

# Planning and Development service

Bridgend County Borough Council

November 2025

# About us

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# Audit snapshot

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## What we looked at

- 1 We looked at whether Bridgend County Borough Council (the Council) supports the Planning and Development Service (the service) to deliver value for money in the use of its resources.
- 2 This audit focussed on the Development Control team and the Strategic Planning Policy Team in the Council's Planning and Development Service. Building Control, Strategic Transportation and Highway Development Control are services within the Planning and Development service, but we did not include these within this audit.
- 3 We note the Service's performance but did not examine the reasons for its performance or make judgements on it.
- 4 We did not look at the decisions of individual planning applications.
- 5 We undertook this audit between July and August 2025.
- 6 In January 2025, the Welsh Government closed its consultation on 'promoting a resilient and high performing planning service'. In summary, the Welsh Government consulted on:
  - increasing planning application fees;
  - changing the performance management framework;
  - Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) skills retention, bursaries, and apprenticeships; and
  - improving resilience and resources with Corporate Joint Committees including extending the Local Development Plan Review period.
- 7 At the time of this audit, the Welsh Government had not formally introduced changes following this consultation. This audit, therefore, reflects the service's arrangements before any Welsh Government changes.

## Why this is important

- 8 A Planning Service can play a key role in supporting councils to deliver their well-being objectives. The service writes a Local Development Plan (LDP) and policies that set out what kind of development is suitable in different parts of the Borough. The LDP lets other Council services as well as developers, communities, and residents know what kind of development can happen and where.
- 9 The service and the Council's Development Control Committee (the Committee) decide individual planning applications. These applications vary from major developments, such as new school buildings, housing and industrial estates, to house extensions, or changes of use to buildings. When deciding whether to approve them, they balance the need for new housing, businesses, and infrastructure with the importance of protecting the environment and local amenities.
- 10 The service works to maintain the natural and built heritage and the environment. It also has enforcement powers to act against any development that takes place without the required permission.

## What we have found

- 11 The Council has limited recognition and understanding of the important role the service has in supporting its priorities. There are weaknesses in the management of resources and risk to support the service. The service lacks a service plan and there is limited understanding and oversight of the service's performance. The Council has comprehensive arrangements supporting its Development Control committee.

## What we recommend

- 12 We made four recommendations to the Council which focus on resource management, service planning, risk and performance management.

# Key facts and figures

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- During 2024-25, the Service received 707 planning applications. It determined 594 with 58 applications withdrawn.
- In April 2025, the Service had a backlog of 279 planning applications. This increased from a backlog of 224 planning applications from the previous year.
- At the time of this audit, the Development Control (planning) officers and agency staff had a combined total of 400 planning applications to determine. This averaged 50 planning applications each.
- The Development Control Team Leaders, Building and Development Control Manager and Group Manager also have planning applications to determine.

The Service has an income target from planning application fees:

- The 2023-24 income target was £832,092. The service achieved £408,028.
- The 2024-25 income target was £760,266. The service achieved £481,450.
- The 2025-26 income target is £952,060. At the end of June 2025, the service had received £353,448.

The Service has spent the following on agency staff:

- £28,366 in 2022-23
- £88,431 in 2023-24
- £91,514 in 2024-25

The Council is the first Local Planning Authority (LPA) since the COVID-19 pandemic to approve a Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP).



## Our findings

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### **The Council has limited recognition and understanding of the important role the Planning and Development service has in supporting its priorities**

- 14 Senior officers from the service are involved in different programme boards, which helps ensure that major projects receive professional planning advice early. However, we were often told that Council services engage with the service too late. This means that planning developments may be at an advanced stage before consulting the service. If the service finds that planning developments are not in line with planning guidelines or the RLDP, it can delay progress. It could impact on meeting funding deadlines and may mean resources have been allocated to projects that do not meet planning policies. Delays cause frustration and may be due to a lack of understanding as to the role of the service and why early engagement is important.
- 15 The Council's Corporate Plan does not refer to the service following changes to the plan in April 2025. Considering there are major planning developments underway in the Borough, it is surprising the service does not have a higher profile in the Corporate Plan. Many of the aims within the Council's Wellbeing Objectives and its RLDP, for example, include redeveloping sites, building new ones, regeneration and placemaking. These cannot be achieved without the service, yet their important role is absent.

