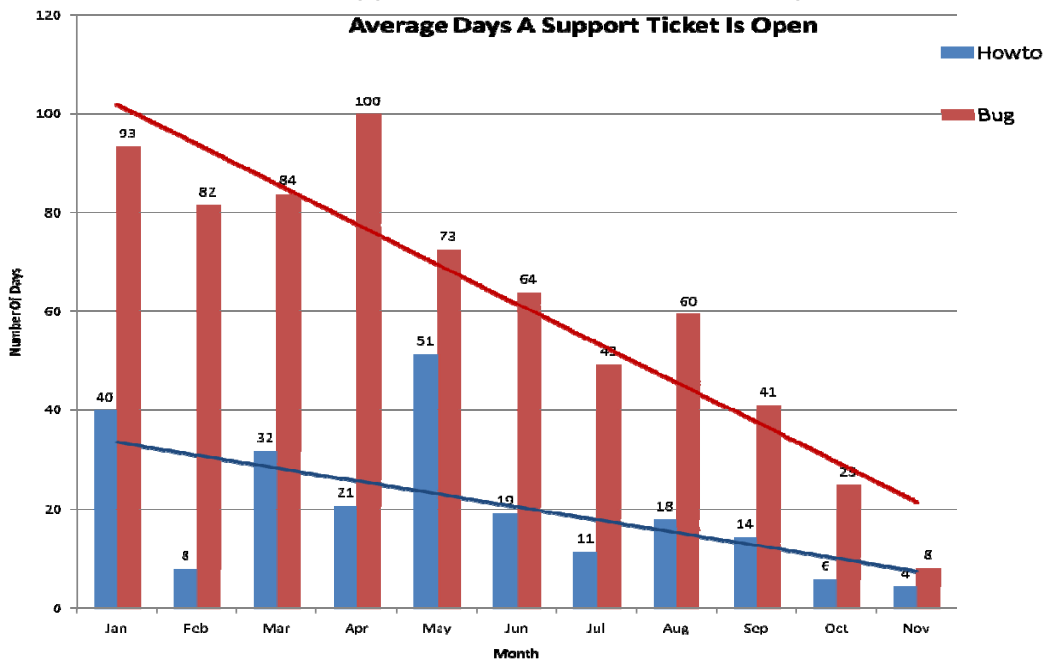
## Help desk report

Earlier this year M3 was struggling to deal with the volume of support requests. David Thorn joined in May, and by July was beginning to close support cases faster than new ones were

being created. During the bids the volume dramatically increased, and calls were strongly prioritised in favour of those that had an impact on the bids.



The time taken to close support tickets was also much improved:



A ticket is not closed until the user regards it as closed. So quite a few of the outstanding tickets relate to problems that have been fixed in the software, but that have not yet been released to users.

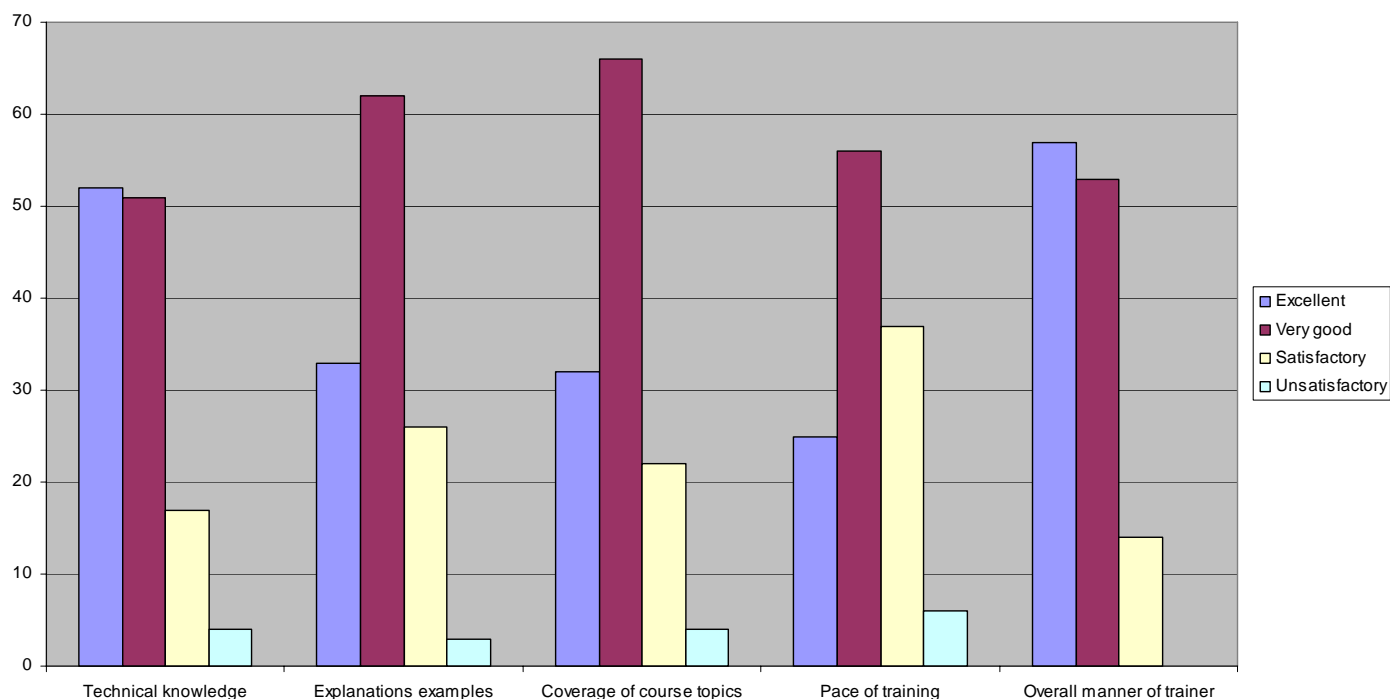
David showed the format in which the pipeline of issues being dealt with would be displayed on the Pamwin website:



