

ENVIRONMENT AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	Planning Service Improvement Update
Meeting date	2 April 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	This updates on the ongoing work to improve the performance of the BCP Council planning service with significant successes in the last year to reduce the backlog and stabilise the workforce.
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that the Board: Note and endorse the measures underway to improve and transform the planning service.
Reason for recommendations	To update on the performance of the BCP Council planning service.

Portfolio Holder(s):	Cllr Millie Earl, Leader of the Council and Chair of Cabinet
Corporate Director	Glynn Barton, Chief Operations Officer
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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

Background

1. The purpose of this report is to showcase the progress made in reducing the planning backlog, improvements in planning performance in relation to planning applications, complaints and enforcement through the embedding of a performance culture.

Planning Improvement Journey

2. A Planning Improvement Board was established in April 2021, chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by relevant Portfolio Holder Members and key officers. This Board had been meeting on a monthly basis to oversee the Planning Improvement programme until the middle of last year when the meeting frequency was reduced due to the scale of progress.
3. The objectives of the programme have been:
 - Achieve high and consistent standards of performance delivering to the expectations of customers
 - Deliver the local plan to set out the framework for growth meeting the areas sustainable development need
 - Deliver strong and responsive development management including proactively managing the backlog of older cases
 - Utilise modern ways of working and new technology to optimise the efficiency of working practices
 - Create an environment for staff to have job satisfaction and develop their careers within the service that is known for delivering positive outcomes and has a strong reputation.
4. The programme has consisted of five workstreams working to meet these objectives:
 - Structure, People and Culture
 - Performance and Development Management
 - System and Process Harmonisation
 - Customer Service and Support Services
 - Local Plan

5. The following sections provides an update on the progress against the key objectives within each workstream.

Structure, People and Culture

6. The key objectives for this workstream were:
 - Recruitment to vacant posts and reduction of agency staff.
 - Implement a new fit for purpose structure.
 - Address workforce issues including low morale, high workloads, staff wellbeing and resilience pressures.
 - Develop a new culture which supports to optimum performance.
 - Address challenges of home working.
 - Provide leadership development to Planning Managers.
7. Progress within this workstream has been significant since the last report to the Board in January 2024.

Recruitment, revised structure and home working

8. The Head of Strategic Planning commenced her new role at the start of February 2024 and the Head of Planning Operations started at the end of February 2024.
9. Early in 2023, a new structure for Planning was agreed with senior officers partly to formalise a range of temporary working arrangements whereby a number of staff were in interim roles, whilst also enabling promotion opportunities for staff who have proven themselves to be worthy of more challenging roles. This process was completed in late December 2023. Since the last report, a number of recruitment exercises have been undertaken to result in a situation where there should be no vacancies in Development Management.
10. In respect to the challenges of home working, When the board was set up, the reliance on agency staff kept home working levels particularly high and many lived some distance away. This caused some practical difficulties and concerns from the public and planning agents about understanding of local context. By recruiting more permanent staff, we have more people who live closer to the area and can more easily carry out site visits and collaborate in the office. Some home working continues to be a positive option for many staff and allows them to focus on key tasks.

Workforce pressures

11. Staff wellbeing and resilience has been a challenge for the Planning Service. They are our greatest asset but have suffered from high workloads, complex caseloads and negative views directed at the service.

Recruitment has assisted with workloads but there are issues with correlating staff experience and case complexity, high levels of sickness in senior roles, and a general low sense of morale particularly for those impacted by Pay and Reward, which has been divisive.

Consistent quality decision making

12. Progress continues to be made and with MasterGov in place, work is underway towards greater clarity and consistency of expectations of officers of their role and output. This is in terms of type of application, detail of reports, when to accept revisions etc

Performance and Development Management

13. The key objectives for this workstream were:

- Address backlog of applications
- Address issues with Major applications
- Improve consultee performance
- Improve section 106 process and performance
- Reduce incomplete/substandard applications
- Review and reduce planning conditions

Background to measuring Development Management performance

14. Local Planning authorities have completed PS1 and PS2 forms for Government since at least the 1990s. These returns collect information about the range of district matter applications that local planning authorities handle when exercising their development management functions. These returns do not cover all applications received by the Council for determination.
15. This information is monitored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) whereby they assess local planning authorities' performance on the speed and quality of their decisions on applications for major and non-major development. Where an authority is designated as underperforming, applicants have had the option of submitting their applications for major and non-major development (and connected applications) directly to the Planning Inspectorate (who act on behalf of the Secretary of State) for determination.

