

Planning for the Future?

Review of Planning and Development
Management service support in Denbighshire
County Council

July 2026

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at how Denbighshire County Council (the Council) supports the Planning and Development Management Service (the Planning Service) to operate effectively and efficiently and to contribute to the long-term strategic objectives of the Council.
- 2 This audit focused on the Planning and Development Management Service which includes the Development Management team, Strategic Planning Policy team, and Compliance team. We did not look at the wider strategic management of the Council or individual planning decisions.
- 3 Our work is focused on providing assurance and to aid improvement in how the Council supports the Planning Service in the medium to long term. We recognise that some things that impact this are outside of the Council's control. This includes the level of planning applications it receives, and Wales-wide decisions like the proposed national park. The difficult context means that planning for different scenarios and being clear on the options available is important.

Why this is important

- 4 A planning service plays a key role in shaping well-designed, sustainable communities by guiding development in line with local priorities. It adds value by enabling growth that supports economic opportunity, protects the environment, and enhances quality of life for residents. A strong planning function also helps the Council make the best use of its resources by directing investment to the right places at the right time. This includes writing a Local Development Plan (LDP) and policies that set out what kind of development is suitable in different parts of the county.

- 5 The Public Sector continues to face significant financial challenges as well as increasing and complex demands on services. The Council is under pressure to meet the needs of the community with limited and uncertain resources. Optimising the use of resources is a significant challenge and means the Council must balance different factors to ensure it makes the best use of public money. This makes a clear understanding of the challenges faced by the Planning Service and reviewing of outcomes created, essential to demonstrate the Council is achieving value for money.

What we have found

- 6 Short term there is clear alignment between the objectives of the Council and the Planning Service. Longer term, this consistency is harder to demonstrate, partly due to the expired Local Development Plan. The Council could strengthen outcome monitoring with clearer targets and complete data. There is also an opportunity for the Service to make communication about its staffing and financial resource needs clearer and more consistent.

What we recommend

- 7 We have made three recommendations. The first focuses on how the Planning Service communicates its resource requirements to the Council. The second focuses on understanding the true cost of the Local Development Plan. The third highlights the need for complete and timely monitoring and reporting of data.

Key facts and figures

Local Development Plan planned end date 2021.

Dedicated reserve to complete Local Development Plan £148,000.

Our findings

The Council can only partly demonstrate the Planning Service helps to support its wellbeing objectives

- 8 The short-term objectives of the Council are clearly linked to key documents in the Planning Service. The aims of the Planning Service appear in the Corporate Plan 2022-2027 and other key documents, like the Economic Strategy 2025-2026. The 2025-2026 service plan also aligns with the Council's wider corporate objectives. Staff also showed a thorough understanding of how their work supports the Council's wider goals. This helps ensure the Planning Service is supporting the Council to achieve its wellbeing goals.
- 9 However, long-term planning could be improved by updating the Local Development Plan (LDP). When adopted, it was anticipated the LDP was planned to be in use until 2021, however, it is still being used as no replacement has been produced. Without incorporating a more recent review, there is a risk that planning decisions do not fully support the Council's wider aims. This can make it harder to deliver joined-up, sustainable development and to decide how best to use resources.

The Planning Service has clearly defined roles and responsibilities; however, the regular training that helps embed them has lapsed

- 10 There are clear protocols in place to help support planning committee members to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. For example, terms of reference for the strategic planning group set out clear aims and timelines as well as the reporting framework. Although this was last updated in 2019, the core objectives are appropriate. Detailed protocols help ensure members clearly understand and can fulfil their duties in supporting the Council.

- 11 Training for members is in place including induction training by document review. However, ongoing training is ad hoc with gaps in evidence recording. Formal biannual training in line with the Council's protocol has not been in place since November 2022. The Council is already aware of this and the head of service plans to reintroduce the regular training structure from April 2026. Regular training helps ensure the planning committee continue to support the Council and residents. Up to date training is particularly important for emerging issues such as environmental resilience and national projects.

