

Monmouthshire Local Planning Authority

PLANNING ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT (APR) – 2023 –24

PREFACE

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

This report shows that Monmouthshire's Planning Service continues to perform effectively, with none 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 newer Members, is working effectively showing a very good relationship between Members and officers in this authority. The whole team has worked with great commitment and the positive impact of several members of staff recruited over recent reporting periods is evident. The good performance is also encouraging given the backdrop of the significant resource issues in organisations who respond to consultations on our planning applications.

Where we think there are areas that could be improved, we have clear actions to address 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 major 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 tenth 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, which will be submitted to WG in Autumn 2024. 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 2023/24. 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 very 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 89% to 93% and remained well above the WG target of 80%;
The average time to determine all applications reduced to 100 days (from 110 days in 2022/23) as the team worked through newer solutions (including the NRW review of environmental permits) that addressed the phosphate pollution issue that had contributed to delays in determining many applications in the central and northern parts of the County;

- The proportion of major applications determined within agreed timescales was 67% and involved just two out of three applications, slightly below the pre-pandemic Welsh average in 2018/19 (68%);
- 84% of listed building applications were determined within approved timescales, an improvement on the previous period (75%) and we provided a valued Heritage service for Blaenau Gwent Council;
- The percentage of applications that were approved was 97%, an indicator that our pre-application advice service is working well;
- During this reporting period, we closed 263 applications seeking pre-application advice. 282 submissions for pre-application advice were received in 2023/24. Of these 35 led to planning applications, and 34 of these were approved and one was withdrawn. 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 which had been in need of improvement over previous reporting periods are now both 'Good' (green). There has been sustained improvement in this element of the service for over two years.

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 2023-24 period.

Corporate Context

2.2 The Council adopted its Local Development Plan in February 2014 and submitted its ninth Annual Monitoring Report to Welsh Government in October 2023.

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).

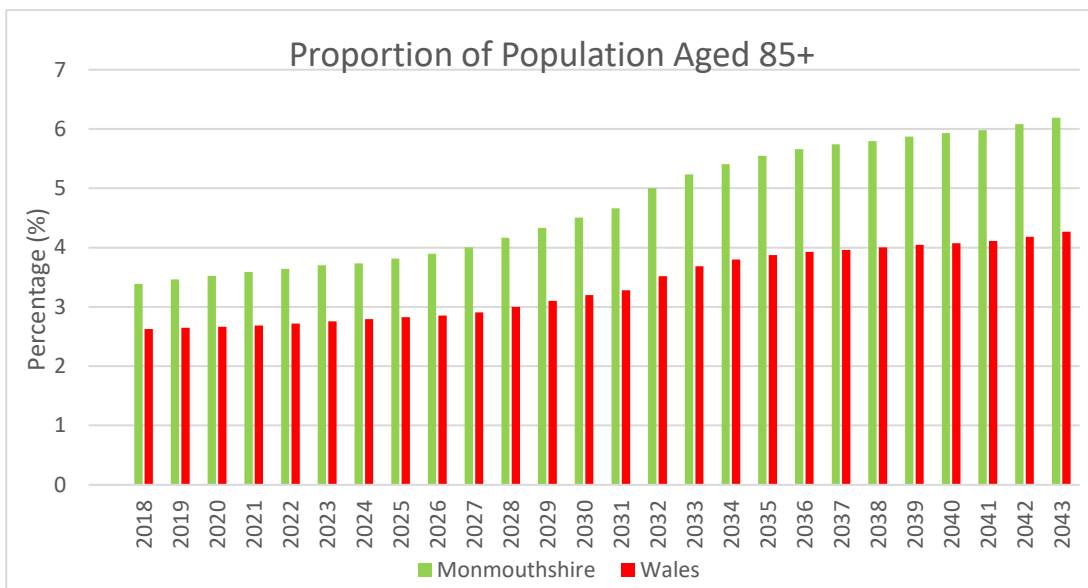
2.8.2 Our population has been increasing steadily, up 7.6% between 2001 and 2011 compared with the Wales average of 5.5%. The increase from 2011 to 2021² represents a lower

