



Blaenau Gwent CBC

Planning Service Annual Performance Report 2015

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November 2015**

Local Planning Authority – Blaenau Gwent CBC

Planning Annual Performance Report (APR) – 2015

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1.0 Foreword

- 1.1 It is with great pleasure that we present the first Blaenau Gwent Annual Performance Report for the planning service. The information in this report has been compiled to give the reader an overview of the performance of the Development Management and European & Planning Policy teams for the financial year April 2014 to March 2015.
- 1.2 The planning service is located in the Environment and Regeneration Department and work with colleagues across the Council and outside organisations to make the environment of Blaenau Gwent vibrant and attractive.
- 1.3 The period covered by this APR has been a challenging one in many ways. However, the data confirms that the services provided by the Council are comparable with any in Wales despite the relatively small team and limited resources.
- 1.4 Along with our officers, we remain committed to a programme of continuous improvement and will listen to the comments made in the public consultation as well as addressing the areas that have been highlighted as being in need of improvement. We will also rise to the challenges of the new Wales Planning Bill as its full impact becomes apparent in the year ahead.



Denis Owens
Cllr Denis Owens
Chair of Planning Committee



Graham Bartlett
Cllr Graham Bartlett
Executive Member: Economy

2.0 Context

- 2.1 Blaenau Gwent is located entirely within the “Heads of the Valleys”, an area widely recognised as facing some of the greatest economic and social challenges created by economic restructuring of the late 20th and early part of this century.
- 2.2 Blaenau Gwent’s history is closely allied to the exploitation of coal and the making of iron and steel. As a result, heavy industry came to fill much of the three main valleys of Sirhowy, Ebbw Fach and Ebbw Fawr. The settlement pattern is one of densely populated valley bottom and sides giving way to open areas of attractive countryside on the valley tops.
- 2.3 Whilst the coal industry declined in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the steel industry was a major employer up until the closure of the Ebbw Vale Works in 2002. The manufacturing sector which grew up around these industries continues to form an important part of the economy of Blaenau Gwent.
- 2.4 The population of the area has been falling since its peak of 127,611 in 1921. This trend appears to be slowing with population levels stabilising over the past decade. The latest WG projection (2011) suggests that Blaenau Gwent’s population is expected to continue to reduce from 69,812 in 2011 to 69,401 in 2021.
- 2.5 Ebbw Vale remains the key settlement and has a critical role to play in the success of the Borough and indeed the region. It must not only be successful in its own right but also function as a service and employment hub for the smaller settlements that surround it. It provides the central framework around which high capacity sustainable transport links have been developed. Other settlements in the area will also need modern shopping, leisure, community and cultural facilities, more attractive and affordable housing, clean and vibrant town centres, accessible countryside and of course employment opportunities.
- 2.6 There have been positive signs of late. The continued redevelopment of The Works, the dualling of the A465, the Enterprise Zone and the extension of the passenger railway to Ebbw Vale town have all resulted in positive benefits to residents and visitors. The potential of the Circuit of Wales to change the wider economic fortunes of the area is one that must be capitalised on as must the links to the open countryside and Brecon Beacons National Park to the north.
- 2.7 In terms of promoting a sustainable economy, the area needs to develop a stronger presence in higher value services and the knowledge economy, and to seize opportunities to create jobs in tourism, creative industries, renewable energy, recycling and waste. Effective action to raise skill levels is particularly important in the Heads of the Valleys area.
- 2.8 Challenges also remain around the quality and choice of the housing stock, economic activity rates, stabilising the population, the role of town centres and development activity in the private sector generally.

2.9 **The Local Development Plan:** Blaenau Gwent adopted its Local Development Plan in November 2012. It covers the period to 2021. This replaced the Unitary Development Plan which covered the period to 2011.

2.10 The LDP sets out the context and challenges for the future of the Borough and identifies the policy context for the Plan. It sets out a vision, objectives and a spatial strategy for the area. The aspiration is for ‘Growth and Regeneration’ and is based on regenerating the area through building a network of district hubs around the principal town of Ebbw Vale. The strategy recognises a north-south borough divide in terms of opportunities for growth. The Plan has a suite of Development Management Policies which form the basis for determining planning applications and identifies how the strategy is to be delivered on the ground with chapter 9 setting out how the Plan is to be delivered and implemented.

2.11 **Fit with Community Strategy and Operational activity of the authority:** The overarching policy framework for action is “Making a Difference – A Community Strategy for Blaenau Gwent 2010-2030”. The strategy has been prepared by the Council and its partners and identifies 7 key themes:

1. **Lively and Accessible Communities:** *Creating communities that people enjoy and want to live in*
2. **Fair and Safe Communities:** *Making people feel safer and included in our communities*
3. **Healthy Communities:** *Helping people be healthy and get the right care and support when needed*
4. **Leading Communities:** *Working with, and for our communities*
5. **Thriving Communities:** *Offering the opportunities, support and resources for people to thrive*
6. **Learning Communities:** *Giving people the skills to succeed*
7. **Green & Sustainable Communities:** *Improving our environment today for tomorrow*

2.12 The LDP expresses in land use planning terms those elements of the community strategy that relate to the development and use of land and buildings. The Community Strategy is supported by the Blaenau Gwent Single Integrated Plan (SIP) (2013). This is a short term “action plan” setting out how the long term vision for the County Borough will be achieved and what will be prioritised to 2017. The purpose of the SIP is to set out the main priorities for partnership working, and what will need to be done to make Blaenau Gwent a better place to live, work and visit and identifies five inter-related key themes and the priorities within them. These are:



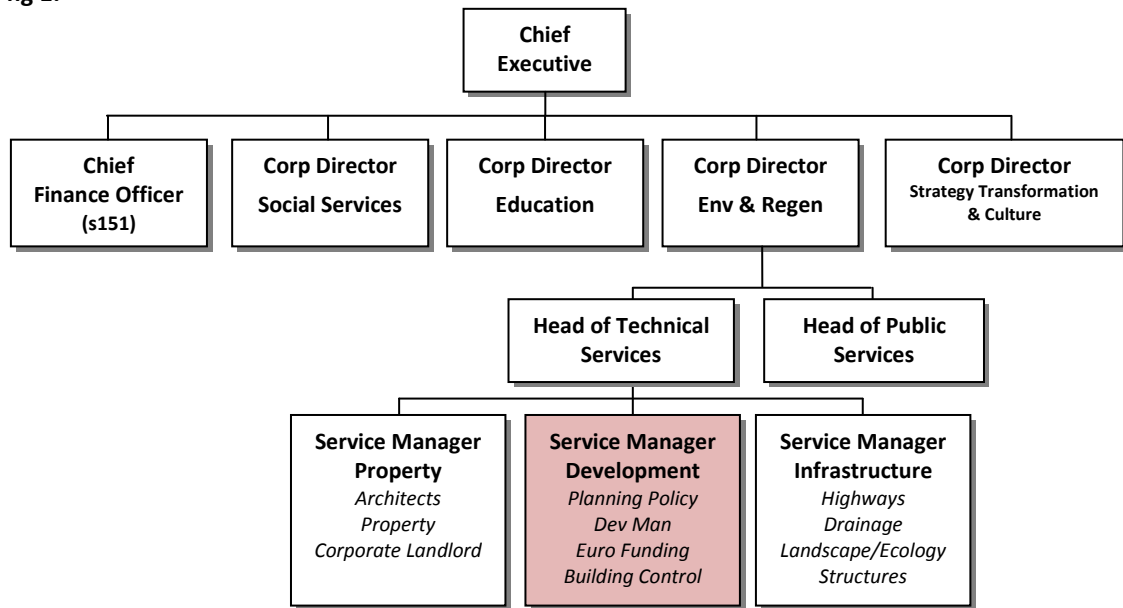
- 2.13 The Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP) sets out the Council's overall plan for the 5-year term from 2012-2017. It is the Council's business plan and links to the Community Strategy's themes. The three high level outcomes that the Council is striving to positively impact on are:
- Children and young people's learning achievement levels are maximised
 - People and communities are enabled to help themselves
 - The living environment is vibrant and attractive.
- 2.14 The two improvement objectives are:
- Ensure that education standards are raised particularly at Key Stage 4; and
 - Ensuring the continuing financial stability of the Council.
- 2.15 Blaenau Gwent, like all Council's in Wales, continues to face significant budget reductions. The challenges for service re-design mean that as a Council we have to focus on transforming the way we work to find new ways to deliver frontline services.
- 2.16 The Council's Transforming Blaenau Gwent Programme has been developed to address and meet these challenges. The programme has clear objectives and these form the focus of our efforts:
- Ensure our future financial viability as a Council;
 - Transform our culture and working practices;
 - Transform our services, how they are delivered and who delivers them; and
 - Drive our work with partners and communities to achieve the aspirations in the Corporate Improvement Plan and Single Integrated Plan.
- 2.17 The CIP is linked to Directorate Service Plans. Annually each directorate evaluates and develops their plans taking into account the CIP. Development Services has its own service plan which feeds into the Technical Services Service Plan which feeds into the Directorate Service Plan. The LDP is a constituent part of this hierarchy of plans, translating the aims and objectives of overarching strategies into the land use planning arena.