There are gaps and inconsistencies in how the Council plans and manages the resources of the Planning Service

- 12 The Council's current approach to requesting additional staff for the planning team is inconsistent and reactive. Each of the three key teams are aiming to address staff shortages through different mechanisms. Delays in business case approval, within a challenging economic climate, have also led to gaps in key posts. The shortfall in both operational and strategic capacity within the service can hinder strategic oversight and significantly increases pressure on the workforce. While we recognise there are three distinct teams in the planning service, creating a current and comprehensive picture of the staffing needs for the service as a whole would help support a more resilient and sustainable service.
- 13 The Council has not fully assessed its resource requirements to develop the next iteration of its Local Development Plan (LDP). The current reserve of £148,000 is considered insufficient by the planning department but the true cost has not been assessed. The planning team also consider they need additional staff capacity to complete the process. We understand there are many external factors, such as the national park decision that will impact completion of the LDP, however, an up-to-date LDP is essential to ensure the Planning Service aligns with the corporate objectives of the Council. A clear and transparent assessment of resource requirements is critical for effective strategic planning and realistic budget setting.

- 14 Financial data is monitored by the Planning Service and is presented to the corporate management team on a quarterly basis. We reviewed quarterly reports to the end of December 2025 and the information was complete, showing an overspend against budget of £168,000. Continued use of regular financial monitoring will help the Council make strategic decisions to support the Planning Service.

The Council could improve how it is measuring progress towards intended outcomes within the Planning and Development Service

- 15 The Council could further improve key performance indicators (KPIs) for the Planning Service by making them consistently “SMART”. KPIs are clearly embedded in the service plan and have assigned responsibility to key individuals, however, some indicators do not include targets. Ensuring KPIs are specific and measurable helps the Council determine if the intended outcomes have been achieved and to measure their success.
- 16 Challenges with obtaining key monitoring data from the new IDOX system remain. The Council are aware of these issues and are actively working to resolve them. Councils submit planning performance information to the Welsh Government through quarterly returns.¹ The Welsh Government uses this information to analyse the quality and timeliness of planning decisions. The Council’s quarterly monitoring returns have gaps in data for the financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25. We saw an example where figures for planning applications completed on time were missing for 2024-25. Having access to up-to-date monitoring data allows the Council to clearly understand if they are delivering value for money across the Planning Service.

¹ [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#)

Recommendations

R1 The Council should work with the Planning Service to make one clear and comprehensive business case for the current staffing needs within the department, taking into consideration: **(paragraph 13)**

- 1.1** The potential impact of dedicated legal support.
- 1.2** The true cost of replacing any key members of the team including training time and recruitment costs.
- 1.3** The cross service expected outcomes of the proposed business case. Internal good practices can be drawn on to support this.

R2 The Council should plan how it will resource the next iteration of the Local Development Plan incorporating: **(paragraph 14)**

- 2.1** key milestones including a planned completion date;
- 2.2** assumptions based on the best available information at this time;
- 2.3** scenario planning where there continue to be areas of significant uncertainty; and
- 2.4** a clear estimate of the full cost based on the above.

- R3** The Council should prioritise access to and reporting of monitoring data to clearly determine if they are achieving value for money from the Planning Service and fulfil their expectations for reporting to the Welsh Government (**paragraphs 16 and 17**). This should include:
- 3.1** continuing to work with IDOX to resolve data access issues and provide appropriate staff training; and
 - 3.2** updating KPIs for the Planning Service to ensure they are “SMART”.

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

We looked at how the Council support the Planning Service to deliver value for money in the use of its resources. This included having clear roles and responsibilities for the service, how the Council understands the resources requirements of the planning team and how the performance outcomes on the service are monitored. We looked at the arrangements in place for the 2025-26 financial year.

We did not look at the wider strategic management of the Council or individual planning decisions.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

We reached our conclusions about how the Council supports the Planning Service to deliver value for money by answering four key questions:

- Can the Council demonstrate the Planning Service is a key enabler to support delivery of its Council's well-being objectives?
- Does the Planning Service have clearly defined roles and responsibilities to underpin operational delivery?
- Does the Council have arrangements to plan and manage the resources of its Planning Service?
- Does the Council manage the performance of the Planning Service?

Criteria

We use the audit criteria to help us answer our questions on the Authority's arrangements. They help us to understand what arrangements should or could look like in context. The work of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and our cumulative knowledge shaped their development.

Methods

Our findings are based on document reviews, meeting observations, and interviews with key officers.

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