

Monmouthshire Local Planning Authority

PLANNING ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT (APR) – 2022 –23

PREFACE

I am very pleased to introduce the ninth Annual Performance Report for Monmouthshire County Council's Planning Service.

This report shows that Monmouthshire's Planning Service continues to perform effectively, with two of the thirteen indicators in need of improvement against the Welsh Government's targets. We are performing well in dealing with all types of planning applications and I am pleased to note that the committee process, which has involved a cohort of new Members, is working effectively showing a very good relationship between Members and officers in this authority. The whole team showed commendable resilience during the period in continuing to turnaround planning applications and heritage work in a timely manner and to investigate and resolve enforcement cases, while clearing a backlog from the previous reporting periods. This was despite having to recruit, train up and assimilate several new members of staff across all elements of the Development Management Team. There has also been significant resource issues in organisations who respond to consultations on our planning applications.

Where we think there are areas that need improving, we have clear actions to improve those elements of the service.

Good planning is central to the Council's purpose of achieving a zero carbon County and supporting well-being, health and dignity for everyone at every stage of life, while also generating growth in the economy and protecting the heritage and landscapes that make our County the beautiful place it is. Good planning is key to achieving our well-being objectives for everyone who lives, works and spends time in our beautiful County. As part of this, Planning has a key role in tackling climate change, placemaking, delivering affordable homes for those in housing need and assisting the local economy to overcome current economic pressures.

Councillor Paul Griffiths, Cabinet Member

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This is Monmouthshire's ninth Annual Performance Report, which looks at the performance of the Planning Service against nationally set performance indicators, Welsh Government (WG) targets, the Wales average performance, and Monmouthshire's performance last year. The results are considered in the context of the challenges, opportunities, priorities and resources (staffing and financial) available to us. The objective of the APR is to reflect on and celebrate good performance, identify areas for improvement, and look across Wales to identify potential areas of best practice that we could learn from or share with others.

1.2 The nature of the performance indicators means their focus is on decision speed and customer service rather than measuring whether or not better outcomes have been achieved. It has not yet been possible to identify an objective way of measuring outcomes, however we seek to prioritise securing the best scheme possible rather than traditional indicators relating to speed of decision-making. Research has identified that our customers' priority is securing planning permission: customers generally understand the benefits of good design and, within reason, do not see the time taken as a priority.

1.3 For the purposes of this report, performance is analysed across the four key aspects of planning service delivery as set out in WG's Planning Performance Framework:

- Efficiency;
- Quality;
- Engagement; and
- Enforcement.

The performance of the Local Development Plan is more than adequately covered in the Annual Monitoring Report, also being submitted to WG in October 2023. For the other areas in the Planning Performance Framework, performance data has been obtained by Monmouthshire officers from the Development Management Quarterly Returns and our own back-office system. Comparisons have been made with the Welsh average performance for each measure over 2018/19 (the latest reporting period for this national data) as well as our own performance against the measures over 2022/23. Performance is ranked as 'good', 'fair' or 'needs improvement'.

1.4 Based on the performance information in Section 6 and Annex A, we can be pleased with the service we deliver given the challenges we have faced. During this period:

- The proportion of all applications determined within 8 weeks, or an agreed timescale, improved compared to the year before rising from 81% to 89% and remained well above the WG target of 80%;
The average time to determine all applications increased to 110 days (from 106 days in 2021/22) explained by the impact of the backlog caused by previous staffing shortages within the application team (and among our consultee organisations) as well as the delay caused by the phosphate pollution issue that led to a pause in determining many applications in the central and northern parts of the County;

- The proportion of major applications determined within agreed timescales was 71% and was above the Welsh average in 2018/19;
- 75% of listed building applications were determined within approved timescales and we provided a valued Heritage service for Blaenau Gwent Council;
- The percentage of applications that were approved remained high at 94%, well above the WG average;
- During this reporting period, we closed 361 applications seeking pre-application advice. 147 planning applications stemmed from the pre-application advice we gave. Of those that have been determined seven were refused (5%) and nine were withdrawn (6%) due to a change in the applicants' circumstances; the remainder were approved (89%). All seven that were refused had not followed the advice we gave at pre-application stage. Consequently, we have a 100% success rate of applications that went to decision stage and followed our pre-application advice.

1.5 A summary table of our performance can be found in Annex A.

The two enforcement measures had been in need of improvement over previous reporting periods, although we have noted following Members' queries about the accuracy of data at the recent Performance & Overview Select Committee, that we were measuring the positive action measure incorrectly and this inflated the figure by including the initial investigation period which meant the measure was 'poor' whereas it should have been 'fair'. We also note that improvement in the enforcement team's performance have been sustained in the first two quarters of 2023/24 where the two key indicators have moved to 'amber' or 'green'.

2.0 CONTEXT

- 2.1 This section sets out the planning context within which the Local Planning Authority operates, both corporately and in terms of Monmouthshire as a county, for the 2022-23 period.

Corporate Context

- 2.2 The Council adopted its Local Development Plan in February 2014 and submitted its eighth Annual Monitoring Report to Welsh Government in October 2022.
- 2.3 We contribute to delivering the Council's high-level objectives, set out in the Council's Community and Corporate Plan 2022-28. The objectives we contribute to are:

MCC Purpose	A zero carbon county, supporting well-being, health and dignity for everyone at every stage of life
CC Objectives	A Fair place to live where the effects of inequality and poverty have been reduced; A Green place to live and work, with reduced carbon emissions, and making a positive contribution to addressing the climate and nature emergency; A Thriving and ambitious place, where there are vibrant town centres, where businesses can grow and develop; A Safe place to live where people have a home and community where they feel secure; A Connected place where people feel part of a community and are valued; A Learning place where everybody has the opportunity to reach their potential.

- 2.4 The Planning Service's purpose, 'To plan for, advise on, give permission for and ensure the best possible development', links directly to all six of these objectives. The Planning Service sits within Communities and Place Directorate.
- 2.5 The Planning Service is made up of i) the Planning Policy and ii) the Development Management (DM) teams. The primary purpose of the Planning Policy team is to prepare and monitor the statutory Local Development Plan (LDP) and assist in its effective implementation through the Development Management (planning application) process. This ensures that the land use and sustainable development objectives of the Council are met ensuring the provision of an adequate supply of land in sustainable locations for housing, retail, education, recreation, tourism, transport, business, waste and other needs,

whilst protecting the county's valued environmental, heritage and cultural assets. This work aligns directly with achieving the Council's objectives.