¹ Source: Census 2021

² Source: Census 2021

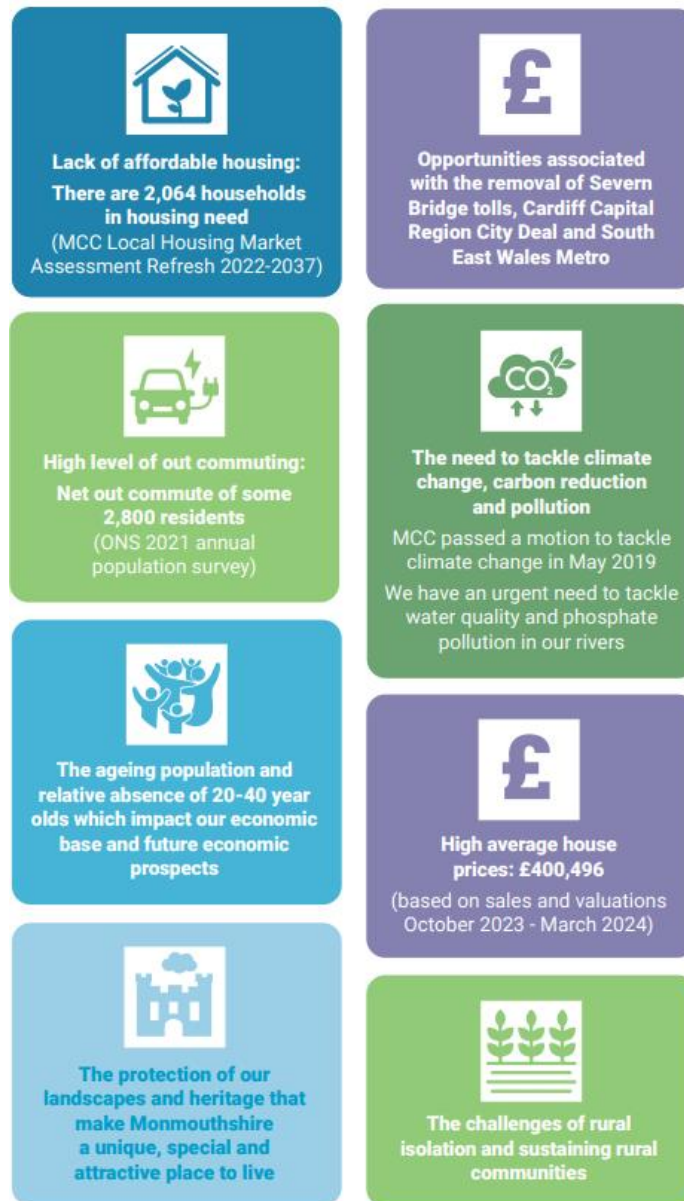
increase at 1.8%, however, this is marginally higher than the growth for Wales over the same period of 1.4%. This increase is wholly attributable to inward migration, with natural change showing negative growth. The County has a relatively high and increasing proportion of older age groups, and a lower 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 2021 Census 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



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

2.8.3 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):



2.9 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 2023/24 there were 291 housing completions. This is discussed in more detail in the LDP Annual Monitoring Report.

2.9.3 Data indicates that house prices in Monmouthshire are very high, averaging around £400k based on sales and valuations between October 2023 and March 2024. HM Land Registry data provides that the average house price in Wales as a whole was £213,063 in January 2024. Between 2006 (the time the Monmouthshire Unitary Development Plan was adopted) and March 2024, there have been 5,174 completions of which 1,012 were affordable, equating to 20% of all dwellings built. Since LDP adoption (2014) to March 2022 there have been 3,169 completions of which 648 were affordable, equating to 20% 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 a 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 2.10.3 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 2023 STEAM (Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor), the sector generated £329.8M for Monmouthshire's economy in 2023 and supported 3,462 full-time jobs. Each visitor contributing to the county's economy by shopping on our high streets, purchasing food and drink, fuel, services and accommodation spent an average of £93.43 per day.