3.0 Blaenau Gwent Planning Service

3.1 Structure

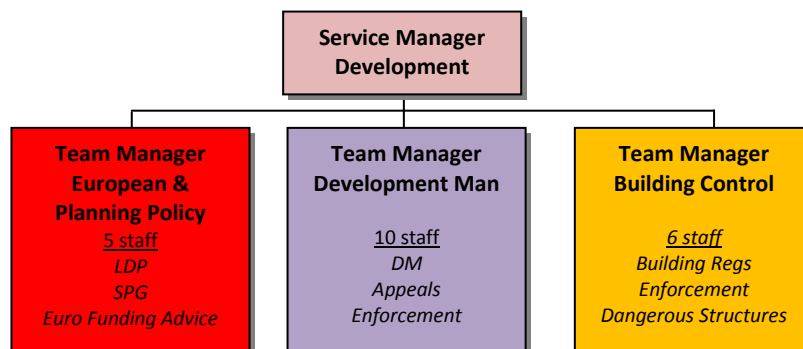
3.2 The planning service comprises the Development Management and the European & Policy Teams. Along with Building Control they sit within Development Services, an integral part of the Technical Services Division of the Environment and Regeneration Department. The high level structure of the Council is shown in fig 1.

fig 1.



3.3 Both the policy and development management functions report to the Service Manager Development and are located in Blaina District Office, remote from the remainder of the Technical Services Division located in Baldwin House, Ebbw Vale. The structure of the Development Team is shown in fig 2.

fig 2.



3.4 The other half of the department reports to the Head of Public Services which includes environmental health, licensing, regeneration, waste, former DLO and catering. These services are located either in the Civic Centre, Ebbw Vale or the Barleyfields Depot, Brynmawr.

3.5 Constitutionally and politically, the planning function is split. The planning policy service is the responsibility of the Executive Member: Economy and its attendant Scrutiny Committee. Development Management is a non-executive function reporting directly to the Chair and Planning Committee.

3.6 **Finance**

3.7 In line with the wider economic climate, planning application numbers and hence income has seen a downward trend over the past 6 years. Development Management has been operating at a financial deficit. The balance between budgeted income and actual income has been exacerbated by the fact that WG chose not to uplift planning fees in the period between 2009 and 2015 yet the budgeted income rose in line with inflation. Taken with the fall in build rates and application numbers, the service has found itself in the difficult position of not being able to meet financial expectations for reasons completely out of its control.

3.8 Income peaked in 2013 largely due to the outline application for the Circuit of Wales. Discussions are ongoing around revising the income “target” with an aspiration that it be based around trends and anticipated workload. This is key to the future of the service. Staff numbers are relatively low compared to other LPA’s and the loss or absence of staff for any length of time impacts disproportionately on the service. Cutting the staff establishment list is not a sustainable option unless the Council accepts the resultant (and significant) drop in service levels. This would be at a time of increased pressure to meet service targets set by WG as part of the “Positive Planning” agenda and the Wales Planning Act as well as potentially significant caseloads associated with the Circuit of Wales.

fig 3.

	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15
Budgeted Income	£373,320	£380,790	£388,410	£388,410	£388,410	£279,731
Actual Income	£202,545	£299,639	£180,570	£288,584	£341,431	£246,821
Deficit	-£170,775	-£81,151	-£207,840	-£99,826	-£46,979	-£32,910

3.9 During 2014, the Council introduced a charging regime for the non-statutory service of dealing with preliminary enquiries. Preliminary enquiries are a vital element of a successful DM process but it is a significant draw on officer time. The introduction of a fee was the first step in working towards full cost recovery. The charge is only levied in respect of planning officer’s time in responding to enquiries. To date, other services such as landscape, highways and environmental health have not introduced a similar charge and they are not compensated via the planning preliminary fee. The fee income

for the first year was modest (£8.5K) but it has helped to bridge the deficit in overall fee income. There is also anecdotal evidence that it has “weeded out” purely speculative enquiries.

- 3.10 In response to the budget deficit and a reduction in staff numbers, the DM team was reorganised during 2014. The decision was taken to stop pro-active site compliance monitoring. This decision was not taken lightly but was unavoidable. Resources are being directed at the core, statutory elements of the service. The enforcement service is now complaint driven, fulfilling statutory obligations. The loss of the compliance monitoring element has led to a drop in income of circa £25K pa which was being generated from retrospective applications resulting from work not in compliance with planning permissions. One can only speculate whether breaches that were being detected continue un-investigated.
- 3.11 Nowhere is the lack of capacity felt more than in the Planning Policy Team which consists of 2.8 FTE’s responsible of the forward planning service. To take advantage of shared capacity, we are working with Torfaen on a viability study for CIL. We have also worked with neighbouring LPA’s, taking the lead on a new SPG for onshore wind turbine related development in the A465 corridor and with Carms CC on mineral related work. This has proved to be an efficient use of scarce resources. As we move toward greater collaboration and local government reorganisation, other issues will need to be faced such as office re-location, merging staff structures and IT provision.
- 3.12 Financial planning is challenging. Not only is the Council facing unprecedented budgetary pressures, the planning service has to plan for two scenarios; one where the Circuit of Wales development proceeds bringing with it significant work and fees and one where it does not. Outline planning permission has been granted (subject to s106) and if non planning issues around common land and financial sustainability are resolved, if the scheme proceeds it will present significant challenges to the service. Delivering the project is a corporate priority and the structure of the teams may need to be revisited once there is more certainty.