2.6 Key areas of work for the Service include:

- Carrying out a replacement of the Monmouthshire LDP.
- Preparing and co-ordinating thematic supplementary planning guidance to help to foster the interpretation and implementation of LDP policy.
- Implementing the Council's LDP through engaging and working with communities, and partnership working with both internal and external partners.
- Monitoring and evaluating development plan policies, including preparing the statutory LDP Annual Monitoring Report (AMR).
- Maintaining the LDP evidence base and ensuring fitness for purpose for future LDP revision.
- Providing pre-application advice to customers;
- Determining planning applications in accordance with adopted policy and material planning considerations, taking into account stakeholder comments and corporate objectives;
- Securing financial contributions from developers to offset the infrastructure demands of new development;
- Safeguarding the County's 2400 Listed Buildings and 31 Conservation Areas, areas of archaeological sensitivity, the Wye Valley AONB and the Brecon Beacons National Park;
- Providing a heritage service for our neighbouring colleagues in Blaenau County Borough that works in a manner that is consistent and as well-resourced as the one provided for Monmouthshire.
- Taking robust enforcement action against unauthorised development that is unacceptable in the public interest.

2.7 The main customer of the Planning Service is the applicant of any planning application, however there are numerous stakeholders including individuals, communities, businesses, third sector organisations, other Council Services and elected Members.

Local Context

2.8 Located in South East Wales, Monmouthshire occupies a strategic position between the major centres in South Wales, the South West of England and the Midlands. The County shares a border with the neighbouring Local Planning Authorities of Newport, Torfaen and Brecon Beacons National Park (BBNP) in Wales and Gloucestershire, the Forest of Dean and Herefordshire in England, with Severn crossing links to South Gloucestershire. The County forms the gateway to South Wales and is part of the Cardiff Capital City Region. This location gives the County a distinctive identity.

Our people

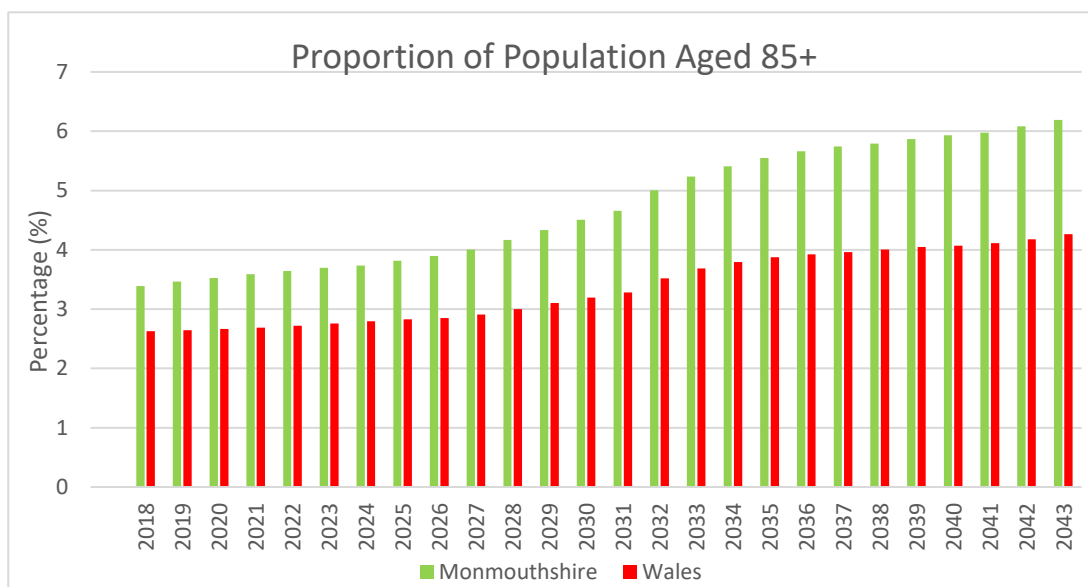
2.8.1 Monmouthshire covers an area of approximately 88,000 hectares with a population of 93,000 in 2021¹. Almost 8% of residents reside within the BBNP area of the County. The County has a low population density of 1.1 persons per hectare – significantly lower than the South East Wales average of 5.3 persons per hectare – reflecting the area's rural nature. Only 53% of the population lived in wards defined as being urban areas (i.e. with a population of more than 10,000).

¹ Source: Census 2021 first release of results (28.06.2022). Please note figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

2.8.2 Our population has been increasing steadily, up 7.6% between 2001 and 2011 compared with the Wales average of 5.5%. The increase from 2011 to 2021² represents a lower increase at 1.8%, however, this is marginally higher than the growth for Wales over the same period of 1.4%. This increase is wholly attributable to inward migration, with natural change showing negative growth. The County has a relatively high and increasing proportion of older age groups, and a lower and decreasing proportion of younger adults compared with the UK and Wales averages. The graph below illustrates the proportion of those aged 85+ in Monmouthshire in comparison to Wales, based upon the 2018-based local authority population projections for Wales, 2018 to 2043. It shows that the trend in the ageing demographic is likely to continue. The 2021³ Census initial release suggests the proportion of those aged 85+ is 3.4% in Monmouthshire compared to 2.7% in Wales.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Stats Wales

2.8.3
This



Demographic change has significant implications for economic activity and demand for services to enable our citizens to continue to live independent lives.

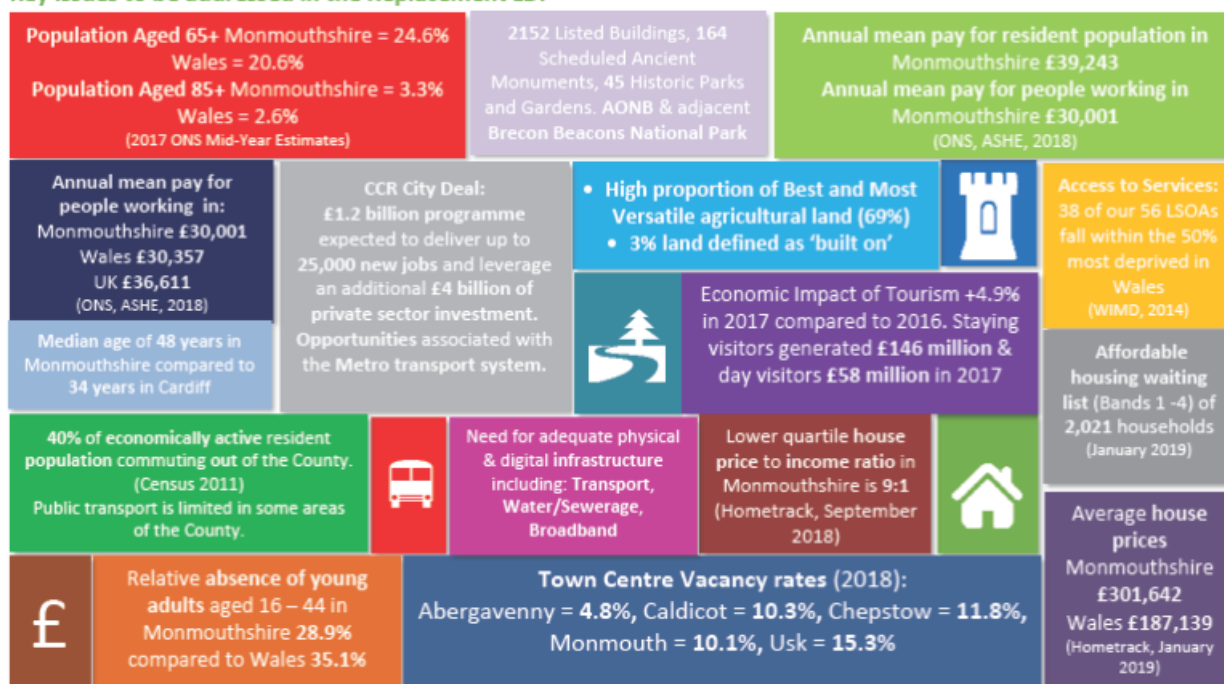
2.8.4 The following diagram encapsulates the issues that the Council are seeking to address during the development of the Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP) over the next few years (Please see revised delivery agreement):