## **There are weaknesses in the management of resource and risk to support the Planning and Development service**

### **Resource management**

- 16 The service is facing a range of resourcing challenges, which poses a risk to its resilience to meet all its demands. The service has not met its income targets in the last two years. The service submitted reports setting out its challenges, workloads and resourcing needs to the Corporate and Cabinet Management Board (CCMB) in October 2020, December 2022, November 2024, and April 2025. These reports clearly state the potential impact on the service's ability to support delivery of the Council's major projects and its competing demands.
- 17 The current funding arrangement for the service is based on 70% of fee income from planning applications and 30% of base budget funding. We have not seen that this is based on robust modelling and financial planning. This makes the service reliant on planning fee income which fluctuates and can be impacted by external factors outside of the Council's control. This arrangement does not provide stability for the service and makes it difficult for it to plan over the medium and long term.
- 18 In 2022, the service presented the CCMB with a proposed new staff structure with an increased budget of £646,000. The service did not receive a permanent budget increase but instead received a one-off amount of £365,000 from ear marked reserves. The use of ear marked reserves is a short-term solution and does not support the service in the medium to long term. These reserves have now run out. At the time of this audit, the service was preparing to submit a growth bid to increase the base budget for 2026-27 as part of the Council's annual budget setting process.

- 19 The service's annual budget does not provide a true reflection of the costs of delivering the service. It does not include the cost of using agency staff, even though the service has used agency staff for at least three years. The total amount spent on agency staff between 2022-23 to 2024-25 is £208,311. At the end of June 2025, the service had spent £35,104. At the time of this audit, no value for money assessment had been undertaken on the use of agency staff.
- 20 The Council estimates it could generate approximately £116 million in Section 106 (S106) monies over the term of its RLDP.<sup>1</sup> This money can help fund community infrastructure projects, such as parks and community facilities. To manage and monitor the allocation of S106 monies, in early 2025, the Council approved setting up a S106 and Infrastructure Delivery team. This shows the Council recognises the importance of having a dedicated resource to oversee this money and mitigate the potential for any underspends of S106 money.

## Risk management

- 21 The service does not have a service risk register setting out its current and future risks and how it manages and mitigates these. As a result, there are no arrangements for the recording and oversight of service risks and no way to assess risk scores or escalate relevant risks to the Directorate Risk Register.
- 22 We were told a significant and long-standing risk for the service is its capacity to support delivery of the Council's regeneration programme and its statutory responsibilities. For example, the Council's RLDP is expected to attract more developers to the Borough with an anticipated increase in major planning applications. These planning applications can help the Council achieve wider social and economic benefits. However, there is no risk management arrangement for the Council to assure itself it has capacity in the service to respond to this increase in interest.

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<sup>1</sup> An S106 agreement (S106) is a legally binding private contract between a developer (or a number of interested parties) and a Local Planning Authority (LPA) that operates alongside a statutory planning permission.

## The service lacks a service plan and there is limited understanding and oversight of the service's performance

### Service planning

- 23 There is a lack of awareness of the corporate requirement to have a service plan. The Council clearly sets out in its Performance Management Framework (PMF) that services should have a service plan. These should inform Directorate Business Plans and the Corporate Plan. While there is a high-level annual Communities Business Plan, there is a complete lack of service planning within the service.
- 24 Without a service plan, the service is not providing clarity on its priorities, performance, and risks. Nor does the service set out how it will deliver its responsibilities. The Council does not support services to meet this corporate requirement by providing a service plan template. We found no evidence the Council monitors compliance with its service planning requirements in its PMF. We set out in **Appendix 3** some of the significant advantages of having a service plan.

### Oversight of performance

- 25 There is limited awareness of the service's performance. Every quarter, the service sends the Welsh Government its performance for several national indicators.<sup>2</sup> However, the service does not analyse this data nor is there oversight outside of the service to understand its performance.
- 26 We consistently heard the narrative that the service focuses on making the right decisions rather than the timeliness of making decisions. We were told the service is underperforming on timeliness of decision making, however, not all the performance data supports this.
- 27 There are two main national indicators set by the Welsh Government for monitoring the timeliness of decision making:

