

Planning Service Review Follow Up – Powys County Council

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Contents

What we looked at	4
What we found	4
Background to this audit	5
Our audit methods	6
Our audit duties	6
Appendix 1 – judgement of progress against the recommendation	7
Appendix 2 – audit questions, criteria and judgement framework	14

Report

What we looked at

- 1 Our audit objective was to assess the Council's progress in addressing the recommendations in the 2023 Auditor General for Wales's Review of the Planning Service ¹.
- 2 This report presents the results of our audit that we undertook during July and August 2024. This audit **does not**:
 - cover all aspects of the Council's Planning Service;
 - review the performance of the Planning Service; and
 - review the merits or decisions of individual planning applications.
- 3 We used audit criteria² to help us assess the Council's progress and used a judgement framework to categorise the Council's progress. Both are set out in **Appendix 2**. Our cumulative audit knowledge informed the criteria and the judgement framework.
- 4 This audit sought to answer the overall question – **Has the Council taken effective action to address the Auditor General for Wales's 2023 report recommendations?**

What we found

- 5 Overall, we found that **the Planning Service has responded quickly by taking effective action to improve its arrangements. The Planning Service has implemented the 2023 recommendations in full.**
- 6 The Planning Service responded positively and quickly to our recommendations by developing a service improvement action plan. That plan clearly set out the actions that the service planned to take to improve its arrangements, some of which went beyond responding to our recommendations. The Planning Service Improvement Board oversees progress against the plan periodically.
- 7 During our fieldwork we observed significant improvements and a positive change in culture and support to officers across the Planning Service. Senior officers in the Planning Service have effectively engaged staff across the service and colleagues from different departments across the Council to address the recommendations. Whilst the corporate functions have provided valuable support to the service since our initial audit, we consider that this type of support should be routinely available to Council services.

¹ Auditor General for Wales (2023) [Review of the Planning Service](#)

² Defined as 'what should be' according to laws or regulations, 'what is expected' according to best practice, or 'what could be', given better conditions.

- 8 At present, the Governance and Audit Committee has not received any updates on the Planning Service's progress in addressing the recommendations. We consider this a missed opportunity to seek corporate assurance that the Planning Service is making progress. Also, it means that the Planning Service has been unable to publicly demonstrate its commitment, progress and successes to date.
- 9 The Planning Service has made the improvements to its arrangements within its existing budget. Significantly, it has remodelled its senior officer team so that it can drive forward the necessary improvements, including new arrangements, ways of working and protocols.
- 10 Officers in the Planning Service now report that they feel listened to, and there is a collaborative approach to improvement. Officers are able to discuss the service improvement action plan and progress. Actions are regularly discussed in the service with opportunities to suggest ideas and different ways of working.
- 11 The Planning Service has responded to our recommendations effectively which, with continued effort and commitment, means it is now better placed to ensure it can sustain those improvements. Currently, the service is responding to the challenge of increasing future demand for ecology input into planning applications.
- 12 **Appendix 1** sets out our detailed judgement of the Council's progress in implementing our 2023 recommendations. This report does not contain any further recommendations.

Background to this audit

- 13 The Planning Service manages the development and use of land in the public interest. It contributes to improving the economic, social, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of Powys. It must reconcile the needs of development and conservation, securing economy, efficiency, and amenity in the use of land. Thereby, ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and protecting and enhancing the built environment.
- 14 It is important that the Council can demonstrate it has taken effective action in addressing our 2023 recommendations and that the changes to the Planning service are sustainable.
- 15 **Exhibit 1** sets out the timeline of events that form the background to this audit.

Exhibit 1: background to this audit

Date	Action
May 2023	Audit Wales published its report following the review of the Planning Service.
June 2023	The Council's Governance and Audit Committee received an action plan setting out the Council's planned actions to address the recommendations.
Summer 2024	This current audit assesses the Council's progress in addressing the recommendations.

Source Audit Wales

Our audit methods

- 16 Our findings are based on reviewing Council documents and interviews with a sample of members, staff in the Planning Service and members of the Council's Corporate Management Team. Our assessment of the Council's progress is limited to these evidence sources.

Our audit duties

- 17 The Council must put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General must be satisfied that it has done this.
- 18 We undertook this audit to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 (2)(d) of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. It may also inform an examination undertaken by the Auditor General under section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

Appendix 1

Judgement of progress³ against the recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Council needs to assure itself that fundamental foundations are in place to enable it to sustainably deliver an effective service. This includes but is not limited to:

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
1.1 (a) review the political and strategic intent for its planning enforcement responsibilities, clearly communicate this, and align resources to deliver the Council's chosen intent.	Implemented <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The Council reviewed its planning enforcement activities and decided it needed dedicated planning enforcement officers. The Head of Service amended the Planning and Regulatory Integrated Business Plan to include a specific objective for planning enforcement. This heightens the profile and importance of planning enforcement activity.<li>2. The Planning Service realigned its existing resources to create specific planning enforcement roles. In 2023, the Council appointed two planning enforcement officers and planning officers are no longer allocated new enforcement cases. This reduces the previous tension between working on planning applications and enforcement cases. However, planning officers have retained historical enforcement cases at a time when caseloads remain high.