Backlog, Extensions of Time and Planning Performance Agreements

16. There has been a continued focus and commitment to reducing the backlog of applications. An application is defined as being in the backlog if it has not been determined by its due decision date. The due decision date is either the statutory timeframe or the date that has formally been agreed with the applicant or their agent through an Extension of Time (EOT) or Planning Performance Agreement (PPA).
17. The statutory time limits for applications for planning permission are set out in article 34 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure (England) Order 2015 (as amended). They are 13 weeks for applications for major development, 10 weeks for applications for technical details consent and applications for public service infrastructure development, and 8 weeks for all other types of development (unless an application is subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment, in which case a 16 week limit applies).
18. Where a planning application takes longer than the statutory period to decide, and an extended period has not been agreed with the applicant, the

government's policy is that the decision should be made within 26 weeks for major applications and 16 weeks for non-major applications (as defined by article 34(2)(b) of the Development Management Procedure Order 2015).

19. The Government recognises, in its guidance, that longer periods may be required:
- Where it is clear at the outset that an extended period will be necessary to process an application, the local planning authority and the applicant should consider entering into a planning performance agreement before the application is submitted; and
 - If a valid application is already being considered and it becomes clear that more time than the statutory period is genuinely required, then the local planning authority should ask the applicant to consider an agreed extension of time.
20. BCP Council performance, with EoTs, has consistently been above government intervention levels. Without EoTs, BCP performance has been below the Government targets across all of the legacy areas and for each of the three measures, but this is improving as shown by the information in Appendix.
21. In respect to PPAs, the Strategic Applications Team has increased our capacity to offer a pro-active service to developers and applicants in offering Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's) to progress major schemes. The team has worked hard to get effective processes in place with this led by the Strategic Applications Team Leader and for the overall credibility of the planning system, the teams understand that extensions of time should really be the exception, and efforts are made to meet the statutory timescale wherever possible.

System and Process Harmonisation

22. Since the formation of BCP Council, the planning service has continued to operate with 3 legacy IT systems undertaken in three area teams, based on legacy council arrangements across Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole with the addition of a separate team dealing primarily with the larger and more complex major applications. Across the teams, processes have been realigned as far as the IT systems allow to ensure there is a consistency of approach to development. Regular meetings are held across the teams and with the team leaders to ensure consistent decision making.
23. A project to harmonise these three IT systems into one new system has been ongoing for a number of years. The new 'Mastergov' system is an updated version of two of the current legacy IT systems which is bringing multiple benefits for processes, staff and customers. A minimal viable product version of MasterGov successfully went live on 5 March 2025 and the feedback from officers and users has been positive.

Customer Service and Support Services

24. The key objectives for this workstream are;
- Improvement of registration and validation process
 - Address current levels of complaints including historical complaints

Validation

25. The Development Management function is supported by colleagues in Business Support. A lot of work has been underway to clarify the progress of an application from submission, through validation and consultation to decision and then appeal, as applicable, so that it is clear who is responsible for it at each stage. Approaches were different in the different legacy areas. The implementation of MasterGov has enabled lots of improvements. For example, an application now does not need to go back to Business Support for a decision notice to be issued. The implementation of MasterGov has, however, created a short-term validation delay as customers were still able to submit applications via the Planning Portal when MasterGov was down.

Planning complaints

26. The last board report explained about the revised processes that had been put in place, including the regular fortnightly meetings within the team to monitor resolution of complaints, and the significant effort that had been made on complaints. This has continued as shown by the tables below.