3.13 Staffing

- 3.14 Both the DM and Policy teams have small but relatively stable structures with limited turnover in recent years. One officer left DM for another LPA and one in the Policy team was re-designated to another service area following a departmental restructure. This stability has enabled good business continuity with staff able to be dedicated to major projects such as The Works, Circuit of Wales and a tranche of renewable energy applications. The inevitable disruption caused by high staff turnover (and the associated cost) has been largely avoided but the relatively small nature of the teams presents challenges in terms of business continuity/resilience during periods of staff absence/sickness.
- 3.15 The immediate issue facing the Policy team is the potential reorganisation of the European funding advice team. An option for its re-location to the Regeneration Team would result in the loss of 2 members from the existing Policy team of 5. The remaining

3 officers (2.8 FTE's) who dedicate time to planning policy work are preparing for a likely full review of the LDP next year and with one of the officers on reduced hours, options are being considered as to how this can be best achieved to deliver a significant piece of work to the strict timescales imposed.

- 3.16 In DM, the staff structure is currently at full strength. During 2014, the previous team structure that comprised an enforcement team and an applications team was abandoned in favour of an area team approach. Each area team is headed by a principal officer and is responsible for all DM and enforcement work in their respective areas of the borough. The new approach is still bedding in. Unfortunately the change of approach coincided with an officer leaving, a maternity leave and a glut of major renewable energy applications which resulted in one principal officer having to dedicate most of her time to duties outside that of the team leader role. However, the new approach is now paying dividends with strong performance being returned in most areas. An additional maternity leave is imminent and whilst approval was given to appoint a 12 month fixed term replacement, recruitment has not proved successful. We are currently looking at an alternative solution via a review of current responsibilities to cover the period of absence
- 3.17 At the time of writing, the Council is implementing its new Business Support initiative. This has involved identifying all posts across the Council that contribute to the administration and support of all its services. In scope staff will move to a new central support service in the Civic Centre during late 2015 onwards. The underlying principles are to remove duplication, streamline processes and build in resilience by addressing single points of failure. The challenge in the short term is to manage the transitional period to minimise disruption to the service.

4.0 The Blaenau Gwent Narrative

4.1 Workload - Policy

Having adopted the LDP in 2012 the focus of planning policy work has been on keeping information on the area up to date through annual studies, the publication of Annual Monitoring Reports, adoption of SPGs and responding to planning applications and enquiries.

4.2 Since adoption, two successive Annual Monitoring Reports (AMR's) have been submitted to Welsh Government on time. Both AMR's have found that there is no evidence to suggest there is a need for a full or partial review of the LDP. The latest AMR did recognise that progress on delivering the strategy of Growth and Regeneration is slower than expected due to the fact that the area has yet to come out of recession. A full review of the Plan is likely to be required next year and it is our intention to start preparing the review report prior to the review date of November 2016.

4.3 We have started making preparations for this major piece of work. A budget contingency fund has been set up and underspends in budgets are being ring-fenced. This finance will be required to enable a number of supporting studies and reports to be commissioned e.g. SA/SEA, HRA, Employment Review and Retail Study.

4.4 The 14/15 financial year saw the continued roll out of Supplementary Planning Guidance Documents. The following documents have been approved since the adoption of the Plan:

1. The Works Design and Masterplan (October 2013)
2. Access, Car Parking and Design (March 2014)
3. Hot Food and Drink Uses in Town Centres (October 2014)
4. Heads of the Valleys Smaller Scale Wind Turbine Development – Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study (April 2015)
5. Planning Guidance for Smaller Scale Wind Turbine Development – Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Requirements (April 2015)
6. Phase 1 Northgate, The Works (October 2015)

The Council is currently preparing further SPGs:

- Householder Design Guide
- Shop Fronts and Advertisements
- Nature Conservation Planning Guidance for Small Scale Wind Energy Developments
- Trees and Development

4.5 Workload - DM

4.6 The application case load of the DM team peaked in 2007. Since that time, numbers of applications have steadily declined but the recent trend has seen signs of growth. This can be part explained by legislative changes around discharge of condition applications and applications for non-material amendments. However, the complexity of the

workload increases year on year. In addition, work also continues to go unrecorded in national PI's e.g. EIA screening opinions which are both time consuming and non-fee earning.

fig 4.

Financial Year	Number of Planning Apps Received	Prelim Enquiries
2004-2005	684	<i>No comparable data</i>
2005-2006	677	
2006-2007	689	
2007-2008	486	
2008-2009	421	
2009-2010	392	
2011-2012	342	
2012-2013	528	170
2013-2014	319	168
2014-2015	417	267
Average	<i>Circa 500 pa</i>	<i>Circa 200pa</i>

- 4.7 The year 14/15 saw a spike in the number of energy related applications submitted. There were 9 gas/diesel generating plants submitted or decided in the year alone. This proved to be a resource intensive work stream taking up significant officer time. The work included screening, scoping, validation and scrutiny of detailed specialist reports, committee report writing and subsequent appeals. This work pressure has tailed off but there remains a steady flow of turbine and solar related enquiries, screenings and applications.
- 4.8 In April 2014, we introduced a fee regime for preliminary planning enquiries. The aim was twofold – firstly to begin to recover some of the cost associated with what had previously been non fee earning work. Secondly, it was anticipated that the introduction of a fee would filter out purely speculative enquiries and the growing trend of some agents using our free service to gauge opinion for schemes in other LPA's where charges were already levied.
- 4.9 We recognised that the introduction of a fee placed a greater obligation upon us to provide a quality service. An advisory leaflet was prepared that sets out precisely what is required in terms of information to be submitted. All permitted development enquiries are subject to a double check by a senior officer and all statements of professional opinion on the merits of a scheme are signed off by a principal officer or team manager. In the main, responses on the merit of a scheme are provided from a policy and development management perspective only. If an enquirer requires highway, ecology, environmental health or other service of the Council they are signposted to the relevant Department.
- 4.10 One advantage of being a small Council is that officers involved in the development process can foster close working relationships. We have developed informal officer groups to deal with The Works, the Blaenau Gwent Enterprise Zone and the Circuit of

Wales. This one stop development team approach can be replicated as and when required calling on the expertise of environmental health, highways, drainage, regeneration, finance, estates, ecology, landscape, rights of way, estates and others.

- 4.11 Enforcement activity has decreased in recent years. This has been due to the need to concentrate on core, statutory elements of the service. The teams were restructured and the service is complaint driven. The risk is that developments not being carried out in accordance with approved plans or in breach of conditions are not being picked up. However, given current staff capacity, reactive and statutory enforcement is the only realistic service option.

fig 5.