² Source: Census 2021 first release of results (28.06.2022). Please note figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

³ Source: Census 2021 first release of results (28.06.2022). Please note figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Monmouthshire Replacement Local Development Plan – Issues, Vision and Objectives

Key Issues to be addressed in the Replacement LDP



2.9 Housing and quality of life

2.9.1 The County has three broad categories of settlement:

- The historic market towns of Abergavenny, Chepstow and Monmouth have developed over many years to have a wide range of opportunities for employment, shopping, community facilities and public transport;
- The newer settlements in Severnside of Caldicot/Portskewett, Magor/Undy, Rogiet and Sudbrook where recent high levels of residential growth have taken place without the local jobs and community facilities to match. The area benefits, however, from a strategic location at the 'Gateway' to Wales with good access to the employment markets of Newport, Cardiff and Bristol;
 The rural area, containing the small town of Usk, the larger villages of Raglan and Penperlleni, and a large number of smaller villages, widely dispersed around the County.

2.9.2 Over the last decade, housing completions in the Monmouthshire LPA area have averaged over 300 dwellings per annum, although there have been significant annual variations with 205 completions in 2014/15 and 443 in 2018/19. To deliver the LDP housing requirement, 488 completions per annum were required (2013-2021). During 2022/23 there were 343 housing completions. This is discussed in more detail in the LDP Annual Monitoring Report.

2.9.3 Land Registry data indicates that average house prices in Monmouthshire have increased with average prices in quarter 1 (January to March) 2022 standing at £334,148, significantly higher than the 2012 quarter 4 baseline price (£188,720).

Between 2006 (the time the Monmouthshire Unitary Development Plan was adopted) and March 2022, there have been 4,540 completions of which 903 were affordable, equating to 20% of all dwellings built. Since LDP adoption (2014) to March 2022 there have been 2,535 completions of which 530 were affordable, equating to 21% of all dwellings constructed. This affordable housing provision only relates to those units derived from planning consents but additional affordable housing provision can result if open market houses are purchased by a registered social landlord.

2.9.4 Monmouthshire is generally a prosperous County offering a high quality of life for its residents. However, poor access to community facilities and declining local service provision is an issue for rural and ageing communities. The health of Monmouthshire's population is generally better than the Wales average, with greater life expectancies and higher proportion of residents classing themselves as being in good health (2011 Census). Fewer residents in the County suffer with a limiting long-term illness compared with Wales as a whole. The rate of reported crime in Monmouthshire tends to be lower than for Wales as a whole.

2.10 **Our economy**

210.1 The ONS Annual Population Survey suggests that the County has a high proportion of working age people in employment (77.7% January 2021 - December 2021) compared to neighbouring Authorities including Newport (72.7%), Cardiff (74.9%), Blaenau Gwent (71.1%) and Torfaen (70.3%). The equivalent figure for Wales is (73.1%). Our economy is reliant on the public sector and services for employment:

- In 2020, the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) records that the public administration, education and health sector accounts for 30.9% of jobs;
- The distribution, retail, hotels and restaurants sector accounts for 27.9% of jobs;
- Tourism, as part of the services sector, is also important in the County (see 2.16.3 below).

2.10.2 The County had 4,490 active enterprises in 2021, 10% of which were in the property and business services sector. The three sectors with the most businesses were Professional, scientific and technical services (17%); Agriculture, forestry and fishing (16%) and Construction (11%). Accommodation and food services accounted for 7%. The UK Business count dataset accessed via Nomis also suggests that 98.5% of the County's businesses are classified as small (i.e. up to 49 employees).

2.10.3 Tourism is vital to Monmouthshire's economy and generates income to support a wide range of businesses that benefit from spending by visitors. According to figures supplied by tourism economic indicator 2021 STEAM (Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor), the sector brought in £182.79 to Monmouthshire in 2021 and supported the equivalent of 2,336 full-time jobs. Each visitor contributing to the county's economy by purchasing food and drink, fuel, services and accommodation spends on average over £77 per day.

2.10.4 Monmouthshire's tourism performance over the life of the previous plan displayed an encouraging 10% real growth in terms of economic impact, an increase of 8.7% in visitor numbers and a 1.5% growth in full-time jobs. The approved Destination Management Plan has been developed following a review of the previous plan and is based on Monmouthshire's best prospects for tourism growth as well as extensive consultation with

stakeholders. The Plan capitalises on key opportunities for Monmouthshire, including its location at the gateway to Wales offering an initial chance to make a great impression, especially now that the Severn Bridge tolls have been phased out.

2.10.5 The 2021 Welsh Government Commuting Statistics indicate that 61.2% of the County's working residents work in the area. This is an increase on previous years and suggests that there has been some progress in meeting the aspiration to increase the proportion of resident workforce working within Monmouthshire over the Plan period. However, the same data source suggests that Monmouthshire has a net outflow of 2,800 commuters – with 14,300 commuting into the Authority to work and 17,100 commuting out. There was significant in-commuting from Newport (3,000), Torfaen (1,900) and Blaenau Gwent (1,400), and from England (2,900). The main areas for out-commuting were Newport (2,600), Torfaen (2,400), Cardiff (1,600) with a further 4,600 going to Bristol. A relatively high proportion of Monmouthshire's residents travel long distances to work, with a high usage of the private car. Heavy reliance on the private car and limited opportunities for public transport is a particular issue in rural areas.

