

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD



Report subject	Planning Performance Update
Meeting date	24 August 2026
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	This update on the ongoing work to improve the performance of BCP Council planning service with significant success in the last year to reduce backlog and increase performance.
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that: 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 the Cabinet
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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

Background

1. The purpose of this report is to update Members on the performance of the planning service including its performance against national and local measures

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 met on a monthly basis to oversee the Planning Improvement programme until the middle of 2025 when the meeting frequency was reduced due to the scale of progress.

The objectives of the programme were:

- 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.
7. Progress within this workstream has been significant since the last report to the Board in 2025.

Recruitment, revised structure and home working

8. 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 where 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.
9. Since the last report, a number of recruitment exercises have been undertaken to result in a situation where there are currently only two vacancies in Development Management. The current vacancies are considered to be the level normally expected for a team of this size. Recruitment is currently underway and it is anticipated that the posts will be filled in due course. The new structure was implemented in March 2025 to coincide with the implementation of the new Mastergov IT system
10. In respect to the challenges of home working, When the board was set up, the reliance on agency staff kept remote/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. We now have more staff coming into the office on a weekly basis while some home working continues, this is a positive option for many staff and allows them to focus on key tasks.

In summary

- There is now a more stable picture with regards to the planning team as a result of a successful recruitment drive
- Agency staff – Previous Total of 18 agency staff (including Capita contract). This is now reduced to 2.5 (The 2.5 contractors are self funded via Planning Performance Agreements so are cost neutral to the service).

- The agency staff have been replaced by permanent employees to give more stability to the service and reduce costs.
- Currently there are 2 vacancies on establishment following recent resignations but this is considered to be low and normal evolution. Recruitment is currently taking place and it is anticipated that the vacancies will be filled within 2 months with a good response having been received to the job adverts.

Consistent quality decision making

12. Progress continues to be made and with MasterGov now 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 and when to accept revisions. The planning team have adopted a new amendments policy which offers clear consistent advice on when amended plans will be accepted. In February 2026, Cabinet agreed a revised Local Validation Checklist which comprises of a matrix and a single document with both guidance and checklists. The checklists seek to address the uncertainty and inconsistency by providing clear and objective document or plan requirements. It does this by requiring documents based on application type, local plan location, and designation based on mapping. It is hoped that this updated advice will offer clear and consistent advice to applicants when making an application with a view to reducing the number of invalid planning submissions. Alongside this a program of regular training for all staff has been introduced together with the production of a number of process notes to assist with knowledge sharing and consistency across the team.

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

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).
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.

