Property Developer interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Property development interviews test commercial judgement as much as process knowledge. Employers want to see that you can read a site, defend a feasibility, handle a council or a builder when things move, and understand where the money and the risk sit at each stage.

- **Process and technical:** How you take a site from initial assessment through due diligence, feasibility, approval, construction and settlement, and the tools you use at each step.
- **Commercial and financial:** How you build and stress test a feasibility, what assumptions you challenge, and how you respond when costs or end values shift.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of negotiating with councils, managing consultants or builders, and keeping stakeholders aligned when a project is under pressure.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypothetical problems such as a cost overrun, a refusal at council, a funding gap or a slow sales campaign, used to see how you think under pressure.
- **Risk and safety:** How you keep WHS duties, insurance, contract risk and quality obligations visible across multiple contractors and packages.
- **Client and agent facing:** How you work with sales agents, purchasers or leasing agents, and how you handle a buyer or tenant issue once a project is complete.

Most processes start with a recruiter or hiring manager screen covering your background and one or two projects in detail. The second round is usually a technical panel with a development manager, a finance or commercial lead and sometimes a construction or delivery manager, and it often includes a short case study or a feasibility discussion based on a real or sample site. A final conversation with a senior leader or director tends to focus on judgement, risk appetite and how you would fit the existing pipeline. Reference checks and, for some employers, a police check and confirmation of any property or agency registrations follow.

1. Walk me through how you take a site from first look to a lodged development application.

Why they ask

This is the core process question for the role. The interviewer wants to see a structured method, an understanding of planning controls, and awareness of where the commercial decisions sit.

How to structure your answer

Give a stage by stage walk through, naming the decision point at the end of each stage, and finish with what would make you stop and walk away.

Example answer

“I start with the planning controls. I read the local environmental plan and any relevant state policies to see what is permissible, what the height and floor space limits are, and whether there is anything in the council's strategy that points the same way. If that stacks up, I do a quick residual check using a broad cost rate and comparable sales to see whether there is a margin worth pursuing. If it survives that, I move to due diligence: title, easements, contamination, flooding, services and any heritage or biodiversity constraints, and I get a surveyor and planner involved early. Then I brief the consultant team on a fixed scope, work up a concept that fits the controls, and lodge. At every point the question is the same, does the project still make sense, and if the answer changes I would rather find out before lodgement than after.”

2. Tell me about a time you had to negotiate with a council or a planning authority when the outcome was genuinely in doubt.

Why they ask

Approvals are where development projects are won or lost, and employers want evidence that you can hold a position while staying workable with the assessing officer.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Set the situation and the specific point of conflict, describe what you did and who you brought in, and land on the outcome in concrete terms.

Example answer

"We had a medium density proposal where the assessing officer was concerned about the traffic generated by the number of dwellings and wanted a reduction in yield. Reducing the dwellings would have taken the project below the return we needed, so simply agreeing was not an option. I asked the traffic engineer to model two alternative access arrangements and I went back to the officer with both, along with a staged approach to the visitor parking and a shared driveway solution that addressed the real concern on the street. I kept the conversation going through the council's own process rather than escalating straight away. In the end we kept the dwelling count, agreed to a slightly larger visitor parking area and a conditions package that the council could support, and the consent came through without a refusal or an appeal."

3. A project is under way and the builder's next cost report comes in well above the feasibility. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

This is the scenario that separates developers who stay calm from those who make reactive decisions. The interviewer is listening for how you verify the problem before you act on it.

How to structure your answer

Work through it as a judgement under pressure: verify the numbers first, then identify the options, then choose based on which one protects the project rather than the ego.

Example answer

"First I would want to know whether the variance is real or a reporting issue, so I would sit down with the quantity surveyor and the builder's contract administrator and go line by line through the cost plan. If it is real, I would separate what caused it into design changes, scope gaps, market movement or builder performance, because each one points to a different response. Then I would work through the options with the project team: value engineering on the parts of the build the market will not pay for, resequencing to move cheaper packages earlier, renegotiating the contract, or going back to the financier if the return is still sound but the timing has moved. What I would not do is cut quality on the parts purchasers actually notice, because that shows up at settlement. I would document the revised feasibility, tell the financier and the directors early, and reset the cash flow forecast rather than hope it comes back on its own."

4. How do you build and stress test a development feasibility?

Why they ask

Feasibility modelling is the technical heart of the role, and employers need to know you understand the assumptions behind the model, not just the output.

How to structure your answer

Answer methodically: inputs, sources, then the sensitivities you run and the assumptions you challenge most.

Example answer

"I start with the revenue side, using comparable sales and rentals adjusted for the specific location, product type and timing, and I am conservative about the rate I assume for a project that will not settle

for another two years. On the cost side I use the quantity surveyor's plan where there is one, and a benchmark rate plus contingency where there is not. Then holding costs, finance costs, council and authority fees, consultant fees, agent commissions and the GST treatment, and I make sure the margin is calculated after everything, not before. The part that matters most is the sensitivities: I run scenarios on cost, on end value, on interest rates and on program, and I look at how much the project can absorb before the return falls below the threshold the business sets. I also re-run the model at every major milestone, because a feasibility that was signed off at acquisition is a historical document by the time construction starts."

5. Tell me about a time you had to manage a consultant or a builder who was falling behind on the program.

Why they ask

Delivery depends on getting other organisations to perform, and interviewers want a concrete example of how you handle that without damaging the relationship you still need.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Be specific about how you found out, what you said, and how the situation finished.

Example answer

"On a staged residential project, the civil contractor fell behind on the first stage because of wet weather and a crew shortage, and the delay was starting to push into the sales release dates. I got the program in writing from the contractor, worked out which activities were actually on the critical path, and agreed a recovery plan with extra crew on the drainage and a revised sequence so the display could still open on time. I also front footed it with the sales agent so they were not promising purchasers a date we could not hold. We caught most of the lost time, the first release went to market only slightly behind the original plan, and we kept the relationship intact for the second stage."

6. How do you keep risk and safety visible across a project with multiple contractors?

Why they ask

Developers carry duties as principal or as the client, and a candidate who treats safety as the builder's problem alone is a liability on a site.

How to structure your answer

Explain your system and then give one example of it working in practice, covering both the paperwork and what happens on the ground.

Example answer

"I keep one risk register for the project that covers planning, finance, contract, safety and quality, and I review it with the project team on a fixed cycle so it does not become a document nobody opens. On safety, I make sure the principal contractor arrangements are clear before anyone sets foot on site, that inductions and site rules are enforced, and that contract works and public liability cover is current across every package. I walk the site regularly, not to do the builder's job but so I can see what is actually happening and raise anything that does not look right. If an incident or a near miss comes up, I want it reported through the proper channel and closed out with a corrective action, and I report safety and risk status alongside cost and program in the monthly update to the board."