2.10.6 Other key challenges facing the Planning Service include areas at risk of flooding (including most of the Gwent Levels and the flood plains of the Rivers Usk and Wye and their tributaries). There are, however, flood defences within the towns of Chepstow, Monmouth and Usk.

2.11 Our built heritage

2.11.1 The Monmouthshire LPA area has a rich built heritage and historic environment which includes:

- Approximately 2,400 Listed Buildings, of which 2% are Grade I, 10% are Grade II* and 88% are Grade II. Of note, around 176 Listed Buildings have been identified as being at risk.
- 31 Conservation Areas – designated for their special historic or architectural interest, covering some 1,648 hectares in total;
- 45 Historic Parks and Gardens – identified as having a Special Historic Interest, covering 1,910 hectares;
- 3 Landscapes of Outstanding Historic Interest identified by Cadw (parts of Blaenavon, the Gwent Levels and the Lower Wye Valley);
- 164 Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

3.0 PLANNING SERVICE

Organisational setting

3.1 Towards the end of 2021/22, the Planning Service underwent significant changes, primarily in the Applications, Heritage and Enforcement Teams. In the Applications Team, three Development Management Officers left the team, one colleague following a prolonged period of sickness, one to pursue a different career and the other following a promotion to another planning authority in S-E Wales. Unsurprisingly, this left significant gaps in staffing, diverted more work onto remaining staff and managers and led to a downturn in end-to-end performance across all types of applications, not just householder and minor

applications. As a response, a new temporary DMO post and a trainee planner post were created and successful candidates were appointed in late 2021 to address the build-up of work. Those two temporary officers have now been appointed to full time DM Officer roles following interview for the permanent (and vacant) posts. The other DMO post was taken up by the Council's former Enforcement Monitoring Officer so that all the Applications Team posts were filled towards by the end of the 2021/22 reporting period.

In Heritage there was a minor re-structure following the decision to suspend collaboration work with Torfaen Council (this was partly owing to resource pressures and partly due to the lack of ability to retain the Senior Heritage Officer post funded by Torfaen). A post for a Heritage Officer filled in July 2022. The Planning Service's Tree Officer left in October 2022 to take up a similar role in S-W England and was replaced in January 2023 by a new officer also working 0.6 FTE like their predecessor.

In Enforcement, two vacant posts were filled in early 2022. Owing to these gaps in appointments, significant pressure was experienced by the remaining team members and performance unsurprisingly dropped off.

In the Planning Support Team, a Planning Support Officer opted to take up a part-time role and the vacant element of their role was filled in 2022.

In the Policy Team, a Senior Officer retired in December 2022 and the Research Officer left for a new job in the private sector in September 2022. Recruitment proved challenging and they were replaced during summer 2023.

3.2 Department structure and reporting lines for the 2022-23 reporting period



Planning Service staffing structure for the 2022-23 reporting period



Budgets

- 3.3 The two main costs for the service are staff costs and the LDP budget (money is transferred from the above budget to sit in an LDP reserve, built up to fund the next LDP). Income is generated by planning application fees and charges for our discretionary services including our pre-application advice service (the latter amounted to approximately £47,000 over 2022/23, slightly higher than the previous year) as well as the Planning Service’s newer discretionary services that are discussed below.
- 3.4 Planning application fee income (£475k) was lower than 2021/22 and less than in most of the previous reporting periods. The prime cause was the reduction in the number of major planning applications which provide much higher fees compared to minor applications. This has inevitably been the result of the impact of the riverine phosphate constraint in settlements like Abergavenny and Monmouth (this is discussed in later sections of this Report) as well as the late stage of the lifecycle of the LDP. Fee projection work means there is likely to be more activity on housing sites over 2023/24 in respect of sites allocated in the current LDP that have not yet come forward (Tudor Road and Drewen Farm, Monmouth) although this is subject to phosphate issues being resolved. Delays to the review stages of the new LDP will mean there will be no new allocated housing sites coming forward until Deposit/ Examination stage, probably in the later part of 2024. Application fees are set periodically by Welsh Government but they do not rise by inflation each year (the last increase was in 2020) and fee income is dependent on economic activity which is also out of the Council’s hands.
- 3.5 Research by the Welsh Government identifies that application fees recover approximately 50% of the cost of dealing with planning applications. Additional costs are incurred through the work involved in the statutory Development Plan, and via other services such as enforcement and heritage management. Increased planning application fee income is used to reduce the net cost of the service to the Council. In-year windfall extra income is used to balance the Council’s budgets and offset overspend in other services. Conversely as has been the case during recent years, underspend in other services was used to offset DM’s under-recovery of income, when economic and other circumstances resulted in a sudden drop in fee income. Application fee income has fluctuated significantly over recent years, and this poses a challenge for budget management going forward. Fee income is heavily influenced by the wider economy, for example house-building (which itself is affected by mortgage lending and development viability) and other funding streams.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Budgeted fee income	£633k	£668k	£684k	£681k	£693k	£589k	£480k	£480k	£570k
Actual income	£664k	£560k	£430k	£653k	£666k	£494k*	£651k	£554k	

N.B. Fee income includes planning application fees, pre-application advice income and the discretionary fees for fast track applications. The 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22 figure also includes payment from Torfaen Council towards funding the joint Heritage Service, that has now ended.

*This reduced level of income was then offset by a grant from WG due to the pandemic

Staff resources

- 3.6 Staffing levels for the reporting period are shown in the chart at paragraph 3.2 above. Key changes over 2021-2023 saw significant turnover of staff within Planning as discussed in section 3.1 above.
- 3.7 For the reporting period, sickness levels were relatively low. The pandemic did have an impact on the capacity of officers in previous reporting periods and certainly over 2021/22 (and 2022-23 in the Policy Team) there have been notable pressures caused during the period between staff appointments – exacerbated by the relatively high turnover of staff during this period. Morale of team members had been impacted by the length of the pandemic and the sense of isolation home-working can have as well as the build-up of work as staff have left and their work has been passed onto remaining staff. It is fair to say that the recruitment of a new cohort of planners has revitalised the team, however, and has enabled the existing staff to get back on top of workloads. To tackle issues of performance and morale, managers put in place regular meetings, welfare chats, counselling and a more structured approach to performance management. In addition, we have invested in young planners who are seeking to enter the profession by providing a trainee post (one year placement) in both the Policy and DM teams – the latter assisting the workload of the planning applications case officers by having their own caseload of householder and minor applications.
- 3.8 Training and development opportunities for colleagues were primarily events organised by the Council itself or occasionally by the RTPI, including the Wales Planning Conference. There was also a law update by FTB Chambers and the annual Welsh Enforcement Conference. In-house opportunities were provided via quarterly Development Management and Planning Policy Liaison Meetings. There is also an opportunity for DM officers to discuss individual cases with colleagues at casework management meetings held twice a week. A junior officer in the team has enrolled on the RTPI-accredited Masters course studying for a planning degree, part time.