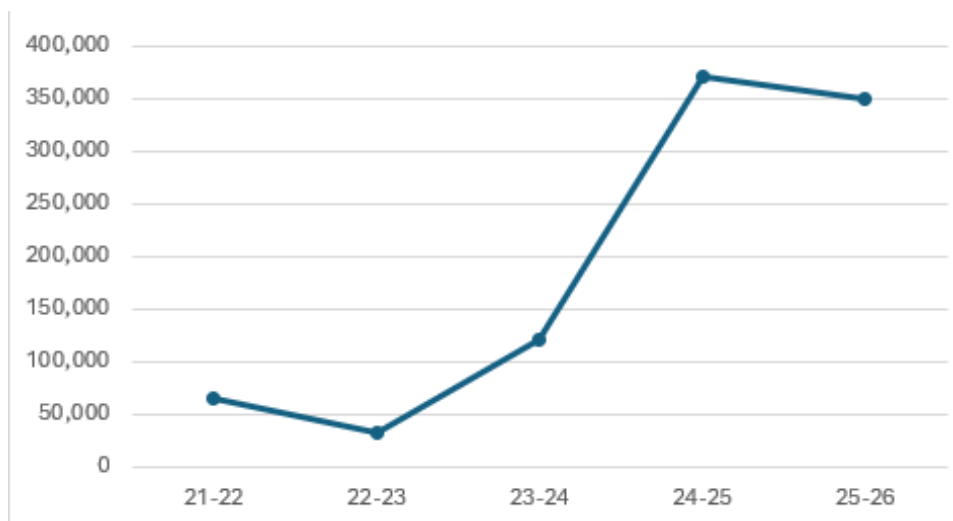
Older applications

20. In November 2021 BCP had a backlog of 734 applications, this has now been reduced by 95% to 39 applications in July 2026
 - Progress with oldest applications
 - When PIB was established, there were applications from 2015, 2016 and 2017 which had not been determined
 - position as of July 2025 all of the older applications have now been determined and we have no applications over 2 years old.

The steady reduction in the backlog over the past 2 years whilst maintaining performance on current applications demonstrates continued improvement in the planning service.

Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's)

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 so that the Council is able to offer this service. PPA's enable effective front loading of the process which helps meet council objectives for housing deliver, funding dedicated officer and consultee resource and providing high quality development. The chart below demonstrates the increase in this service since 2024/25 - within two years the approach has generated sufficient funds to allow the team to effectively deliver this service.



The leadership skills of the Strategic Applications Team Leader have been critical in the delivery of the service, building confidence and embedding a culture of accountability, learning and problem solving. Engagement between the team with developers, allowing for work to be responsive to developers' needs, have built trust with applicants and developers returning to use the PPA service. Feedback from a recent PPA for a Premier League football stadium stated the planning team "have been highly constructive and efficient. The level of professional cooperation sets a positive example for how football clubs and local authorities can work together to deliver economic growth by supporting an anchor institution in their city".

In last two years the team have handled 33 PPAs, 4 of which were for AFC Bournemouth. Total PPA fees of £787,593.00 in this time which has directly funded the service. Some key projects which have had PPA's include the following

- AFC Bournemouth Vitality Stadium extension;
- Bournemouth Airport extension;
- JP Morgan Chaseside extension;
- Poole Bridge to Hunger Hill Flood Defences;
- Reserved Matters for UE1 Urban Extension;
- Poole Waterworks Improvement Projects (x2).

MasterGov IT System

22. Since the formation of BCP Council, the planning service operated 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.
23. A project to harmonise these three IT systems into one new system successfully went live on 5 March 2025 and the feedback from officers and users has been broadly positive. MasterGov is a system that needs active management, including enhancements and fixes, and this has been facilitated by the Systems Admin team, coming into the directorate. The team undertake a combination of reactive problem solving work and enhancements, and the current priority is to implement the new Building Safety Levy module across the MasterGov platform whilst also implementing a new platform build.

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
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.

Planning complaints

26. Revised processes have been put in place, including regular fortnightly meetings within the team to monitor resolution of complaints. The number of complaints is variable, with sometimes it being obvious that a complaint intends to skip through the complaints process to raise an issue with the LGSCO, but response times are consistently good and LGSCO often does not investigate a complaint about the as

they don't see enough evidence of fault in the way the Council processed the planning application etc

Local Plan

27. The key objective for this workstream was to deliver and adopt the BCP Local Plan. 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.
28. The Council is currently operating three legacy area Local Plans that include over 300 policies. In May 2026, Cabinet approved to formally commence preparing a new Local Plan within the reformed 30-month plan making system. This included publishing a scoping consultation exercise for a period of 6 weeks. BCP Council's Local Plan Scoping Consultation ran from 15 June to 27 July 2026. It marked the first stage of creating a unified 15-year planning blueprint (2028–2043) for Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, alongside an active Call for Sites.

Options Appraisal

29. N/A – Report for information

Summary of financial implications

30. The income levels for Planning Operations for 2026-27 are stable and similar to that for 2025-26.
31. 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. 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

32. 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

33. 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 has been key to delivering the current improvements.