2.10.4 Monmouthshire's approved Destination Management Plan ran to 2020 when Covid hit and while Monmouthshire's visitor economy has recovered well post pandemic (15% real growth since 2017), there is a need to renew the Plan to align it better with Monmouthshire's Corporate & Community Plan, and to broaden the metrics to demonstrate the cultural, social and environmental benefits of tourism alongside the economic benefits. Our citizens will be engaged from the outset to ensure that while the Plan is still informed by the market, it will be shaped by local people.

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. 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, several posts were replaced. During December 2023 a Senior DM Officer left for a promotion in another SE Wales local authority. Owing to the reduced workload for senior officers as a result of the lifecycle of the LDP (virtually all major sites have been built out) this post has been frozen and is subject to annual review. We retain four working Senior DM officers in the structure.

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 was 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 had been 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.

Performance has been strong across all elements of the service since the vacant posts were filled. There has been a much reduced turnover in the last two reporting periods leading to more stability and higher morale. The risk from losing existing staff to the highly competitive job market for planning and specialist professional staff in both the public and private sectors is noted as a threat that we will need to consider and address.

3.2 Department structure and reporting lines for the 2023-24 reporting period



Planning Service staffing structure for the 2023-24 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 £51,000 over 2023/24, 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 (£400k) was the lowest received since 2011/12. The prime cause was the reduction in the number of major planning applications which provide much higher fees compared to minor applications. This has partly 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 slightly more activity on housing sites over 2024/25 in respect of sites allocated in the current LDP that have not yet come forward (Tudor Road and Drewen Farm, Monmouth) now that the phosphate issue in respect of the main towns has been resolved. Delays to the adoption of the RLDP means there will be no new allocated housing sites coming forward until Deposit/ Examination stage, probably in the later part of 2024/ early 2025. 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 interest rates, mortgage lending and development viability) and other funding streams.

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Budgeted fee income	£668k	£684k	£681k	£693k	£589k	£480k	£480k	£567k	£617k
Actual income	£560k	£430k	£653k	£666k	£494k*	£651k	£554k	£475k	

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. It is fair to say that the recruitment of a new cohort of planners has revitalised the team following the end of the pandemic 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 (a one year placement) in both the Policy and DM teams – the latter assisting the workload of the planning application 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. Two junior officers in the team are enrolled on the RTPI-accredited master's course studying Planning, part time in Cardiff University. A Heritage officer is studying the M.Sc. in Sustainable Building Conservation, part-time also in Cardiff University .

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:
- In October 2023 Council endorsed updates to the Preferred Strategy following the statutory consultation/engagement in December 2022- January 2023. Work is currently progressing on the preparation of the Deposit Plan which is due to be completed in September 2024. It is anticipated that political reporting to seek endorsement of the Deposit Plan for public consultation and subsequent statutory engagement/consultation will take place in Autumn 2024. The revised RLDP timetable will be set out in an updated Delivery Agreement which will be reported to Council at the same time as 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).

- We have continued providing 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 BGBC 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 issued detailed planning guidance (updated July 2023) 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, allied to NRW's recent review of environmental permits for the main settlements' waste water treatment works, has led to the identification of solutions that will help bring forward much needed development (including affordable housing) in the main towns of Monmouth and Abergavenny as well as smaller settlements in the County.
- 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 a 46-home affordable housing scheme north of Caldicot School, a significant employment development (B1, B2 and B8) at Severnbridge Industrial Estate and a 1km closed velo track at Llanfoist.