Financial Year	Complaints
2005-2006	390
2006-2007	415
2007-2008	392
2008-2009	338
2009-2010	325
2010-2011	290
2011-2012	272
2012-2013	231
2013-2014	257
2014-2015	208
Average	312

4.12 **Service improvement.**

Our current Business Plan identifies a number of key actions to deliver service improvement and efficiency. The headline priorities are:

Ref	Priority	RAG	Comment
Dev 1	Meeting challenges and changes to the planning system in response to the Wales Planning Bill	Green	Continuous review of work flow – systems thinking
Dev 2	Ensuring service delivery whilst managing reduced resources and financial pressures	Green	Continuous process via team meetings and DMT
Dev 3	Business continuity in light of succession planning	Green	Review of staff structures underway
Dev 4	Circuit of Wales	Green	Work to facilitate reserved matters apps ongoing
Dev 5	IT	Red	See commentary below
Dev 6	Review the role of the European function to maximise funding opportunities	Green	Service likely to be relocated to Regen team
Dev 7	Develop a strategy for the review of LDP/ replacement LDP with light touch LDP/SDP	Green	Finance strategy in place
Dev 8	Prepare a Flood Risk Management Plan in line with statutory requirements	Green	Complete
Dev 9	Determine if Blaenau Gwent should adopt a CIL charge	Yellow	Viability assessment being finalised
Dev 10	Out of hours – develop a fit for purpose delivery model given loss of out of hours service	Green	Complete

4.13 The key issue is IT – hardware and software. At present, the back office software is Northgate iPlan (and sister package iBuild in Building Control), GGP is the GIS provider and Civica electronic document management system. Some of the key issues being faced are:

1. No facility to upload part 1 application details to the web. We acknowledge that we are one of the few LPAs who do not provide this service. This is the first step towards a more integrated service user interface that would allow application tracking, public commenting and full e-consultation. The software has been procured but remains in “test” format. This is a priority, particularly as it now appears as a performance indicator on the “dashboard” published by WG. The lack of this facility is now holding the service back, has implications in terms of the efficient use of officer time/resources and does not allow reasonable online engagement with the public. It is also a failing that impacts on our ability to meet the Council’s aspirations as part of its “Transforming Blaenau Gwent” programme with the public encouraged to use electronic communication.
2. Line speeds and screen refresh rates at Blaina DO. The planned office re-location to the Civic Centre during 2016 should address this problem. The Civic has been completely re-wired as part of the corporate investment in IT infrastructure.
3. Hardware – budget pressures dictate that we cannot procure a fully functional system to allow planners and building control officers to fully integrate with back office systems when on site. Even if such a product could be sourced, wi-fi and network coverage in the Borough is patchy due to the topography. We are about to trial an interim solution with hand held tablet pc’s.
4. Our Northgate systems are about to be merged into a new product “Engage”. Decisions taken around IT now may prove critical as we move toward LGR.

4.14 These four issues have resulted in a relatively low take up by local agents in using the planning portal. Electronic submission comes with its own difficulties and costs to this LPA in terms of print costs and the difficulty in paying online application of fees. Whilst welcoming submissions via the portal, we have not pro-actively encouraged that approach until these IT constraints have been addressed. I am in discussions with the Council’s new IT provider SRS to work through solutions to these issues. In addition, the Council is embarking on a Customer and Digital Strategy to improve the front facing electronic face of Council services. This should assist in prioritising the customer experience of a public facing service such as planning.

5.0 What Service Users Think

- 5.1 In 2014-15 we commissioned two customer satisfaction surveys aimed at assessing the views of people that had received a planning application decision during the period. The first covered the period April 2014 - September 2014 and the second covered the period October 2014 - March 2015. The following feedback is based on the combined results of both surveys.
- 5.2 The surveys were sent to 138 people, 25% of whom submitted a whole or partial response. The majority of responses (65%) were from local agents. 18% were from members of the public. None of respondents had their most recent planning application refused.
- 5.3 We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the planning service. They were given the following answer options:
- Strongly agree;
 - Tend to agree;
 - Neither agree nor disagree;
 - Tend to disagree; and
 - Strongly disagree.
- 5.4 Fig 7 shows the percentage of respondents that selected either 'tend to agree' or 'strongly agree' for each statement for both Blaenau Gwent and Wales.

fig 7.

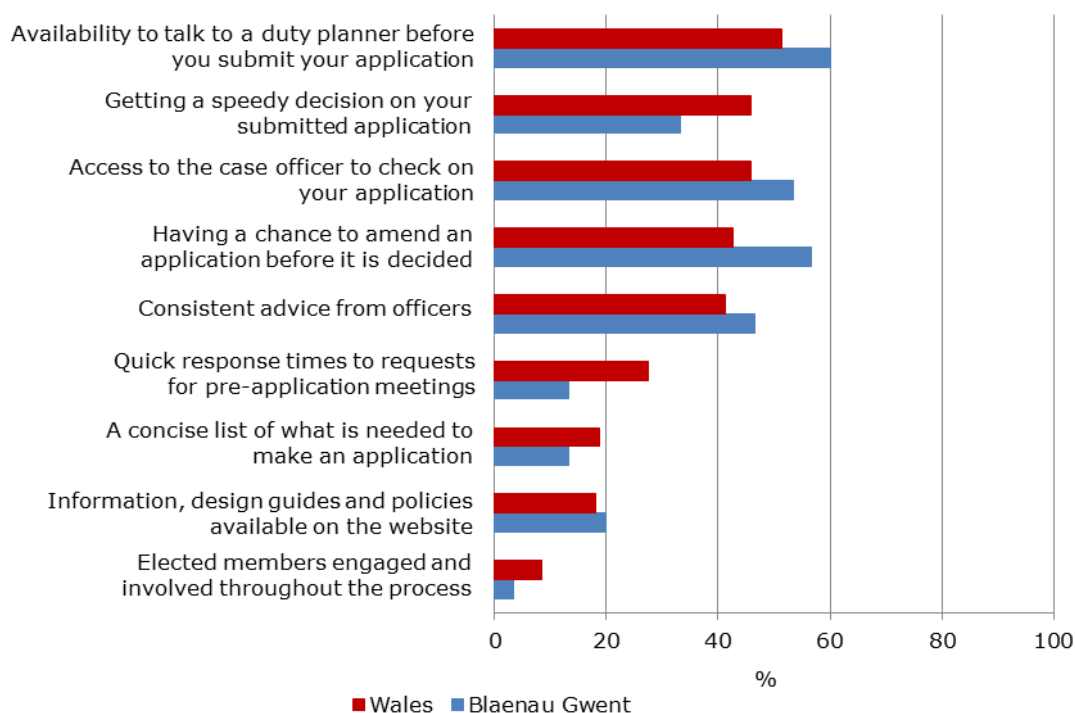
Percentage of respondents who agreed with each statement 2014-15

Percentage of respondents who agreed that:	Blaenau Gwent	Wales
The LPA enforces its planning rules fairly and consistently	52	45
The LPA gave good advice to help them make a successful application	62	57
The LPA gives help throughout, including with conditions	53	48
The LPA responded promptly when they had questions	68	55
They were listened to about their application	66	56
They were kept informed about their application	57	46
They were satisfied overall with how the LPA handled their application	63	57

- 5.5 It is encouraging that this Council exceeded the all Wales average return in every category. However, it has to be acknowledged that satisfaction ratings of mid 50% must be improved upon. We are active members of SEWSPG and the South Wales Heads of DM group where good practise is shared and will strive to improve these returns.
- 5.6 We also asked respondents to select three planning service characteristics from a list that they thought would most help them achieve successful developments. Fig 8 shows how often each characteristic was selected as a percentage of the total number of selections.

fig 8.

Characteristics of a Good Planning Service: Blaenau Gwent 2014-15



Comments received include:

"No information available online for tracking submitted applications."

"In summary I have found the BG Officers to be open professional and constructive. They consistently deliver a good public service in spite of limited funding."