³ See **Appendix 2** for further explanation of progress categories.

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The Planning Service has updated its webpages to include more publicly available information on planning enforcement. The Council's approach to planning enforcement is now more transparent. 4. There is a Planning Enforcement Action Plan. This plan includes: enforcement's key aims; provides enforcement planning officers with key performance measures and targets; and improvements to the planning enforcement approach. This conveys the planning enforcement service's priorities, expectations and enables progress monitoring.
<p>1.2 (b) develop a Planning Services Business Plan which underpins the Property, Planning and Public Protection Integrated Business Plan. It should clarify the Planning Service's links between the Planning Service and the Council's Corporate objectives, to focus the service's action on improvement, and set out effective service monitoring arrangements, performance targets,</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Planning Service now has both a service improvement action plan and an enforcement action plan. Both underpin the Planning and Regulatory Service Integrated Business Plan 2024-2028. Within the Integrated Business Plan there are three objectives relating to the Planning Service. There is a strong focus on Planning Service improvement with the key actions and activities aligning with the service's improvement action plan. The Integrated Business Plan also contains information on workforce development, which explains how the Planning Service is addressing previous workforce issues. 2. In developing the Planning and Regulatory Service Integrated Business Plan 2024-2028, the service used the corporate approach in setting and updating its service level risks for the Planning Service. The service identifies several risks that demonstrate the extent and breadth of the risks and challenges the Planning Service faces. There are meaningful controls and actions to mitigate the risks. 3. Moving forward, there are benefits to the service in retaining a service improvement plan. It will help to involve officers in shaping the service's future direction and identifying new opportunities. A future service improvement plan could also help members and senior officers appreciate the

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
workforce development and risk management arrangements.	Planning Service's commitment to continuous improvement and aid in future monitoring of the service.
1.3 (c) safeguard the Planning Service's officers, senior managers and elected members by developing clear arrangements and protocols which set out how they engage directly with planning agents and applicants to ensure integrity, trust and confidence in the service.	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Planning Service has introduced safeguards for its officers and senior managers when they engage directly with planning agents and planning applicants. The Planning Service established a Communications Protocol. This protocol sets out the steps planning agents and planning applicants are encouraged to take when contacting the service on any planning application. 2. The Planning Service has regularly discussed this protocol at the planning agents forum to promote the new way to engage with the service. Also, to encourage all planning agents to adhere to it. The protocol is available on the Planning Service external webpage to promote to the public the best communication channels. 3. The introduction of the Communication Protocol is reducing the amount of correspondence received by senior officers. This also helps safeguard officers against undue pressure, and they feel supported and professionally valued.
1.4 (d) establish regular and effective team meeting arrangements to improve communication within the Planning Service and provide a structured and consistent	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The staff pulse surveys and our interviews show that the Planning Service has significantly better team morale and communication. Structured team meeting arrangements have transformed communication and provide a more supportive working environment. 2. The introduction of weekly development management team meetings brings a range of benefits. These meetings are an opportunity for officers to discuss planning applications and enforcement

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
<p>opportunity for officers to discuss planning and enforcement cases.</p>	<p>cases with colleagues and share professional perspectives. The team also invites internal and external partners and stakeholders to update officers on issues such as ecology, environmental health, built heritage, and design. Officers from the technicians' team receive monthly invites and planning policy officers are invited to attend every quarter.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The Professional Lead for Planning now chairs quarterly meetings for all officers in the service. In addition, there are three-weekly meetings between the Principal Planners, Team Leader, and Professional Lead. The Principal Planners, Team Leader and Professional Lead also regularly meet with the Head of Service. 4. The Planning Service introduced annual away days for all of its officers. To date, there have been two annual away days and officers value these days both from a professional and social perspective. 5. Officers have opportunities to consult on, and shape service improvements. For example, at the June 2023 away day, each officer completed a SWOT⁴ analysis of the service. One idea generated from this away day was establishing a 'Duty line'. This is now available 5 days a week for the public to contact the service with general planning queries and seek advice. 6. Since our original review, officers have returned to working from the office for 2 days a week. Officers we spoke to report that this change has led to improved communication, a more collaborative and integrated working environment and a more settled and cohesive team. 7.