Fixed In Version	Title	M3 Reference
2.2.5.n	percentage On-Cost defaults to `actual` although saved when logging out of a scheme. I am not sure if the actual or selected standard cost are used when consolidating schemes	19378
2.2.5.n	If a comma is entered into the Jan 99 value, the program produces an unexpected error which then loops	18928
2.2.5.n	appraisal screen, changing to As % on costs rings up erroneous warning message	18973
2.2.5.n	update values and rents checkbox failing to come live	19316
2.2.5.n	Stages pop up reshuffles when ticked	19311
2.2.5.n	remove file path parameters	18578

## Training Update

Feedback on the new approach to training has been very positive. M3 would aim at continued improvement:



M3 is running a wider variety of courses than ever before, designed to match the needs of different types of user, based on their roles within the organisation, and their previous experience in development, and in use of Pamwin.

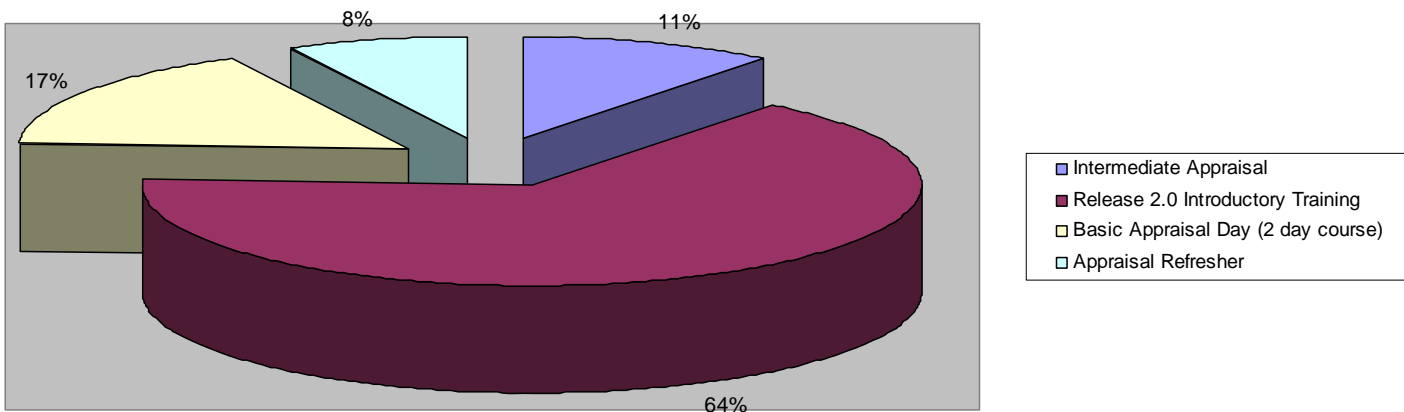
On site courses can be tailored to meet your individual requirements. The Pamwin website has details of each of the modules and how these can be combined. Or we can discuss your requirements with you.

Regular scheduled courses are run in London and Birmingham:

- Basic Appraisal Course for staff new to development (2 days) – Assumes no previous knowledge of Pamwin Plus and no development experience.
- Basic Appraisal Course for experienced development staff (1 day) – Assumes no previous knowledge or some knowledge of Pamwin Plus and some development experience

- Appraisal Refresher (1 day) – Designed to fill in the gaps in users' knowledge of Pamwin Appraisal.
- Basic Scheme Monitoring for staff new to Scheme Monitoring (2 days) – Assumes no previous knowledge of Pamwin Plus and some development experience. Trainees will understand the basis of appraisal figures and have the ability to update and monitor approved Schemes.
- Basic Scheme Monitoring for experienced development staff (1 day) – Assumes some knowledge of Pamwin Plus and some development experience. Trainees will have the ability to update and monitor approved Schemes.
- Supervisor course for new Pamwin Supervisors (2 days) – Assumes no knowledge of Pamwin Plus, Trainees will be introduced to Pamwin Plus, understand how to undertake Supervisory tasks and liaise with IT on upgrades and maintenance of Pamwin Plus.
- Supervisor refresher course (1 day) – Aimed at those who would like a refresher on Supervisory tasks.

We delivered more training this year than in previous years.



Users suggested that March and April were poor times to run courses, and that the Autumn was likely to be the most popular.

M3

There was some interest in a Training Passport, whereby an organisation could purchase a number of days of training at a reduced rate per day. But interest in this option would wane if it was not possible to carry over any un-used days into a following year.

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## Pamwin Conference

Users wanted a two day user group in February to prioritise developments for next year. They were happy for this to be in London, and preferred it to be in the hotel where they stayed.

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They also wanted a Pamwin conference designed to meet the needs of a wide variety of Pamwin users, to be held in September.

M3

Dave Treanor  
5<sup>th</sup> December 2007