- 5.7 For Blaenau Gwent service users, the availability to talk to a duty planner before submitting an application was the most popular choice. This reflects the nature of our caseload which is heavily weighted towards householder and minor development. Residents who submit applications are often unrepresented by a professional agent and value the accessibility to their case officer. We ensure that a duty officer is available during officer hours to provide assistance. We are currently investigating means of improving our interface with unrepresented applicants. Importantly, we have yet to convene an agent's forum. This is an acknowledged weakness but has proved unachievable to date due to lack of capacity to organise the event.
- 5.8 In the interests of providing a positive and constructive service, Blaenau Gwent seeks to negotiate a mutually acceptable outcome to applications rather than focus entirely on making a decision inside 8 weeks. It is acknowledged that the two ends are not mutually exclusive but our return against the PI of average time taken to determine applications of 55 days compares very favourably to the all Wales average of 76 days. This demonstrates that even where the 8 week target is missed, applications are decided quickly thereafter and not at the expense of approvals as our rate of granting planning permission also compares well with the national average.

6.0 Blaenau Gwent Performance 2014-15

6.1 This section details our performance against PI's in 2014-15. 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.

6.2 Performance is analysed across the five key aspects of planning service delivery as set out in the Planning Performance Framework namely plan making, efficiency, quality, engagement and enforcement. I will discuss each in turn.

6.3 Plan Making

6.4 As at 31 March 2015, we were one of 21 LPAs that had a current development plan in place. We were required to submit an Annual Monitoring Report in October 2015. This document was submitted to WG in September 2015. Following a meeting with WG planning officials, it is understood at the time of writing that its finding of “no full review required at this stage” has been accepted.

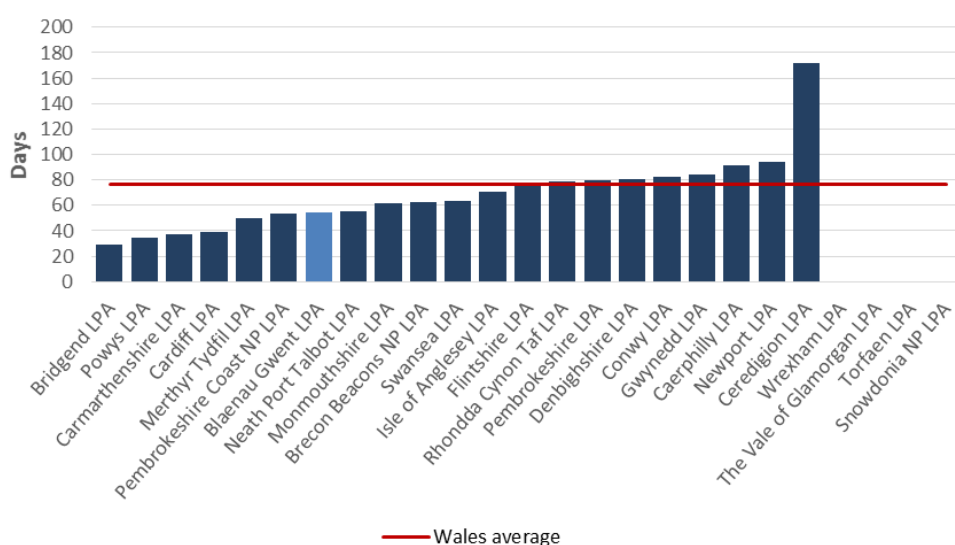
6.5 During the APR period we had 2.6 years of housing land supply identified, making us one of 18 Welsh LPAs without the required 5 years supply.

6.6 Efficiency

6.7 In 2014-15 we determined 384 planning applications, each taking, on average, 55 days (8 weeks) to determine. This compares favourably to an average of 76 days (11 weeks) across Wales. Figure 9 shows the average time taken by each LPA to determine an application during the year. Our performance is considered to be satisfactory and well above the all Wales average and is 7th out of 21 for whom data is available.

fig 9.

Average time taken (days) to determine applications 2014-15

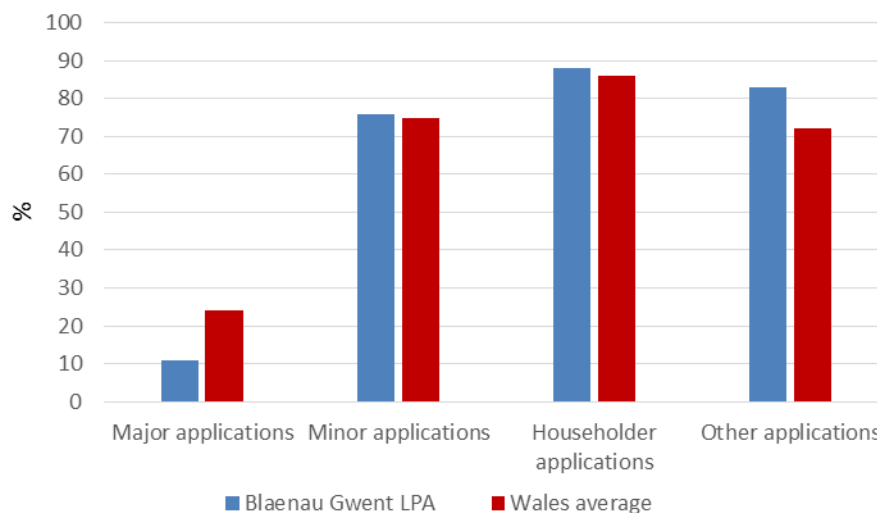


6.8 77% of all planning applications were determined in the statutory timescales. This compared favourably to 73% across Wales, but was below the 80% target. Only 5 out of 25 LPAs met the 80% target. We are working to identify means of improving this return further but we have to acknowledge the key role played by our internal and external consultees as well as the local delegation agreement. Within the Council, our key services are highways, environmental health, ecology and landscape/trees. Each of those services has an appointed officer to input into the planning process but each has a single point of failure. When that particular officer is away, there is insufficient resilience in those services to ensure a prompt response. This directly impacts on the planning service ability to come to speedy decisions. This fundamental weakness is likely to become steadily worse in the coming years as financial efficiency savings have to be found. Having acknowledged this weakness, recent DM performance data (subsequent to the period covered by this APR) shows consistently good performance.

6.9 Fig 10 shows the percentage of planning applications determined within the required timescales across the four main types of application for Blaenau Gwent and Wales.

fig10:

Percentage of planning applications determined within target (by type)

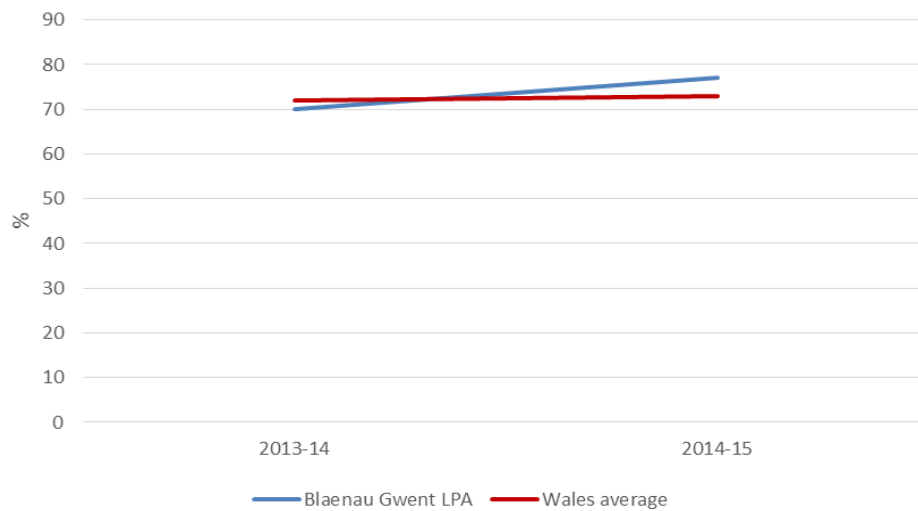


6.10 Blaenau Gwent is at or above the all Wales average in 3 of the four categories. That is down to the professionalism and dedication of the staff within the services that contribute to these returns. I have considered reviewing the scheme of delegation in an effort to improve these figures but the advent of the all Wales delegation scheme which is expected in 16/17 means that other priorities have taken over as we wait for that eventuality. The failure to meet the Wales average in respect of major applications is in part due to the complexity of the applications and is skewed by the small cohort of cases involved.