⁴ Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
<p>1.5 (e) put transparent and consistent arrangements in place for the service to act cohesively as a team to discuss officers' differences of opinion on planning applications, to ensure all officers are professionally satisfied with the final planning decisions.</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Planning Service has introduced a way for officers to discuss professional differences of opinion on a planning application. The development management weekly meetings allow discussion of complex or subjective planning applications. These meetings promote a more supportive working environment. These discussions also act as a learning and development opportunity for officers helping them feel more supported and professionally valued.
<p>1.6 (f) establish service standards and protocols and effectively communicate these to all officers to ensure consistent approaches e.g., how to deal with applications with missing information.</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The service has set up a comprehensive range of planning guidance notes. These promote best practice and ensure consistency of approach. Officers can easily access these from the Council's internal SharePoint site. 2. Planning Service officers help develop guidance notes. These are discussed at development management team meetings and at 1-2-1 meetings, where required. These guidance notes are also used as a training resource during staff induction. 3. At the time of our 2023 Planning Service review, the service did not have a consistent way of responding to planning applications with missing information. This was a long-standing and frustrating issue and contributed to officers' large caseloads. To help address this, the Planning Service now has a protocol for agreeing time extensions or additional information requests when dealing with planning applications with missing information. This protocol clarifies the service's approach to ensure a consistent and fair working practice across all staff.

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
	<p>4. The service has also made use of the planning agents forum to make agents aware of this protocol. The service also promotes this protocol on the Council website, so the public can see what standards the service expects.</p>
<p>1.7 (g) put in place formal staff learning opportunities to ensure a consistent, structured and proactive approach to support new officers in the role and provide continuous development opportunities for existing staff.</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Planning Service has a consistent, structured, and proactive approach to supporting new officers. The Planning Service has formalised its new starter induction process, using guidance notes, an induction checklist and individual training plans for new starters. This allows new officers to develop, progress and gain confidence at their own pace. 2. The Planning Service is developing a formal induction process for planning officers gaining promotion to support their transition into a new role. 3. Officers use the development management meetings to share learning from courses they have attended. As stated above, the service invites consultees as well as corporate services to the weekly meetings to provide learning opportunities for officers. Examples include: finance colleagues helping officers interpret financial information relating to rural enterprise planning applications; and the legal officer explaining the process of enforcement legal notices. 4. The Planning Service encourages officers to identify learning and development opportunities. The Planning Service has a training matrix which contains the learning and development requirements for all officers. However, the service would benefit from clarifying who is responsible for keeping the training matrix up to date.

Recommendations	Judgement of progress
<p>1.8 (h) assure that the Planning Service has robust data quality arrangements to ensure that it reports accurate performance data so that staff, Members, Welsh Government and the public can place reliance on its integrity to make accurate and informed decisions</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Planning Service has introduced arrangements to improve its data quality. The service now has a protocol to promote a consistent approach to data entry. There are regular data quality checks before creating performance reports. The Professional Lead for Planning, the Development Management Team Leader and Lead Planning Technician perform these checks. 2. In addition to this recommendation, the Planning Service now uses Power BI to create performance management dashboards and management reports. The performance dashboard is a powerful tool to enable all officers, senior officers and relevant elected members to have up to date and easily accessible performance data. This helps the management and monitoring of the service.
<p>1.9 (i) identify and learn from good practice from other Local Planning Authorities when implementing service improvements.</p>	<p>Implemented</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The service is learning from other Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to help inform its own arrangements and service improvements. Examples include engaging on the extensions of time protocol, Developments of National Significance (DNS) and procurement of a new ICT system. 2. Other LPAs are also approaching the Planning Service to learn from them. Examples include operation of its planning agents forum, performance dashboards and use of Power BI and how the Planning Service is reducing the backlog of enforcement cases.

Appendix 2

Audit criteria and judgement framework

Overall question: **Has the Council taken effective action to address the Auditor General for Wales's 2023 report recommendations?**

Audit criteria

The Council has acted in line with its own intended timescales. Where it has not, it has communicated the delays to senior leaders and elected members

The Council can evidence what has changed because of addressing the recommendation

The Council has put in place appropriate measures of success to understand the impacts of addressing the recommendation

The Council has arrangements to challenge its own assessment of progress in addressing the recommendation

The Council provides periodic updates to elected members on progress against its actions to address the recommendation

Source Audit Wales

Recommendation Status	Explanation
Not accepted	The audited body did not accept our original recommendation. This is recorded in the Management Response Form.
Implemented	The audited body has implemented the recommendation actions, and the recommendation is deemed closed.
Work in progress	The audited body has started work (including planning) to implement the recommendation.
Work not yet started	The audited body has not yet started work to implement the recommendation.
No longer relevant	Other events or circumstances, for example legislative changes or significant changes in the operating environment have overtaken recommendations and they are no longer relevant. Alternatively, the audited body has found another way to implement change which renders the original recommendation obsolete. Also, if a subsequent Audit Wales audit report has made different or overriding recommendations.

Source Audit Wales



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