Three staff within DM have undertaken Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) qualifications over recent years.

4.0 OUR LOCAL STORY

Workload

- 4.1 Key projects during the reporting period included:
- Consideration was given as to how best to progress the RLDP having regard to the challenges that arose following public consultation and engagement on the previous Preferred Strategy in Summer 2021, namely the Welsh Government objection to the level of growth set out in that Preferred Strategy and water quality issues in the Rivers Wye and Usk, whilst also ensuring that the RLDP delivers on our objectives and addresses our core issues of providing affordable housing, reducing the need for people to travel and seeking to address our demographic imbalance. In September 2022 Council endorsed the proposal to proceed with a new growth and spatial strategy that responds to the above. Reflecting this, a revised Delivery Agreement was agreed by Council and agreed with the Welsh Government

(December 2022) and the revised RLDP Preferred Strategy and Candidate Sites Register (CSR) were subject to public consultation and engagement from 5th December 2022 – 30th January 2023, with eight engagement drop-in events held throughout the County, along with two virtual events. Approximately 220 Preferred Strategy and 650 CSR representations were submitted during the consultation period. Work progressed on the candidate site assessments, development of the RLDP evidence base and processing representations. Feedback from the Preferred Strategy and Candidate Site Register consultation is anticipated to be reported to Council in October 2023. The outcome will inform the next key stage of the RLDP, the Deposit Plan.

- Over the last two reporting periods the work pattern has adapted from 100% of our staff working from home to a more hybrid arrangement with officers using collaboration spaces in County Hall to meet as a group on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Support Team colleagues normally using the original space in the office to meet, scan and train colleagues. Site visits for planning applications have continued although we suspended visits for pre-application advice submissions until our resources were back to full capacity. During the pandemic we had let agents know that all applications to be submitted should be done so electronically as the office was temporarily closed and paper forms of submission could not therefore be scanned for the case officer and consultation purposes. This appears to have produced a shift to almost 100% electronic submissions. Planning Committee has reverted to a hybrid arrangement with some Members preferring to attend in County Hall (others opting to attend virtually).
- Continuing a joint heritage service for Monmouthshire and Blaenau Gwent Councils. This commenced in January 2019 and has provided our neighbouring authority with expert heritage advice without the need to employ its own officer or commission a consultant. MCC manages the service for BGCBC via a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and provides the staff to deliver a resilient heritage service assisted by BGBC funding.
- Towards the end of the 2021, as a planning authority we were faced with a new constraint of riverine phosphate pollution. Within Monmouthshire it was identified that within the River Usk 88% of the river's water bodies failed to meet the required water quality target and within the River Wye 67% failed to meet the target. As a result of this failure NRW have issued detailed planning guidance to ensure that the environmental capacity of the rivers (which are designated special areas of conservation) do not deteriorate any further. Any proposed development within the catchment areas of the rivers that might increase phosphate levels need to clearly evidence within a planning application that the development can demonstrate phosphate neutrality or betterment in its design and/or its contribution to the water body. In most cases there will be limited capacity to connect to the public sewerage system and an alternative solution will have to be found. This requirement on drainage considerations has impacted on all development that increases the volume or concentration of wastewater. We have been working through the guidance and applying it to all new applications in those Wye and Usk catchment areas. This has sometimes delayed applications and many were on hold until the Council had developed a clear strategy for dealing with such issues. We continue to work with a wide range of agencies including WG, NRW, Welsh Water and other authorities (including new nutrient management boards) to find sustainable solutions to this significant environmental problem. Recent work has seen DC-WW commit to providing phosphate stripping technology at Monmouth and Llanfoist waste water treatments works by April 2025. This commitment will help bring forward much needed development in the main towns of Monmouth and Abergavenny.

- Delivering our bespoke pre-application advice service for potential applicants, as well as offering pre-purchase certificates and completion certificates.
- Successfully recruiting new staff and training them to adapt to their new roles in DM and Policy Teams.
- Implementing prioritised elements of the Team’s Digital Plan to improve our processes and customer experience – including upgrades to the Idox Document Management System (DMS) and Public Access (PA).
- Securing detailed planning permissions for the new 21st Century Comprehensive School at Abergavenny, two major housing developments at Vinegar Hill and Rockfield Farm, Undy - both strategic housing sites in the LDP, a significant employment development at Wales 1 Business Park, Magor (14,400sq.m), a substantial food retail development at Bulwark neighbourhood centre, a re-development at Nevill Hall Hospital to provide a new two-storey satellite radiotherapy unit and a new Police Station to serve the Abergavenny area and the A465 corridor at Llanfoist.



Artist impression of new police station located near A465 at Llanfoist (above) and now under construction (below)

4.2 Last year there was a decline in the number of applications received (12%), influenced by the UK's current economic challenges, the impact of phosphate pollution in the SAC catchment areas and the lifecycle of the LDP which is in the process of being replaced. The percentage of applications determined within agreed timescales improved by 8% on the previous year and is rated 'green' (89%). The proportion of approvals remained high at 94%. During 2022-23, 96% of applications were determined under delegated powers while 35 planning applications were decided by Planning Committee (Wales's average in 2018/19 was 93%).

	2014 -15	2015 -16	2016 -17	2017 -18	2018 -19	2019 -20	2020 -21	2021- 22	2022- 23
Applications received	1173	1284	1117	1188	1126	1134	1126	1154	1014
Applications determined	1053	1085	1087	1071	1101	1106	947	1152	1026
% within 8 weeks or agreed timescale	76%	79%	90%	91%	88%	91%	91%	81%	89%
% applications approved	95%	95%	96%	95%	95%	97%	97%	97%	94%

4.3 A key area of work over the last four to five years has been the development of new, bespoke services. The most popular of these has been the Fast Track services for householder applications, lawful development certificates (LDCs) (existing and proposed) and listed building consent. Unfortunately due to the Covid pandemic and subsequent staffing challenges we had to suspend the Fast Track services. We have now reintroduced the Fast Track services over the next reporting period following our successful recruitment drive. A summary of the current system as well as other bespoke services we offer is set out below.

4.4.1 The Fast Track service accelerates the administration and processing of the application for a small additional charge (currently set at 50% of the equivalent application fee for the standard service e.g. for a householder application this would be £230 plus £115 = £345). The offer is that Fast track applications are determined within 28 days following the submission of a valid application. This decision period varies for fast track applications for a certificate of lawfulness (10 days) and applications for listed building consent (35 days). In the unlikely event of not being able to achieve this target or agree a short extension of time (no more than 5 working days) we will refund the fast track service fee.