New cases registered by stage					
	Enquiry	Stage1	Stage2	LGSCO	Totals
Feb-24	11	10	5	0	26
Mar-24	7	4	4	0	15
Apr-24	18	4	2	1	25
May-24	13	7	1	0	21
Jun-24	8	12	2	1	23
Jul-24	5	4	2	1	12
Aug-24	6	2	2	0	10
Sep-24	16	3	1	0	20
Oct-24	11	2	2	1	16
Nov-24	8	4	1	1	14
Dec-24	9	3	1	0	13
Jan-25	17	7	1	0	25
Feb-25	10	4	3	0	17
Totals	139	66	27	5	237

Responses dealt with by stage					
	Enquiry	Stage1	Stage2	LGSCO	Totals
Feb-24	12	12	0	0	24
Mar-24	11	8	3	1	23
Apr-24	20	5	0	0	25
May-24	9	11	4	0	24
Jun-24	4	8	0	1	13
Jul-24	4	10	3	1	18
Aug-24	9	5	2	0	16
Sep-24	13	2	3	0	18
Oct-24	8	2	2	1	13
Nov-24	6	3	0	1	10
Dec-24	8	2	1	0	11
Jan-25	15	4	3	0	22
Feb-25	11	7	0	0	18
Totals	130	79	18	5	232

Local Plan

27. The key objective for this workstream was to deliver and adopt the BCP Local Plan.
28. The Council has a statutory duty to prepare and maintain a Local Plan. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out that the planning system should be genuinely plan-led with succinct and up-to-date plans.
29. The Council is currently operating three legacy area Local Plans that include over 300 policies. The intention was that the BCP Local Plan would replace these plans providing a single up-to-date plan for the area.
30. The draft BCP Local Plan was submitted for independent examination in June 2024. Part 1 Local Plan hearings took place in late January 2025. The post-hearing letter from the Planning Inspectors, published on 6 March 2025, explains that they consider that “the Council has failed to engage constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis during the preparation of the Plan so far as it relates to the strategic matter of housing” and therefore they have concluded that the Duty to Cooperate has not been complied with. As this cannot be remedied during the examination process, they have advised that there are two options open to the Council, either to withdraw the Plan from examination or to ask that they write a report setting out their conclusions. The Council will consider its next steps in the coming weeks.

Options Appraisal

31. N/A – report for information

Summary of financial implications

32. The income levels for Planning Operations for 2024-25 are stable and similar to that for 2023-24.
33. As previously reported, at the start of 2024, the Planning Skills Delivery Fund award of £100,000 was gratefully used to assist with agency spend to deal with the backlog.
34. Historically funding for the local plan has come from a reserve which should have been recharged annually, but had not been since there was no ‘surplus’ planning application income. Following assistance from colleagues in Finance, there is now a budget for the Local Plan for 2025-26 onwards in the MTFP. This is a positive step forward as the Council recognises the importance of the Local Plan and is funding it through base budget.

Summary of legal implications

35. Planning applications and enforcement action can be the subject of challenge, either by applicants appealing to the Planning Inspectorate against decisions to refuse permission or against conditions imposed by the Council when permission is granted, or by third parties challenging the Council's decision by judicial review, via the courts. Where the Council has been found to have acted unlawfully or unreasonably then sometimes costs are awarded against the Council, and in the case of judicial review, planning permission can be quashed. The Council's legal team advise and defend the Council's position in such circumstances.

Summary of human resources implications

36. There is a national shortage of suitably qualified and experienced Planning Officers (for development management, planning policy and planning specialists) and, historically, this has required the Planning Service to use agency staff. Since the January 2024 report, a number of permanent and experienced staff have been recruited, and this been key to delivering the current improvements.

Summary of sustainability impact

37. Individual planning applications are determined on their own merit, in accordance with the Development Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework. Sustainability is a key consideration in these policies.

Summary of public health implications

38. None identified at this time.

Summary of equality implications

39. None identified at this time.

Summary of risk assessment

40. If performance dips below government thresholds then the Council is at risk of being designated as a Standards Authority for the purposes of planning applications. This requires close working with MHCLG for both the period while performance is under the required standard and for two years after performance reaches the required minimum standard. The Council's performance is consistently above designation levels and is actively monitored by the team on an ongoing basis.