6.11 Between 2013-14 and 2014-15, as Fig 11 illustrates, the percentage of planning applications we determined in Blaenau Gwent within the required timescales increased and is above the Wales average for the same period.

fig 11.

Percentage of planning applications determined within the required timescales



6.12 Encouragingly, at a time when performance improved, the number of applications we received increased and the number of applications we determined increased. 11% of these major applications were determined in the required timescales, the fifth lowest percentage of all Welsh LPAs. This is a reflection of a very small cohort as well as the applications being complex in nature requiring significant amount of additional post submission information. Over the same period:

- The percentage of minor applications determined within required timescales increased from 73% to 76%;
- The percentage of householder applications determined within required timescales decreased from 90% to 88%; and
- The percentage of other applications determined within required timescales increased from 65% to 83%.

6.13 Quality

6.14 In the last two quarters of 2014-15 (Oct 2014 – March 2015) our Planning Committee made 23 planning application decisions, which equated to 11% of all planning applications determined. Across Wales, 7% of all planning application decisions were made by Planning Committees over the same period. This difference is not considered significant. It will be subject to fluctuations reflecting the changing nature of the caseload.

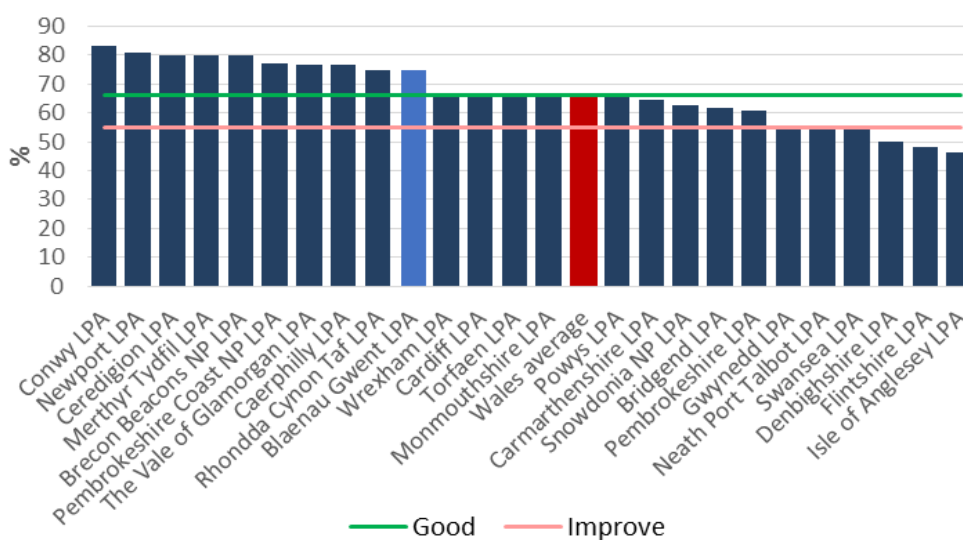
6.15 In Blaenau Gwent, 13% of these member-made decisions were made against officer advice. This compared to 11% of member-made decisions across Wales. This equated to 1.4% of all planning application decisions going against officer advice set against 0.7% across Wales. In recognition of this return, we held a member/officer workshop to look at all the cases where officer recommendation had been set aside and investigated whether each case was a legitimate and defensible decision in the light of

government advice. This return is being closely monitored to see if the trend continues above the all Wales average.

- 6.16 In 2014-15 we received 6 appeals against our planning decisions, which equated to 1.4 appeals for every 100 applications received. Across Wales 1.9 appeals were received for every 100 applications. Again, the difference between the BG return and the all Wales figure is not viewed as significant, indeed it could be seen as a positive. It can be partly explained by the high percentage of approvals issued by Blaenau Gwent which rose to 96%.
- 6.17 Of the 4 appeals that were decided during the year, 3 (75%) were dismissed. As Fig 12 shows, this was higher than the percentage of appeals dismissed across Wales and we were one of 10 LPA's designated as "good".

fig 12.

Percentage of appeals dismissed 2014-15



N.B. During 2014-15 we had no applications for costs at a section 78 appeal upheld.

6.18 Engagement

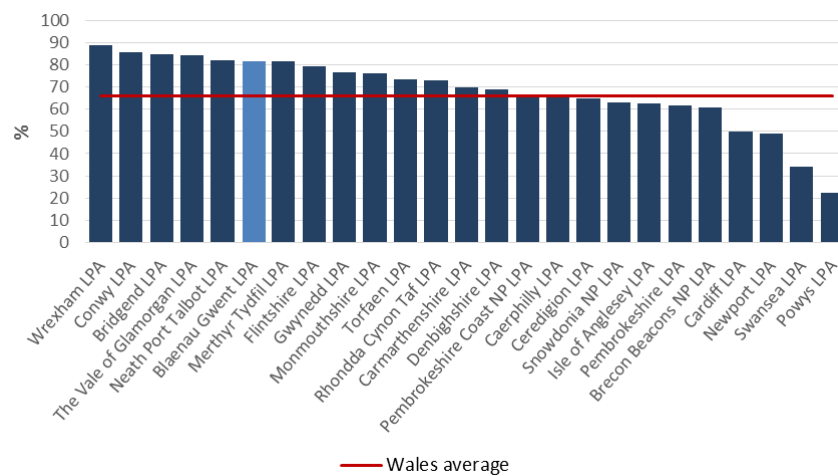
- 6.19 On a positive note, we are one of 22 LPA's that allowed members of the public to address the Planning Committee, 66% confirmed they were listened to about their application and 62% said we gave good advice. The all Wales figures were 56% and 57% respectively.
- 6.20 However, our acknowledged weakness of having limited online presence reflects poorly on the service. We are one of only 3 LPA's that did not have an online register of planning applications. The public cannot access, track progress and view content of applications. This remains a priority in our Business Plan for the current year but the solution lies largely out of our direct control as we require corporate IT support.

6.22 Enforcement

6.23 At the outset, it must be stated that enforcement data must be viewed with some caution. The means of collating data was changed by WG during the study period. However, in 2014-15 we investigated 99 cases, which equated to 1.4 per 1,000 population. This was the fifth lowest rate in Wales. We took on average 9 days to investigate each case.¹ We investigated 82% of these enforcement cases within 84 days comparing favourably with the Wales average of 66%. Fig 13 shows the percentage of enforcement cases that were investigated within 84 days across all Welsh LPAs.

fig 13.