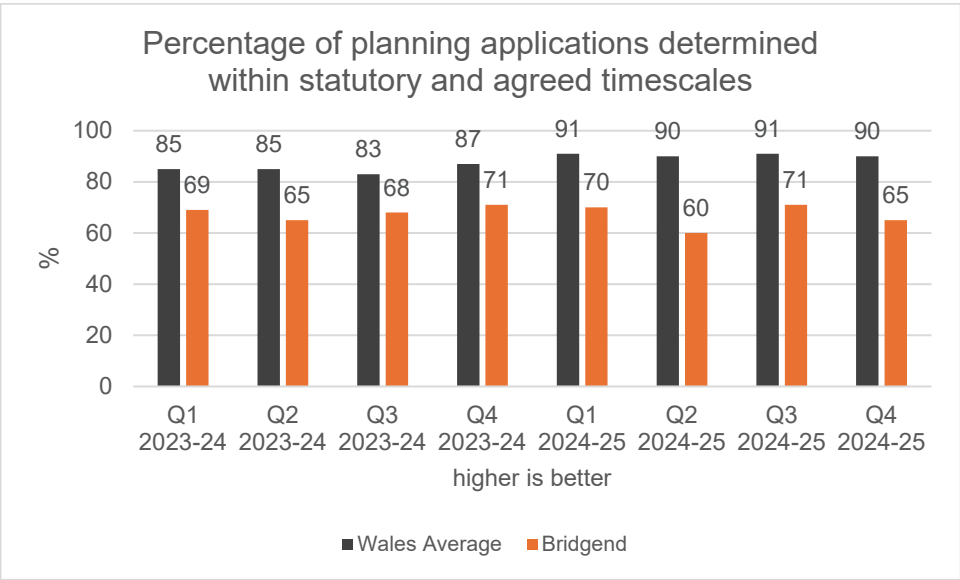
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<sup>2</sup> [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#)

- percentage of planning applications determined in statutory and agreed timescales; and
- the average time taken to determine all applications in days.

28 As shown in **Exhibit 1**, for the two-year period between April 2023 to March 2025, the service consistently performed well below the Wales average for the percentage of planning applications determined within statutory and agreed timescales.

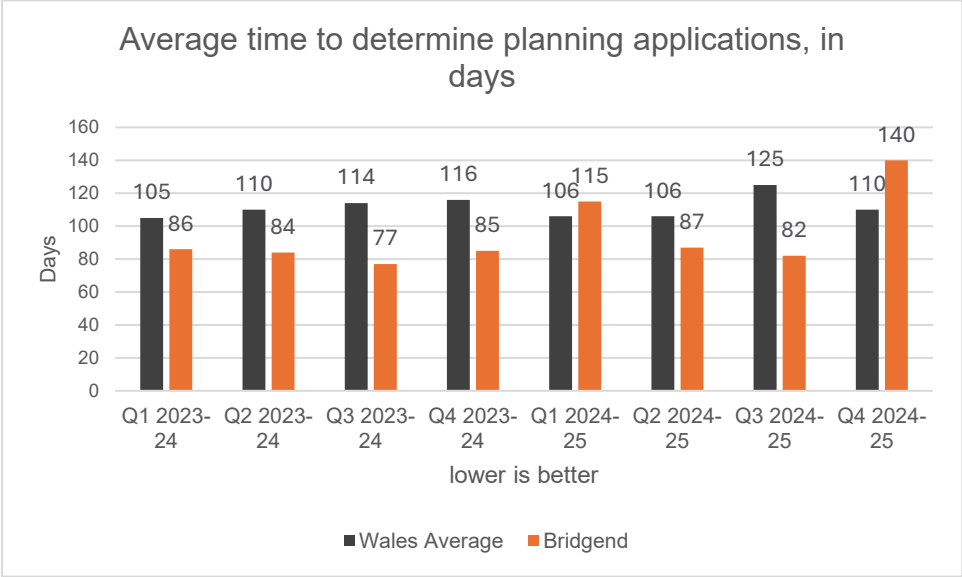
**Exhibit 1: percentage of planning applications determined within statutory and agreed timescales**



Source: Welsh Government, [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#), July 2025

29 However, as shown in **Exhibit 2**, aside from quarter 1 2024-25 (April to June 2024) and quarter 4 2024-25 (January to March 2025), the service performed significantly better than the Wales average over the two-year period for the average time in days to determine planning applications. Therefore, the service is performing better than a lot of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in the time taken to make decisions.

**Exhibit 2: average time to determine planning applications, in days.**



Source: Welsh Government, [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#), July 2025

30 We found limited evidence of any public committee receiving information on the service’s performance, risks, and activity in at least the last two years. As a result, there is insufficient awareness, oversight and scrutiny of the service even though it is an essential enabler for the delivery of the Council’s ambitions.

**The Council has comprehensive arrangements supporting its Development Control committee**

31 The Council has a comprehensive Planning Code of Practice which guides members on the Development Control Committee procedures and arrangements. It last reviewed this document in May 2022, and is in the process of reviewing it again to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

- 32 Development Control Committee members receive regular support to help them understand their roles and responsibilities, and changes to planning policies. There is a good induction into the Committee and the service holds regular briefings and training for all members. This constant support can help all members understand the role of a committee member, the role and purpose of the committee as well as changes to local and national planning policies.