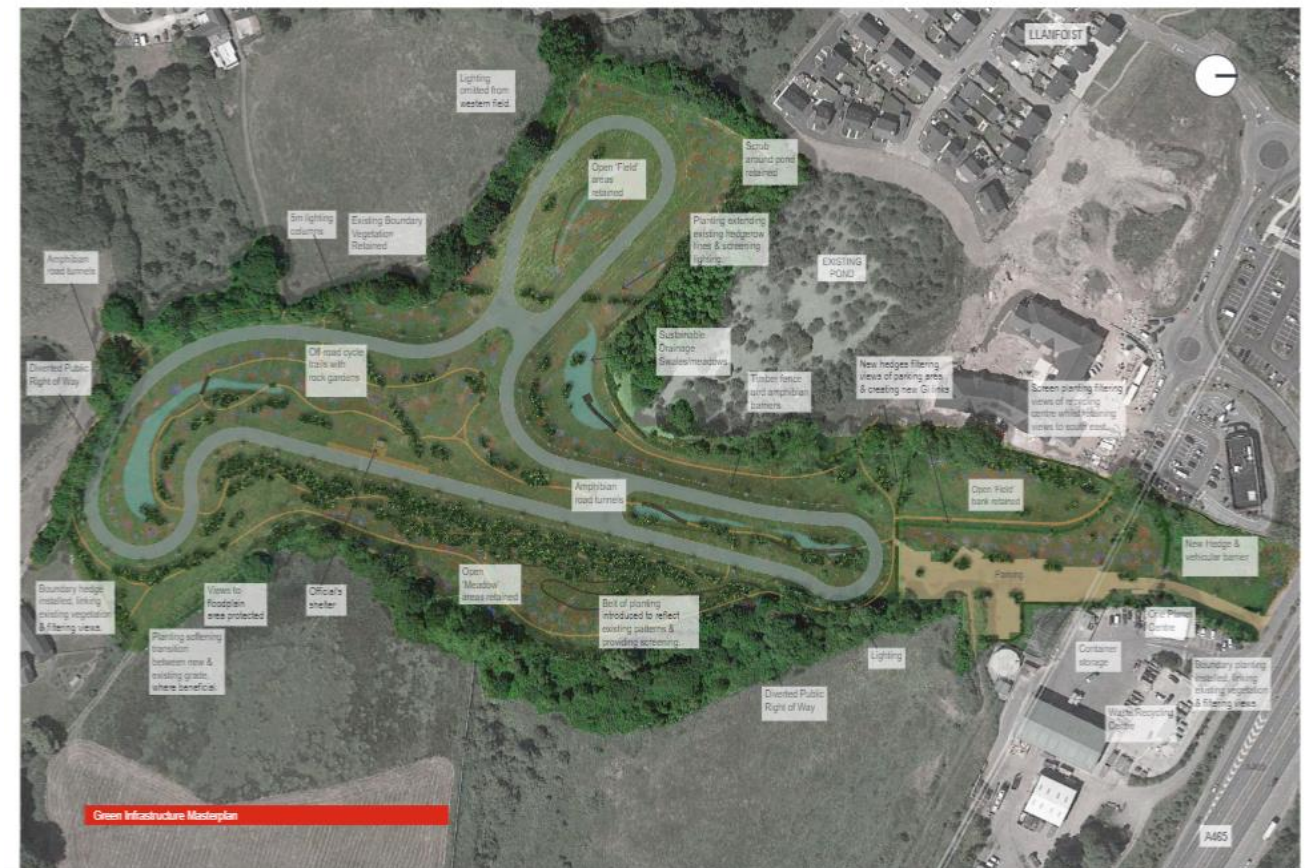


Image of the approved velo park at Llanfoist near the A465 (T), to be partly funded via S106 monies contributed by housing developments in Llanfoist and Abergavenny

4.2 Last year there was a decline in the number of applications received (5.7%), influenced by the UK’s current economic challenges, the impact of phosphate pollution in the riverine 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 4% on the previous year and is rated ‘green’ (93%). The proportion of approvals remained high at 97%. During 2023-24, 96% of applications were determined under delegated powers while 32 planning applications were decided by Planning Committee (Wales’s average in 2018/19 was 93%).