4.4.2 We also provide a *pre-purchase certificate* service aimed at people looking to buy a property in Monmouthshire. The application would provide the applicant with i) a planning history search; ii) details of planning permissions and listed building consents and iii) enforcement history relating to identified breaches of planning control. This service would include a site visit and identify whether there are any breaches of planning control and whether or not any breaches would be enforceable. The certificate confirms that any approved development at the site, up to the point of the request, has been carried out in accordance with approved plans and that there is no

breach of planning control at the site. We aim to provide a written response within 28 days. This service looks at compliance with all types of planning permissions including listed building consent: it does not provide a substitute to lawful development certificates.

4.4.3 The other discretionary service we offer is a *certificate of completion*. The certificate will indicate whether or not the planning permission and/or Listed Building Consent applied for has been carried out in accordance with the approved plans, and also it would confirm the status of all planning conditions and any approved amendments if applicable. The purpose of this service is to offer support to applicants, agents or any other interested party that the works are appropriate and acceptable once they have been built. If there is an issue of noncompliance this will be brought to the applicant's attention and an opportunity provided for the breach of planning control to be rectified. The service includes a site inspection and desk based research and investigation. We will aim to provide a written response within 28 days.

4.5 These discretionary services were commenced on 1st July 2017 (they were rolled out slowly and then gathered pace until the pandemic when lockdowns, restrictions and home-working meant the pressure on staff time needed a response; priorities were put on applications and pre-application advice so the fast track service was suspended). As they have now been recommenced, we will review the effectiveness of these services during the next reporting period.

4.6 In more recent years, we have introduced planning performance agreements (PPAs) with applicants to provide a systematic framework of project management for more complex planning applications with milestones agreed such as submission of the application, set meeting dates and a projected committee date. The first was pioneered at Fairfield Mabey strategic, mixed use site in Chepstow and was well-received by those involved including the applicant. During 2022/23, two PPAs were used for major proposals at Wales One, Magor (a large employment proposal) and the Wye Bridge active travel scheme. The fees for these two PPAs totalled approximately £40,000 which helped the Planning Team and internal consultees manage their resources to meet the target dates in the PPA.

4.6 In relation to enforcement workload, the team were significantly hampered throughout the previous reporting period by vacancies in two posts due to those officers leaving for new roles either within the wider DM team or in a neighbouring authority. Positively, the more recent additional resource in the small team has seen performance improve substantially. We also recently noted that we were undervaluing the performance of the team by measuring the 'positive action' indicator wrongly, adding in the initial investigation period which should be measured separately. For 2022/23 this figure improved from the old method of measurement of 290 days to a more accurate 123 days which is now a fair level of performance. Additionally, progress is being maintained during the (next reporting) 2023/24 period. Action 2 for this priority area is retained to seek longer, sustainable improvement. Improvements to internal processes have enabled cases to be closed earlier and to focus activity on the more serious breaches of control.

4.7 Value of Planning

4.7.1 RTPi Cymru has published a toolkit which measures the value generated by a local authority planning service. The tool has been developed to capture the economic, social and environmental

value at a local planning authority level across Wales. The tool and its 'Value Dashboard' have been designed to provide RTPI Cymru and the Welsh Government with a platform to demonstrate to local authorities, national policy makers, the private sector, researchers and other broader policy and media audiences, the value planning contributes and how planning is positively contributing to Wales' seven well-being goals. The data has been updated to reflect planning permissions and completions in the current reporting period, 2022/23. The toolkit has been a very useful means of promoting the good work undertaken by the department that is often taken for granted. Over this period, the toolkit concludes that the service has contributed £84.7M to the local economy by the allocation of sites in the LDP, the safeguarding of land, the granting and implementation of planning permissions, the operation of its enforcement function and the securing of planning obligations. In the two previous reporting periods this equated to approximately £87M – that higher figure reflecting more construction activity compared to 2022/23 because of the lifecycle of the LDP and the impact of the phosphate pollution issue.

We aim to update this for the ensuing reporting periods. The 'Dashboard' data summarises the Planning Service's contribution below:

Value of Planning in Monmouthshire 2022/23

Planning service key data



31 FTE jobs in planning service



1,014 applications handled



£0.5m collected in fees

LDP Land Safeguarded



LDP Land Allocated

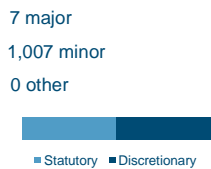


LDP Value

£2.1m uplift value
(based on land allocated for whole plan period)

Value adding policies ? 89%

Applications



0 DCOs dealt with
2 DNS dealt with
67 LBC applications granted
11 refusals appealed
1 judicial reviews

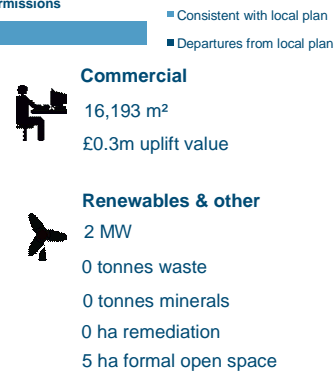
Decisions



Permissions

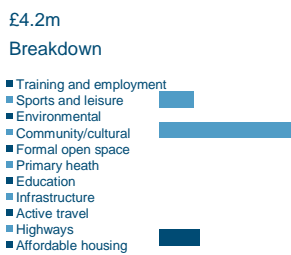


Permissions



Contributions

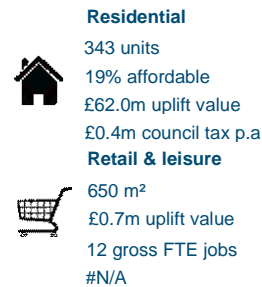
Section 106 income



CIL income



Completions



Commercial



Renewables



Tourism



Enforcement

384 enforcement complaints
4 planning contraventions
3 enforcement notices
4 breach of condition notices
0 stop notices
3 section 125 notices



Wider indicators



In 2022/23 the total value of planning was £84.7m

SOURCES: Planning function outputs (LPA survey), Land and property value data (JLL estimates), business rates valuations (Valuation Office Agency), employment densities (English Homes & Communities Agency), Council tax rates (StatsWales), Health benefits for Affordable Housing (Department for Communities and Local Government Appraisal Guide, based on various studies outlined in app databook), Community benefit from renewables (Renewables UK Cymru). Some of the calculations require high level assumptions to convert between units/m²/ha. Where possible, benchmarks have been employed otherwise reasonable assumptions have been used. Business rate, council tax and gross FTE job estimates based on assumption of 100% occupancy and do not factor in any displacement. Numbers of applications and decisions are unlikely to match up as these can take place in different financial years for any given application. 'Value adding policies' refers to the proportion of policies the team has identified as adding 'intangible value' that are included in local plans. Approvals and refusals do not sum to 100% due to applications carry across years. The total value of planning only incorporates some of the metrics presented in the dashboard.