Summary of sustainability impact

34. 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

35. None identified at this time

Summary of equality implications

36. None identified at this time

Summary of risk assessment

37. 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

38. None

Appendices

39. None

Cllr Questions

a) Is BCP meeting its statutory obligations and internal objectives as a Planning Authority

Yes, BCP is meeting its statutory obligations and internal objectives as a Planning Authority

The government sets strict performance targets for local councils in England when determining planning applications. Councils risk being placed in "special measures" if they fail to meet these statutory speed and quality thresholds, which are continuously monitored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

1. Speed of Decisions

Councils are expected to determine the majority of their planning applications within statutory time limits or an agreed extended deadline.

- **Major Applications** Councils must determine at least **60%** within 13 weeks (or 16 weeks for applications requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment).
- **Non-Major Applications** Councils must determine at least **70%** within eight week

2. Quality of Decisions

Performance is also measured by the number of council decisions that are subsequently overturned at the appeal stage.

Quality Threshold: Councils must ensure that no more than **10%** of their total decisions (assessed separately for major and non-major applications) are overturned upon appeal over a rolling assessment period

Major applications defined as:

- **Residential:** Provision of 10 or more dwellinghouses, or a site area of 0.5 hectares or more (where the exact number of houses is unknown).
- **Commercial/Non-Residential:** Creation of 1,000 m² or more of gross floor space.
- **Site Area:** Any development or change of use on a site of 1 hectare or more.
- **Specialist Uses:** Operations involving waste development or the winning and working of minerals

Non-major defined as:

- **Minor Developments:** 1 to 9 homes, or small-scale commercial/retail expansions.
- **Householder Developments:** Extensions, conservatories, loft conversions, and garages within the boundary of a single existing house.
- **Change of Use:** Converting a building from one use class to another (e.g., an office to a residential unit) on a site smaller than 1 hectare.
- **Other Consents:** Advertisement consents, listed building consent, and works to protected trees

Statistics taken from the last Quarter and previous two years

	Number of applications determined	Percentage granted	Percentage determined in time
Q1 2026			
Total	566	82%	93%
Majors	23	74%	100%
Non-Majors	615	82%	92%
2025 - 2026			
Total	2150	83%	83%
Majors	88	75%	68%
Non-Majors	2062	74%	81%
2024-2025			
Total	2466	82%	86%
Majors	86	80%	81%

Non-majors	2380	80%	84%
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b) Is there a case for an external Peer Review

The planning department are well above government targets for determining planning applications both in respect of speed of decision making and quality of decision making.

It is considered that there is no current need for an external review. It has been demonstrated that there has been steady and continued improvement with regards to the performance of the planning department over the past years. This is on part due to the appointment of permanent members of staff at Director and Head of Service level.

It is considered that the current management team are well placed to continue improvement and build upon recent success including reducing the backlog of older applications, staff retention and recruitment and speed and quality of decision making.

c) What is the difference in performance levels between 'major' planning application and others

Refer to (a) above.

d) Is there data on residents' satisfaction on terms of those who submit applications and those who object to applications that have been submitted

We do not have data in respect of customer satisfaction

e) What further measures can be introduced to improve performance

Improving performance is being considered constantly as there is a need to adapt to changing circumstances and legislative requirements that may have an impact on how a planning application is determined.

Current initiatives being researched include the following:

Staff training: Regular staff training in specific areas like Biodiversity Net Gain and Flood Risk. There is month peer to peer training which occurs currently and will continue to do so, this provides valuable knowledge transfer throughout the team .

Legal: Working with legal to help streamline process and increase efficiency where possible.

Review of current team structure: A review of the structure will take place to ensure it is fit for purpose and is delivering what is required.

Use of conditions: A review of the use of conditions and information required with a planning submission is currently being undertaken to ensure that we are not seeking more information than is necessary to determine the application and therefore be as efficient as possible.

National Scheme of delegation: Implementation of the forthcoming national scheme of delegation to take place by October this year. This will reduce the number of applications going to planning committee