	2015 -16	2016 -17	2017 -18	2018 -19	2019 -20	2020 -21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24
Applications received	1284	1117	1188	1126	1134	1126	1154	1014	956
Applications determined	1085	1087	1071	1101	1106	947	1152	1026	956
% within 8 weeks or agreed timescale	79%	90%	91%	88%	91%	91%	81%	89%	93%

% applications approved	95%	96%	95%	95%	97%	97%	97%	94%	97%
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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 followed by subsequent staffing challenges we had to suspend the Fast Track services. We reintroduced the Fast Track services over this 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 relatively small additional charge (currently set at £230 – the standard householder application fee, plus the premium of £130 = £360, and £460 plus £255 = £715 for other applications). 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 agreement of a short extension of time (no more than 5 working days) we will refund the fast track element of the 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. Owing to the limited numbers of major applications received, none were negotiated during 2023/24.

N.B. PPAs have been agreed for applications in the next reporting period (2024/25).

4.7 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, a good standard has been achieved during the 2023/24 period (91 days). The need to improve this element of the service was previously an action in multiple APRs and we are now confident that the team is functioning well and has evidenced sustained improvement. Thus, this action has been achieved and is no longer required.

4.8 Value of Planning

4.8.1 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, 2023/24. 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 £68.6M 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 £85M – that higher figure reflecting more construction activity compared to 2023/24 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, although it is fair to say that the parameters behind the model are now several years out of date and may undervalue the socio-economic contribution of the local planning authority. We will enquire with the RTPI and Welsh

Government as to whether the data assumptions behind the toolkit are proposed to be updated.
The 'Dashboard' data summarises the Planning Service's contribution below:

Value of Planning in Monmouthshire 2023/24

Planning service key data



30 FTE jobs in planning service



956 applications handled



£0.8m collected in fees

LDP Land Safeguarded



20
369 ha Green Wedge
3,174 ha Local Nature Reserve



434 ha open space
7,942 ha minerals

LDP Land Allocated



Residential
111 ha



Retail & leisure
0 ha



Commercial
244 ha



Waste
0 ha

LDP Value

£2.1m uplift value

(based on land allocated for whole plan period)

Value adding policies/ 89%

Applications

7 major
949 minor
0 other

■ Statutory ■ Discretionary

0 DCOs dealt with
2 DNS dealt with
51 LBC applications granted
10 refusals appealed
0 judicial reviews

Decisions

7 934 approvals (98%)
x 22 refusals (2%)
150 xxx

Refusals

■ Delegated ■ Committee

Approvals

■ Delegated ■ Committee

Permissions



Residential
219 units
£8.8m uplift value
35% affordable



Retail & leisure
2,560 m²
£0.1m uplift value



Tourism
500 bedspaces
1000 self catering

Permissions

■ Core/central/local plan

■ Dependent on local plan



Commercial
5,737 m²
£0.1m uplift value



Renewables & other
2 MW
0 tonnes waste
0 tonnes minerals
0 ha remediation
5 ha formal open space

Contributions

Section 106 income

£1.2m
Breakdown

- Training and employment
- Sports and leisure
- Environment
- Community/cultural
- Formal open space
- Primary health
- Education
- Infrastructure
- Active travel
- Highways
- Affordable housing

CIL income



£0 total value

Completions



Residential
291 units
26% affordable
£50.9m uplift value
£0.4m council tax p.a



Retail & leisure
1,150 m²
£1.3m uplift value
18 gross FTE jobs



Tourism
#NA

Commercial

8,200 m²
£5.2m uplift value
132 gross FTE jobs

#NA

Renewables

1 MW
£5,000 community benefit

Tourism

500 167 FTE jobs
800 self catering

Enforcement

286 enforcement complaints
4 planning contraventions
6 enforcement notices
5 breach of condition notices
0 stop notices
2 section 125 notices



Wider indicators



£84,000 spend on consultancy fees



£10,000 health benefits of affordable housing provision p.a



11 internal consultees



£90,000 recreational benefits from open space created p.a

1 Energy statements

0 EqIAs

3 Environmental statements

2 Travel plans

0 HIAs

4 Transport assessments

In 2021/22 the total value of planning was

£68.6m

SOURCES: Planning function outputs (LPA or dev), Land and property value data (LL estimates), business rates valuations (Valuation Office Agency), employment data (ONS (English Home & Communities Agency), Council tax rates (Stats Wales), Health benefits Affordable Housing (Department for Communities and Local Government Appraisal Guide, based on various studies outlined in appraisal database), Community benefits from renewables (Renewables UK/Cymru). Some of the calculations require likely base assumptions of course between 1 and 2 ha. Where possible, benchmarks have been employed otherwise reasonable assumptions have been used. Figures are net 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 a given application. 'Value adding policies' refers to the proportion of policies the team has identified as adding tangible value that are included in local plans. Approval and refusals do not sum to 100% due to applications carry across years. The total value of planning includes some of the metrics presented in the dashboard.



