

Urban Planner interview questions

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What to expect

Urban Planner interviews mix technical assessment questions with behavioural and scenario questions about consultation and stakeholder conflict. Panels usually include a senior planner and someone from a related council function such as strategic planning or development assessment, and they will probe both your regulatory knowledge and your judgement in ambiguous, politically sensitive situations.

- **Technical/regulatory:** Tests your working knowledge of planning schemes, zoning codes and the development application assessment process.
- **Behavioural:** Draws on past experience to see how you've handled consultation, conflicting stakeholder interests or policy drafting under deadline.
- **Scenario/judgement:** Presents a hypothetical planning conflict or contentious application and asks how you would balance competing interests and recommend a path forward.
- **Client-facing:** Explores how you communicate technical planning decisions to non-expert audiences, including residents and elected officials.

Expect an opening round on your planning background and qualifications, followed by technical questions on assessment and policy process, then scenario or behavioural questions on consultation and stakeholder management, and a closing section for your questions about the council's current strategic priorities or workload.

1. Walk me through how you would assess a development application against a council's planning scheme.

Why they ask

Confirms you understand the statutory assessment workflow rather than only the strategic side of planning.

How to structure your answer

Describe the process step by step: checking compliance against zoning and code provisions, identifying variations, consulting relevant referral agencies, weighing submissions, then forming a recommendation with conditions.

Example answer

"I'd start by checking the application against the zoning and any relevant overlays, such as heritage or flood provisions, then work through the development control plan clause by clause to flag any variations. Where there's a variation, I'd assess whether it still meets the underlying planning objectives before deciding whether to recommend approval, conditions, or refusal. I'd also check whether referral to another agency, like a roads authority, is required before the recommendation goes forward."

2. Tell me about a time you had to draft a policy or guideline that had to balance competing priorities.

Why they ask

Planning policy almost always trades off growth, amenity, environment and cost, so panels want evidence you can navigate that trade-off in writing, not just in conversation.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: situation, task, action, result, with a clear description of the competing priorities and how the final policy resolved them.

Example answer

"In a strategic planning project, I was tasked with drafting density provisions for a growth corridor where residents wanted to protect character while council wanted to hit housing targets. I ran the data analysis on projected demand, then drafted a tiered height and setback provision that concentrated density near transport nodes and kept lower scale elsewhere. The result was a provision council could adopt with community support largely intact."

3. A community group strongly opposes a development application that otherwise meets the planning scheme. How do you handle the recommendation and the public meeting?

Why they ask

Tests judgement under pressure when a technically compliant application is politically contentious, a common situation in this role.

How to structure your answer

Set out how you'd separate the technical merits from the political pressure, describe how you'd communicate that distinction at the public meeting, and state your recommendation approach.

Example answer

"I'd be clear in my report that the assessment has to be based on the planning scheme provisions, not on the volume of objection alone, while still documenting the community's concerns properly. At the public meeting, I'd explain what the scheme does and doesn't allow council to consider, and where there's scope for conditions that address specific concerns like traffic or overshadowing, I'd recommend those rather than a refusal that wouldn't hold up on appeal."

4. How do you use GIS or land-use data in your planning work day to day?

Why they ask

Checks practical familiarity with the tools this role actually uses, not just theoretical planning knowledge.

How to structure your answer

Give a concrete example of a specific analysis task, the tool used, and how the output fed into a planning decision or document.

Example answer

"I've used ArcGIS to map demographic and land-use data against existing infrastructure capacity, which is how I identified a school catchment gap in a growth area forecast. That mapping went straight into the strategic plan as the evidence base for recommending a new site allocation."

5. Describe a situation where you disagreed with a colleague, senior planner or elected official on a planning recommendation.

Why they ask

Planners routinely have their technical recommendations overridden or challenged politically, so panels want to see you can disagree professionally and still support the outcome.

How to structure your answer

STAR, with particular attention to how you raised the disagreement and what you did once a decision was made.

Example answer

"A councillor wanted to reduce a proposed density allocation below what the housing strategy modelling supported. I put my concerns in writing, setting out the modelling and the risk of falling short of the state housing target, but once council made its decision I updated the policy documentation to reflect it and flagged the gap for the next strategy review rather than relitigating it."

6. What's your view on how technology, such as automated assessment tools, is changing development application processing?

Why they ask

With AI risk rated moderate for this role, panels increasingly ask how candidates see technology affecting the assessment side of the job.

How to structure your answer

Give a brief, grounded view: what technology handles well, where planning judgement still matters, and how you'd adapt your own practice.

Example answer

"Automated checks are useful for the mechanical compliance items, like confirming setback or floor space ratio numbers against the code, which frees up time for the judgement calls that actually need a planner: weighing variations, interpreting intent, and handling the consultation side. I'd want to use that time saved on the parts of assessment and strategy that still need a person in the room."