ARUP

JLL



Housing developments recently completed – top left at Devauden that involved 60% of homes as affordable housing units; top right - a 100% affordable housing scheme on the site a former garage block off Hereford Road, Abergavenny; bottom left – a 100% affordable housing scheme on brownfield land in Caldicot and bottom right – an innovative mews development of affordable housing in Bulwark

Local pressures

4.8 Key local pressures include:

- Enabling delivery of the County's housing needs: bringing forward allocated LDP sites; site viability; achieving good planning decisions, creating sustainable and balanced communities and seeking to achieve a good level of housing growth having regard to strong demand;
- Managing the development plan and development management process having regard to the impact of riverine phosphate pollution that has affected development proposals in the central and northern parts of the County significantly;
- Ensuring full capacity of our staffing levels and to recruit promptly where vacancies arise;
- Securing timely consultation responses from consultees, both internal and external;
- The work associated with the replacement of the adopted LDP having regard to the challenging timetable for delivery;
- The need to help resource and deliver the Strategic Development Plan for SE Wales;
- The lack of income from major planning applications due to the gap between the implementation of the current LDP and the adoption of its successor with associated impacts on budgets to resource the service;
- Career development and training support for staff in the light of limitations on budgets.

4.9 One of our key challenges is balancing our aim of creating quality places in a timely manner while ensuring schemes are viable and help deliver housing numbers. We are, however, clear that quality is more important than quantity. The introduction of a place-making emphasis in Planning Policy Wales is welcomed, as is its form that embraces the Well-Being of Future Generations Act.

5.0 Customer Feedback

5.1 The number of formal complaints and letters offering compliments are recorded. There were 14 complaints received over 2022/23, compared to 18 during 2021/22. Several of these complaints stemmed from concerns about lack of communication from case officers during the processing of planning applications and were resolved following intervention by line managers and subsequently improved dialogue with the applicant. There was also a willingness for applicants to become more tolerant once they understood the team's situation in respect of on-going vacancies and delays caused in waiting for consultation responses from key consultees. Other complaints related to a concern about lack of enforcement in respect of construction management at a large housing site and two other sites where enforcement action was not taken as quickly as the community had wanted or because it would not have been expedient to do so.

Planning is a contentious area dealing with access to land and changes to property values. It will always be the subject of complaint from third parties who are dissatisfied with a decision. This measure needs to be taken in context and the number of justified complaints is arguably a more pertinent measure. We do however aim to treat all customers with care and respect and to communicate clearly with the public so that they understand what the relevant planning issues are when we make decisions. There is always a degree of subjectivity so there will inevitably be disagreement about the weight given to the respective issues in the planning decision.

Notwithstanding the number of complaints, none of the fourteen complaints investigated under the Council's formal Complaints Procedure were deemed to be justified and also none of the five escalated to Stage 2 (investigated by a senior council officer unconnected with the Planning Department). In addition, none were considered appropriate to be investigated by the Public Service Ombudsman.

As far as enforcement of planning control is concerned, there is often a misunderstanding within the community about the scope for enforcement action by a planning authority or an appreciation of the length of time it takes to remedy a breach of planning control. The team will continue to engage with our communities to ensure there is improved dialogue and clearer understanding of both the justification for action and the speed it takes. This ties in with Action 2 of the Action Plan.

We received seventeen recorded compliments over 2022/23.

	2015 /16	2016/ 17	2017/ 18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23
Number of Stage 1 formal complaints received	5	5	4	14	13	21	18	14

Number of Stage 2 formal complaints investigations received	2	2	1	4	2	2	6	5
Number of Stage 2 complaints upheld or partially upheld	0 upheld	0 upheld	0 upheld	3 partially upheld	2 elements of the complaint partially upheld	2 partially upheld	0 upheld	0
Number of Ombudsman complaints upheld or partially upheld	0	0	1 upheld	0	0	0	0	0
Number of compliments received	2	9	2	6	6	4	4	17

5.2 Quality customer service continues to be a service and organisation priority so the momentum and desire to improve remain. We aim to introduce a new feedback form (online) for customers to engage with us during the next reporting period.



Left - Planning Committee Members visiting the restored slipway at Maby Bridge housing site, Chepstow as part of their Design Tour in October 2022 and right – view of a terrace of town houses on the same development facing the River Wye, with public open space in front

6.0 OUR PERFORMANCE 2022-23

6.1 This section details our performance in 2022-23. It considers both the Planning Performance Framework indicators and other available data to help paint a comprehensive picture of performance. Where appropriate we make comparisons between our performance and the all-Wales picture, although the absence of data for 2019/20 – 2022/23 from WG means we have to compare performance to the Welsh average over 2018/19.

6.2 Performance is analysed across the five key aspects of planning service delivery as set out in the Planning Performance Framework:

- Plan making (this aspect is not covered in this APR as the information is more than adequately analysed in the latest LDP Annual Monitoring Report);
- Efficiency;
- Quality;
- Engagement; and
- Enforcement.

6.3 Based on the performance information we can be pleased with the service we deliver. During this period:

- The proportion of major applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timescales was very good at 71%, and was well above the Good target of 60% (5 out of 7 applications);
- The proportion of all applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timescales remained high at 89%, an improvement on the previous year (81%) demonstrating the effective recruitment and training up of new officers in the Applications team;
- The proportion of applications we approved remained high at 94%;
- Of those applications that had gone through our pre-application advice service, and followed our advice 100% were approved;
- We ‘won’ seven out of eleven appeals against our decisions to refuse planning permission;
- We dealt with a large number of applications for listed building consent (67 applications) and 75% of these were determined within agreed timescales – this was despite having a reduced resource in the Heritage team from January 2021 until the end of July 2022;
- Enforcement performance improved for the measure relating to the percentage of enforcement cases investigated in 84 days (rising from 55% to 65%) although it is still in need of improvement, and the performance vastly improved in respect of the average time to take positive action which fell from 250 days to 123 days, albeit that the previous year’s figure was measured incorrectly as noted earlier. We investigated 15% more cases in 2022/23 than the previous year (384 cases) and served 14 notices.
- Significant s106 monies (over £4M) were secured towards important community infrastructure schemes including the Magor Hub as a result of granting permission for major developments such as those at Rockfield Farm and Vinegar Hill, Undy.