ARUP JLL



Housing developments recently completed or near completion – top left site at Devauden that involved 60% of homes as affordable housing units; top right - a 100% affordable housing scheme on the site of a former garage block off Hereford Road, Abergavenny; bottom left – image of the ongoing Brunel Quarter strategic housing site on brownfield land at Chepstow; town houses on the Brunel Quarter development with associated green infrastructure.

Local pressures

4.9 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, promoting retention of staff via training and other opportunities, 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.

4.10 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 4 complaints received over 2023/24, compared to 14 during 2022/23. The theme 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 delays caused in waiting for consultation responses from key consultees. Another complaint related to a concern about lack of enforcement relating to construction management at a large housing site 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 four complaints investigated under the Council's formal Complaints Procedure were deemed to be justified as was the single one 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.

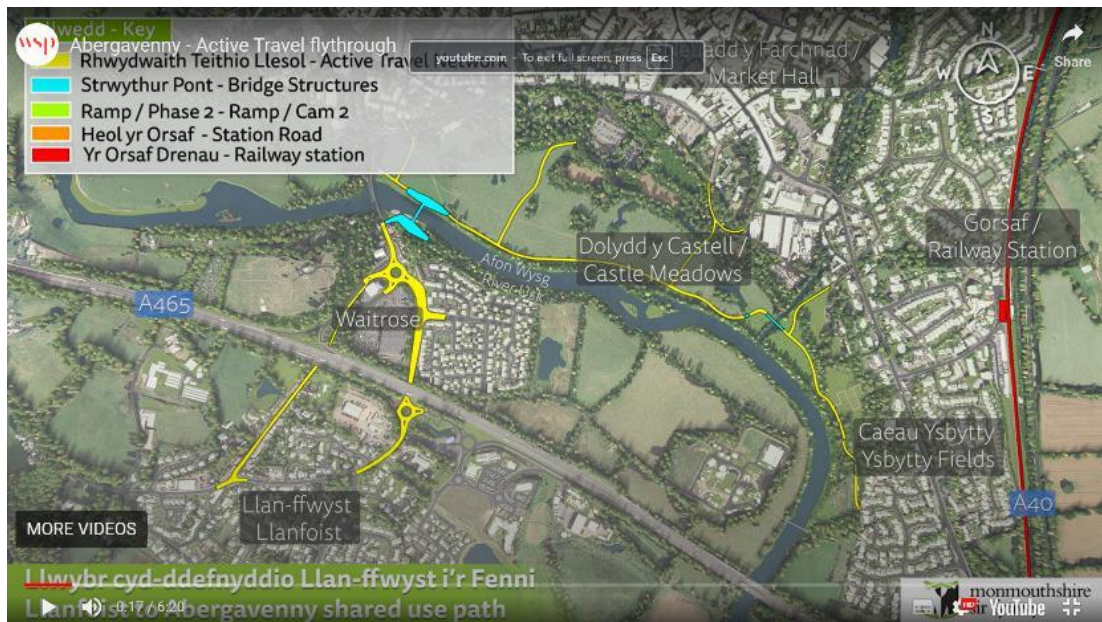
As far as enforcement of planning control is concerned, there is often a misunderstanding within the community about the scope for enforcement action by a planning authority or an appreciation of the length of time it takes to remedy a breach of planning control. The team will continue to engage with 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 4) of the Action Plan (see Section 6.5 below).

We received twenty-four recorded compliments over 2023/24.