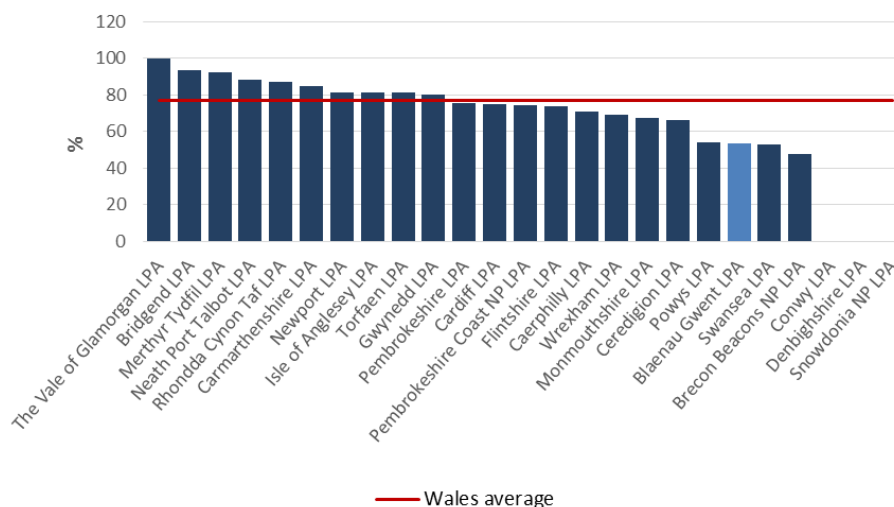
Percentage of enforcement cases investigated within 84 days, 2014-15



6.24 Over the same period, we resolved 167 cases, taking on average 133 days to resolve each case. 53% of this enforcement action was taken within 180 days from the start of the case. As Fig 14 shows, this was the third lowest percentage in Wales.

fig 14.

Percentage of enforcement cases resolved in 180 days, 2014-15



¹ Robust comparisons are not currently available as only 14 of the 25 LPAs supplied data for this indicator.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 The priorities for the coming year as highlighted in this report are...

- to meet the challenges raised by changes to the Welsh planning system.
- address I.T. weaknesses.
- consolidate recent DM performance improvement.
- prepare for a full LDP review.
- To work constructively with the private and public sector to stimulate development and to address where possible issues around deliverability, viability and other constraints to development.
- meet timescales for the delivery of the Circuit of Wales.
- comply with the Council's transformation agenda and when required to continue to find efficiency savings without prejudicing frontline performance.
- address logistical difficulties generated by the re-location of support staff and a probable office move during mid 2016.

ANNEX A - PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD OVERVIEW

MEASURE	Indicator - RAG Status		
	GOOD	FAIR	IMPROVE
Plan making			
Is there a current Development Plan in place within the plan period?	Yes		No
LDP preparation deviation from dates in Delivery Agreement, in months	<12	13-17	18+
Annual Monitoring Reports produced following LDP adoption	Yes		No
The local planning authority's current housing land supply in years	>5	4-4.9	<4
Efficiency			
Percentage of "major" applications determined within time periods	Not set	Not set	Not set
Average time taken to determine "major" applications in days	Not set	Not set	Not set
Percentage of all applications determined within time periods required	>80	60.1-79.9	<60
Average time taken to determine all applications in days	Not set	Not set	Not set
Quality			
Percentage of Member made decisions against officer advice	Not set	Not set	Not set
Percentage of appeals dismissed	>66	55.1-65.9	<55
Applications for costs at Sect 78 appeal upheld in the reporting period	0	1	2
Engagement			
Does the LPA allow members of public to address Planning Committee?	Yes		No
Does the LPA have an officer on duty to provide advice to the public?	Yes		No
Does LPA web site have online register of planning applications which the public can access, track their progress and view content?	Yes	Partial	No
Enforcement			
% enf cases investigated (determined whether breach of planning has occurred and if so, resolved whether or not enforcement action is expedient) within 84 days	Not set	Not set	Not set
Average time taken to investigate enforcement cases	Not set	Not set	Not set
% enf cases where enf action is taken or a retrospective application received within 180 days from start of the case (in cases where it's expedient to enforce)?	Not set	Not set	Not set
Average time taken to take enforcement action	Not set	Not set	Not set

WALES AVERAGE	Blaenau Gwent LAST YEAR	Blaenau Gwent THIS YEAR
Yes	Yes	Yes
60	N/A	N/A
Yes	Yes	Yes
4.2	7.6	2.6
24	50	11
206	No Data	55
73	70.3	77
76	No Data	55
11	1.7	13
66	100	75
0	0	0
Yes	Yes	Yes
-	-	-
Yes	No	No
66	No Data	82
71	No Data	9
77	No Data	53
175	No Data	133

ANNEX B

COMMENTARY ON BG PERFORMANCE - DASHBOARD INDICATORS

PLAN MAKING

Indicator	Is there a current Development Plan in place that is within the plan period?	
“Good” <i>A development plan is in place and within the plan period</i>		“Improvement needed” <i>No development plan is in place (inc where the plan has expired)</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
LDP adopted 2012 – plan period expires 2021. Requirement met.		

Indicator	LDP preparation deviation from the dates specified in the original Delivery Agreement (in months)	
“Good” <i>The LDP is being progressed within 12 months of the dates specified in the original Delivery Agreement</i>	“Fair” <i>The LDP is being progressed within 12 and 18 months of the dates specified in the original Delivery Agreement</i>	“Improvement needed” <i>The LDP is progressed more than 18 months later than the dates specified in the original Delivery agreement</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	N/A	
LDP adopted over 12 months ago outside the period of this APR.		

Indicator	Annual Monitoring Reports produced following LDP adoption	
“Good” <i>An AMR is due and has been prepared</i>		“Improvement needed” <i>An AMR is due, and has not been prepared</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
AMR’s have been submitted on time to WG		

Indicator	The LPA's current housing land supply in years	
"Good" <i>The authority has a housing land supply of more than 5 years</i>	"Fair" <i>The authority has a housing land supply of between 4 and 5 years</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>The authority has a housing land supply of less than 4 years</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Improvement Needed	
<p>The issue in Blaenau Gwent is not the supply of land but the reluctance of developers to build due to concerns over viability and a lack of confidence in the housing market.</p> <p>The situation is not helped by the high aspirational build rates. As year by year we fail to deliver the anticipated build rates this increases the number of houses that have to be built in the remaining years making it more and more difficult to have a 5-year supply. Therefore rather than reflecting poor performance, the out turn is a reflection of the methodology used to calculate the housing land supply.</p>		

EFFICIENCY

Indicator	Percentage of "major" applications determined within time periods required	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 11%	
<p>The return of 11% is disappointing. However this can be explained by the tranche of single and small scale wind turbine development in the period. The applications were by their very nature complex and inter related. The quality of some applications required significant further information to be submitted.</p>		

Indicator	Average time taken to determine "major" applications in days	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 55	
<p>The average time taken on 55 days confirms that wherever possible, the Council determines applications in a timely manner.</p>		

Indicator	Percentage of all applications determined within time periods required	
"Good" <i>More than 80% of applications determined within stat time period</i>	"Fair" <i>Between 60% and 80% of applications determined within stat time period</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Less than 60% of applications are determined within stat time period</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Fair	
<p>The return of 77% compares favourably in an all Wales context but is below the 80% target. In the light of the resources available during 14/15 this is considered acceptable performance outturn given the section was carrying a vacant post. Efforts are being made to reach the 80% target by investigating all aspects of delivery including an internal light touch systems thinking review.</p>		