This shows that, despite a challenging workload, the longer-term effects of vacancies and issues such as phosphate pollution, our performance has been good and our pre-application advice service is effective.

6.4 A summary table of our performance can be found in Appendix A of the APR. Of the 12 ranked indicators, 6 are ranked ‘Good’, while 5 are ‘Fair’ and 1 is in ‘need of improvement’.

	Number of indicators
Welsh Government target has been set and our performance is ‘good’	6
Welsh Government target has been set and our performance is ‘fair’	5

6.5 Four actions are identified going forwards:

Action 1 – Digitise information in relation to older planning applications that are held on microfiche to enable the public to self-serve, reducing the time of Support staff and the Duty Officer to assist such enquiries and to reduce the need for travel.

Action 2 – Continue to review and make positive change to the Planning Service's enforcement function and its processes to speed up our decision-making, ensuring we are providing a good service for our customers. Digitise the enforcement notice register to help customers self-serve.

Action 3 – To finalise a Buildings at Risk (BAR) strategy to manage and prioritise any interventions to enable key heritage assets to realise a sustainable use for future generations.

Action 4 – To continue to invest in our staff to ensure professional qualifications are achieved and professional development takes place – be it via external or internal training.

Digitising the historic microfiche records, improving the experience of customers and reducing demand on officer time

6.6 We still hold substantial information on older planning applications in microfiche form. Retrieving such information is time-consuming and inefficient and the lack of accessible information for the public leads to a high volume of calls and enquiries to the Council's Support Team and daily Duty Officer. Digitising this information will reduce phone calls and emails to all those officers and will free up time to carry out work of greater value to the service and customers, such as processing submissions for pre-application advice and the applications themselves. This action would be subject to budget approval given the pressure on resources at present (Action 1).

Action 1 – Digitise information in relation to older planning applications that are held on microfiche to enable the public to self-serve, reducing the time of Support staff and the Duty Officer to assist such enquiries and to reduce the need for customers to travel to the office.

Speed of resolving enforcement cases

6.7 The performance of the Council's Planning Enforcement team had declined in relation to the two enforcement measures in recent years as a result of staffing pressures. There is public perception that the service has been poorly performing. While some of this is justified given the recent lack of resource and difficulty in recruitment, these issues are certainly not unique to Monmouthshire, and the problem is at least in part due to a misunderstanding of the powers available to us and/or unrealistic expectations, a matter that had been addressed in some way by the training on enforcement in recent years for community and

town councillors. There remains scope for improvement. The review of the Planning Enforcement function is ongoing and has already helped to improve this team's practices and drive out waste, leading to the '84 day' measure improving from 55 to 65%. The positive action indicator improved significantly reflecting that we measure this performance indicator more accurately now and that we have a fully-resourced team to deliver the work. The action below is a spin-off from previous years. An ongoing element is the need to digitise the enforcement register so that the information can be downloaded, reducing the need for paper copies or customers to travel to County Hall for a copy (Action 2).

Action 2 – Continue to review and make positive change to the Planning Service's enforcement function and its processes to speed up our decision-making, ensuring we are providing a good service for our customers. Digitise the enforcement notice register to help customers self-serve.

Buildings at Risk Strategy

- 6.8 There are competing demands on the Heritage Team and many requests from the community are received to intervene to stop the decay of several prominent listed buildings throughout the County. Officer time and financial resources are limited in this regard, but an action plan agreed by Members would help to prioritise the cases that warrant priority working and action. To this end a Buildings at Risk Strategy and action plan was proposed to be developed to manage this process more effectively and to help the communities understand the choices we make when opting to take appropriate action to save and protect such assets. The strategy would put a methodology in place for drawing out the worst buildings and then set out appropriate actions as to how these are tackled; in all likelihood there would be actions identified to address the worst 5-10 buildings at risk so it is a more manageable and transparent process. This process started in this reporting period but is a work in progress and so is retained for the next period.

Action 3 – To finalise a Buildings at Risk (BAR) strategy, and agreed by Members, to manage and prioritise any interventions to enable key heritage assets to realise a sustainable use for future generations.

Supporting and investing in our people

6.9 Over recent years there has been a relatively high turnover of staff within the team. To ensure that our colleagues feel valued and supported, we have committed to helping more junior staff to study to achieve professionally-accredited qualifications. Three of our staff are now enrolled on undergraduate courses. More established members of staff will be supported by training opportunities, many of which are organised internally to reduce costs. Some events have also been combined with training events for Council Members. These will cover issues like one planet developments / rural enterprise dwellings, S106 agreements, affordable housing and active travel.

Action 4 – To continue to invest in our people (including staff and Members) to ensure both professional qualifications are achieved and professional development takes place – be it via external or internal training.



Abergavenny King Henry VIII School – image of the new approved school (above) and the development now under construction (below)

Opportunities going forward:

6.10 The following opportunities for the coming year have been identified as a result of this Annual Performance Report, our LDP, AMR and our Service Business Plans:

- Continue to roll out the project management of major planning applications, where appropriate, via planning performance agreements to seek, by best endeavours, timely and well-managed processing of such applications, providing a good customer experience for the customer;
- To digitise the information held by the Council in microfiche or paper form to improve the web site experience for customers and improve customers' pathways to information (Action 1);
- To improve the speed with which we deal with enforcement cases via the continued systems review of the Enforcement function and via analysis of individual team members' performance (Action 2);

- To digitise the Council’s enforcement register as part of the digital improvement programme to help customers self-serve (Action 2);
- To finalise and implement a Buildings At Risk Strategy to safeguard some of our most precious but vulnerable heritage assets (Action 3);
- Continue with the replacement Monmouthshire LDP because of the need to facilitate the identification/ allocation of additional housing land as well as addressing the demographic and employment challenges of the County;
- To identify, implement and/or disseminate best practice via the Planning Officers’ Society for Wales or other working groups, including the Welsh Government, the WLGA and the RTPI
- To support our colleagues via training opportunities, regular reviews and one-to-ones to invest in their careers, ensure their well-being and mental health are resilient and their productivity remains high (Action 4).
- To respond to the threats resulting from the pandemic followed by the economic squeeze on households and enterprises to ensure our County’s businesses can be resilient and can thrive.
- To manage the threat of phosphate pollution in our two main rivers to reduce environmental damage, while finding new ways of managing this issue that will still allow sustainable development to take place in those catchment areas.

6.11 Progress will be measured via our 2023/24 Annual Performance Report, 2023/24 LDP Annual Monitoring Report, and our 2023 - 2026 Service Business Plan.



Image of Magor Community Hub partly funded via significant financial contributions from local developments allocated in the Local Development Plan (above); and the building as constructed in September 2023 (below)