	2016/ 17	2017/ 18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23	2023/ 24
Number of Stage 1 formal complaints received	5	4	14	13	21	18	14	4
Number of Stage 2 formal complaints	2	1	4	2	2	6	5	1

investigations received								
No of Stage 2 complaints upheld or partially upheld	0	0	3 partially upheld	2 elements of the complaint partially upheld	2 partially upheld	0	0	0
No of Ombudsman complaints upheld or partially upheld	0	1 upheld	0	0	0	0	0	0
No of compliments received	9	2	6	6	4	4	17	24

5.2 Quality customer service continues to be a service and organisation priority so the momentum and desire to improve remain. We are introducing a new feedback form (online) for customers to engage with us in respect of our pre-application advice service.



Illustrations showing the approved Active Travel links to be provided at Llanfoist and Castle Meadows to link the areas more effectively with Abergavenny town centre (and eventually the Railway Station) avoiding the narrow and hazardous road bridge over the River Usk which is a deterrent to cyclists and pedestrians.

6.0 OUR PERFORMANCE 2023-24

- 6.1 This section details our performance in 2023-24. 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 – 2023/24 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 very pleased with the service we deliver. During this period:

- The proportion of major applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timescales was good at 67%, and was above the Good target of 60% (2 out of 3 applications);
- The end-to-end period for determining major planning applications increased from 120 days in 2022/23 to 436 days in 2023/24; this related to just three applications – one being the approved velo park at Llanfoist that was significantly delayed by phosphate pollution issues (including a Welsh Government holding request for a potential call-in, subsequently withdrawn) and another related to an industrial development at Caldicot on an allocated site that was held up by flood assessment issues for a protracted period;
- The proportion of all applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timescales remained high at 93%, an improvement on the previous year (89%) demonstrating the effective recruitment and training up of new officers in the Applications team;
- The proportion of applications we approved remained high at 97%;
- Of those applications that had gone through our pre-application advice service, and followed our advice 100% were approved;
- In eight out of ten appeals against our decisions to refuse planning permission, MCC's decision was confirmed, well above the 'Good' standard of 66% or more;
- We dealt with a large number of applications for listed building consent (51 applications) and 84% of these were determined within agreed timescales;
- Enforcement performance improved for the measure relating to the percentage of enforcement cases investigated in 84 days (rising from 65% to 83%) which is now rated 'Good', and the performance significantly improved in respect of the average time to take positive action which fell from 123 days to 91 days, also rated 'Good'. We investigated 286 enforcement cases and served 13 notices.
- Significant s106 monies (approx. £1.2M) were received towards important community infrastructure schemes including the Magor Hub and the velo park proposal as a result of granting permission for major developments such as those at Rockfield Farm/ Vinegar Hill - Undy, Deri Farm - Abergavenny and Grove Farm - Llanfoist.

This shows that the team is working effectively and has overcome the longer-term effects of vacancies and issues such as phosphate pollution. Our performance has been very good and our pre-application advice service is effective.

The Previous APR's actions involving reviewing the Enforcement Team's performance and implementing measures to improve output, initiating the Buildings at Risk Strategy,

digitising our enforcement register and upgrading our back office software systems to process applications more efficiently were all completed.

- 6.4 A summary table of our performance can be found in Appendix A of the APR. Of the 12 ranked indicators, 10 are ranked 'Good', while 2 are 'Fair' and none are in 'need of improvement'.

	Number of indicators
Welsh Government target has been set and our performance is 'good'	10
Welsh Government target has been set and our performance is 'fair'	2
Welsh Government target has been set and our performance 'needs improvement'	0

- 6.5 Four actions are identified going forwards:

Action 1 – a) Digitise information in relation to older planning applications that are held on microfiche to enable the public to self-serve, reducing the demand on staff time and to reduce the need for travel.

b) Digitise re-surveyed data relating to trees covered by Tree preservation Orders so that the information is accurate and available online and the public can research their enquiries themselves rather than seek this from our Tree Officer, Support Team or Duty Officer.