Indicator	Average time taken to determine all applications in days	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 55	
<p>55 days is considered an acceptable out turn given current staff resource.</p>		

QUALITY

Indicator	Percentage of Member made decisions against officer advice	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 13%	
<p>The out turn against this indicator is being closely monitored. It resulted in detailed discussion with the Chair and Vice of Committee and a subsequent workshop for Planning Committee. The discussion included a review of committee procedures, the role of delegation, material/non material considerations and properly recording the reason for decisions. It is not considered necessary at this time to undertake a fundamental review of the delegation process given the pending all Wales delegation scheme due next year.</p>		

Indicator	Percentage of appeals dismissed	
“Good” <i>More than 66% (two thirds) of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal</i>	“Fair” <i>Between 55% and 66% of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal</i>	“Improvement needed” <i>Less than 55% of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
<p>The cohort of appeal decisions is small. Nevertheless, out turn was within “target”.</p>		

Indicator	Applications for costs at Section 78 appeal upheld in the reporting period	
“Good” <i>The authority has not had costs awarded against it at appeal</i>	“Fair” <i>The authority has had costs awarded against it in one appeal case</i>	“Improvement needed” <i>The authority had costs awarded in two or more appeal cases</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
<p>There were no award of costs against Blaenau went during 14/15.</p>		

ENGAGEMENT

Indicator	Does the local planning authority allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee?	
“Good” <i>Members of the public are able to address the Planning Committee</i>		“Improvement needed” <i>Members of the public are not able to address the Planning Committee</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
<p>The public speaking policy was introduced in 2010. It was reviewed in 2012 and found to be operating effectively. The only change was that the time slot was increased from 3 mins to 5 mins. There are no plans to review the policy further as it is understood it will be compliant with new national planning committee protocol requirements due shortly.</p>		

Indicator	Does the local planning authority have an officer on duty to provide advice to members of the public?	
“Good” <i>Members of the public can seek advice from a duty planning officer</i>		“Improvement needed” <i>There is no duty planning officer available</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Good	
<p>A duty officer system operates during office hours. Appointments can also be made with case officers outside of that process.</p>		

Indicator	Does the LPA’s web site have an online register of planning applications which members of the public can access track their progress (and view content)?	
“Good” <i>All documents are available online</i>	“Fair” <i>Only planning application details are available online, and access to other documents must be sought directly</i>	“Improvement needed” <i>No planning application information is published online</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Improvement needed	
<p>This weakness is fully acknowledged. We have made efforts to make provision including the procurement of software to sit alongside our EDM system to allow for web publishing. This would also facilitate e-consultation. However, due to competing interests elsewhere in the Authority, it has not proved possible to get the software implemented. The issue has previously been highlighted in writing by the WG Chief Planning Officer and efforts will continue to be made to rectify the position.</p>		

ENFORCEMENT

Indicator	Percentage of enforcement cases investigated (determined whether a breach of planning control has occurred and, if so, resolved whether or not enforcement action is expedient) within 84 days	
“Good” <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	“Fair” <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	“Improvement needed” <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 82	
<p>Enforcement activity is now reacted to reactive service due to staff capacity issues.</p>		

Indicator	Average time taken to investigate enforcement cases	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 9	
The low levels of complaints made in respect of the service taken with the return is evidence that the service is meeting present demand		

Indicator	Percentage of enforcement cases where enforcement action is taken or a retrospective application received within 180 days from the start of the case (in those cases where it was expedient to enforce)	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 53	
The PI is very challenging. To resolve a case in 180 days requires investigation and removal of a breach/planning application decided. This process takes time. Given current resources, 53 is considered satisfactory.		

Indicator	Average time taken to take enforcement action	
"Good" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Fair" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>	"Improvement needed" <i>Target to be benchmarked</i>
Blaenau Gwent Performance	Benchmarked target to be confirmed by WG – currently 133	
The out turn is considered satisfactory.		

ANNEX C

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

- C1 *The purpose of the Sustainable Development Indicators is to measure the contribution the planning system makes to sustainable development in Wales.*
- C2 *The Sustainable Development Indicators will be used to measure the progress against national planning sustainability objectives, set out in Planning Policy Wales, and can be used to demonstrate to our stakeholders the role and scope of the planning system in delivering wider objectives.*
- C3 *The information will also be useful to local planning authorities to understand more about the outcomes of the planning system and help inform future decisions.*

Authority's returns	In quarter 1 we provided a full response (54 data items); In quarter 2 we provided a full response (54 data items); In quarter 3 we provided a full response (54 data items); In quarter 4 we provided a full response (54 data items).
N/A	

Indicator SD1	The floorspace (square metres) granted and refused planning permission for new economic development on allocated employment sites during the year.
<i>Granted (square metres)</i>	
Authority's data	0
<i>Refused (square metres)</i>	
Authority's data	0
<p>The LDP allocated 50 ha of employment land to be delivered by 2021. This equates to the delivery of 3.3ha per annum. Although outline permissions were granted on two of the employment sites this year no full or reserved matters applications have been granted.</p>	

Indicator SD2	Planning permission granted for renewable and low carbon energy development during the year.
<i>Granted permission (number of applications)</i>	
Authority's data	1
<i>Granted permission (MW energy generation)</i>	
Authority's data	14
<p>14MW is a significant part of Blaenau Gwent's Renewable Energy contribution. Blaenau Gwent has consented in total 27.031 MW which equates to 30.8% of the required electricity by 2020 (Source DECC Jan 2011 and BG records).</p>	

Indicator SD3	The number of dwellings granted planning permission during the year.
<i>Market housing (number of units)</i>	
Authority's data	69
<i>Affordable housing (number of units)</i>	
Authority's data	7
<p>This figure is well below the 233 units per annum which the LDP seeks to build but is in line with the levels of completions attained over the past few years.</p>	

Indicator SD4	Planning permission granted and refused for development in C1 and C2 floodplain areas during the year.
<i>Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that <u>DID NOT</u> meet all TAN 15 tests which were <u>GRANTED</u> permission</i>	
Authority's data	0
<i>Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that <u>DID NOT MEET</u> all TAN 15 tests which were <u>REFUSED</u> permission on flood risk grounds</i>	
Authority's data	0
<i>Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that <u>MET</u> all TAN 15 tests which were <u>GRANTED</u> permission</i>	
Authority's data	4
<p>This data shows very good performance in terms of compliance with TAN 15 requirements</p>	

Indicator SD5	The area of land (ha) granted planning permission for new development on previously developed land and greenfield land during the year.
<i>Previously developed land (hectares)</i>	
Authority's data	10
<i>Greenfield land (hectares)</i>	
Authority's data	31
Greenfield return includes large solar farm site.	

Indicator SD6	The area of public open space (ha) that would be lost and gained as a result of development granted planning permission during the quarter.
<i>Open space lost (hectares)</i>	
Authority's data	0
<i>Open space gained (hectares)</i>	
Authority's data	0
This is an acceptable result but needs to be weighed against the findings of the AMR which records losses from other sources and identifies an overall fall in terms of meeting the FIT standard (Monitoring Table LDP Policy SP9).	

Indicator SD7	The total financial contributions (£) agreed from new development granted planning permission during the year for the provision of community infrastructure.
<i>Gained via Section 106 agreements (£)</i>	
Authority's data	0
<i>Gained via Community Infrastructure Levy (£)</i>	
Authority's data	0
This poor figure reflects the lack of development coming forward and the lack of viability in the area.	