Background papers

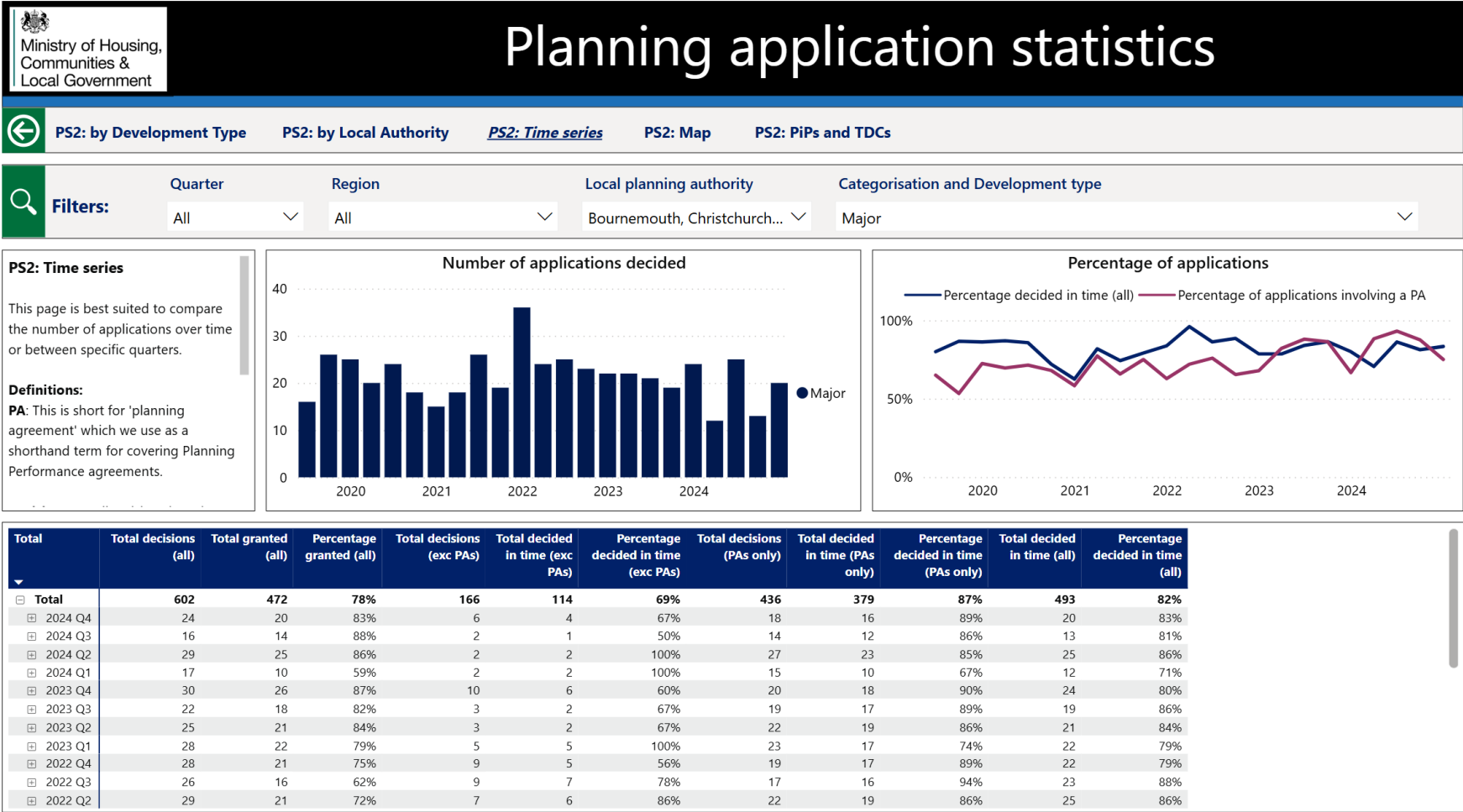
Published works - Improving planning performance: criteria for designation (updated 2024)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/674f2ec08b522bba9d991af9/Criteria_Document_2024.pdf

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Extracts from MHCLG dashboard using data published on 20 March 2025

Extract 1 – MHCLG Planning application statistics PS2: Time series (majors)



Extract 2 – MHCLG Planning application statistics PS2: Time series (non-majors)