Action 2 – To finalise and seek political approval for 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 3 – To continue to invest in our staff to ensure professional qualifications are achieved and professional development takes place – this includes the accreditation of two of our heritage officers so that the Senior Officer can determine applications for listed building consent involving grade II* buildings without reference to Cadw and the Heritage Officer can determine grade II-related applications. The more we develop our own staff, the less reliant we are on a very competitive labour market.

Action 4 – improve communication and relationships with our community and town councils by providing training on the Planning process with an emphasis on enforcement matters.

Action 1 – a) Digitise information in relation to older planning applications that are held on microfiche to enable the public to self-serve, reducing the demand on staff time and to reduce the need for travel.

- 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 necessary but relatively costly action is likely to be funded externally as part of the migration of local authority data resulting from the HM Land Registry assuming management of local searches.

b) Digitise re-surveyed data relating to trees covered by Tree preservation Orders so that the information is accurate and available online and the public can research their enquiries themselves rather than seek this from our Tree Officer, Support Team or Duty Officer.

- 6.7 This is a time-consuming project and will no doubt be an action for successive APRs to come. There is a need to re-survey the existing and often out of date tree preservation records held by the Council from the 1950s to the present and then digitise this accurate information on the Council's GIS layers so that it can be made available to the public to self-serve. The re-survey work will require additional resource via our own Tree Officer and colleagues in the Council's Grounds Maintenance Team in MonLife. We are developing a template to start this structured approach to the re-survey.

Action 2 – To finalise and seek political approval for 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.

- 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 in the previous APR 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 and was largely completed but is extended into the next period to allow it to be finalised and then consulted upon to gain political agreement.

Action 3 – To continue to invest in our staff to ensure professional qualifications are achieved and professional development takes place – this includes the accreditation of two of our heritage officers so that the Senior Officer can determine applications for listed building consent involving grade II* buildings without reference to Cadw and the Heritage Officer can determine grade II-related applications. The more we develop our own staff, the less reliant we are on a very competitive labour market.

- 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 (see also Action 4 below). These have covered issues like planning enforcement, one planet developments / rural enterprise dwellings, S106 agreements, affordable housing and active travel. Two of our heritage officers are seeking accreditation from Cadw so that they can determine applications for listed building consent under Cadw's delegation scheme. One of those officers already has accreditation to deal with grade II buildings but is seeking advanced delegation to be able to determine proposals involving grade II* buildings. Our Heritage Manager is already accredited for applications concerning grades II and II* buildings, and is understood to be the only local authority officer in Wales who holds this endorsement.

Action 4 – improve communication and relationships with our community and town councils by providing training on the Planning process with an emphasis on enforcement matters.

- 6.10 It is several years since the last training involving an introduction to the Planning process was carried out with community and town councillors and inevitably there will be a new cohort of members who lack knowledge and confidence when interacting with the planning system as they carry out their work for the local community. This is often borne out in the range of queries we get from local community councils especially regarding enforcement issues. To this end, we propose to carry out refresher training on the planning process with some focus on planning enforcement. County councillors who are also community or town councillors will be encouraged to attend to provide an element of leadership and to stimulate engagement.



The new Severn View Park Care home, an innovative design approach to dementia care using more intimate and personal spaces; part of the strategic mixed-use development at Crick Road, Portskewett, allocated in the LDP.

Opportunities and Risks 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 a and b);
- To finalise and implement a Buildings At Risk Strategy to safeguard some of our most precious but vulnerable heritage assets (Action 2);
- 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, helping to meet the challenge of retaining our officers in a currently highly dynamic job market in the built environment professions (Action 3).

- To provide training and support for our colleagues in community and town councils to enable them to engage with the planning process more effectively (Action 4).
- To respond to the challenges raised by the economic squeeze on households and enterprises to ensure our County's communities and local economy 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 2024/25 Annual Performance Report, 2024/25 LDP Annual Monitoring Report, and our 2024 - 2027 Service Business Plan.



Image of Magor Community Hub partly funded via significant s106 agreement financial contributions from local developments allocated in the Local Development Plan (above); and the building as constructed in September 2023 (below).