# Recommendations

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## **R1    Resource management**

The Council should demonstrate it understands the resource requirements of the Planning and Development service based on its demands and capacity to help inform resourcing decisions. (**Paragraph 16**)

## **R2    Risk management**

The Council should ensure the service identifies, manages, and monitors its risks to help the Council understand how service risks may impact delivery of the service's responsibilities and the Council's priorities set out in its Corporate Plan. (**Paragraph 21**)

## **R3    Service planning arrangements**

The Council should comply with its Performance Management Framework and ensure the Planning and Development service has a service plan. (**Paragraph 22**)



**R4    Performance monitoring and reporting**

The Council should ensure it manages, monitors, and reports the activity and performance of the Planning and Development Service. This should be supported with up-to-date performance information to help improve the Council's understanding of the service's performance. (**Paragraph 31**)

# Appendices

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# 1 About our work

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## Scope of the audit

This audit focussed on the Development Control team and the Strategic Planning Policy Team in the Council's Planning and Development Service.

We looked at:

- whether the Council can demonstrate the service is a key enabler to support delivery of its well-being objectives;
- the planning and management of the resourcing of the service;
- whether there are clear roles and responsibilities in the service; and
- whether the Council manages the performance of the service.

We note the service's performance (**Appendix 2**) but did not examine the reasons for its performance or make judgements on it.

We did not look at the decisions of individual planning applications.

We undertook this audit between July and August 2025.

## Audit questions and criteria

### Questions

This audit sought to answer the following questions:

- Can the Council demonstrate the Planning and Development Service is a key enabler to support delivery of its well-being objectives?
- Does the Council have arrangements to plan and manage the resources of its Planning and Development Service?
- Does the Planning and Development Service have clearly defined roles and responsibilities to underpin operational delivery?

- Does the Council manage the performance of the Planning and Development Service?

## Criteria

We assessed whether:

- the Council is clear on the role and function of the service;
- the Council has aims and objectives for the service;
- it is clear how the service contributes towards delivering the Council's priorities;
- officers from the service attend corporate or strategic groups for Council major developments and are well connected to other Council services to provide support and advice;
- the service has a business plan (or equivalent);
- the Council understands the service's risks, challenges, resource (finance and staff) requirements including demand and capacity;
- the Council has assessed its capacity and resource needs to deliver its commitments in its current Local Development Plan 2018-2033 and next iteration of this Plan;
- the Council has committee procedural arrangements for its Development Control Committee and regularly reviews these;
- the Development Control Committee members and the staff in the service staff receive appropriate induction, training and support;
- the Council has arrangements for the reporting and scrutinising of the service's performance;
- the Council can demonstrate how it responds to service challenges and opportunities; and
- the Council benchmarks the performance of the service to compare it to other planning services.

The development of the audit questions and criteria has been informed by our cumulative knowledge of our reviews at other Local Planning Authorities.

## Methods

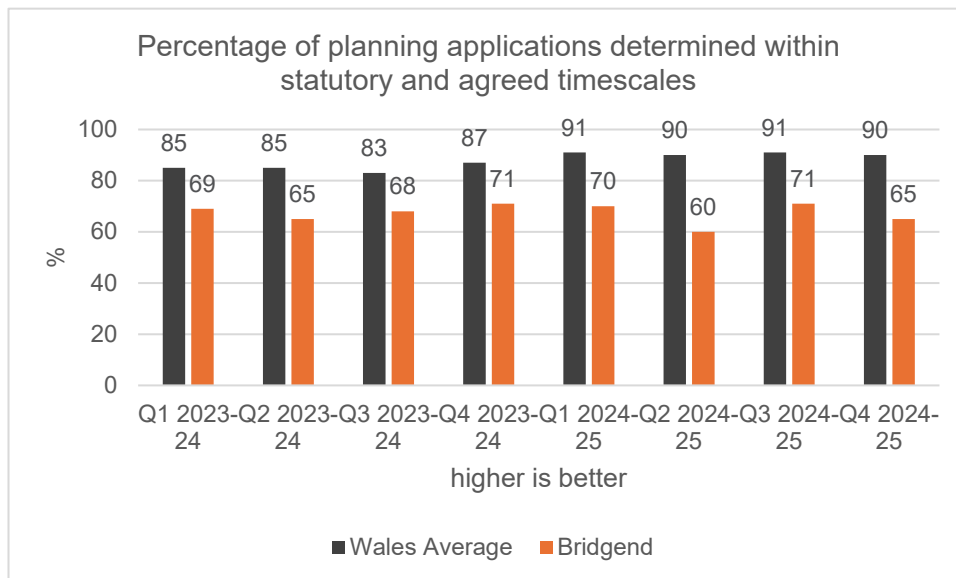
We read documents, watched Development Control Committee meetings, and interviewed officers and members.

## 2 Planning and Development Service Performance

Every quarter, Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) report performance data to the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government publicly reports three performance indicators. Publication of this information allows for comparisons of the performance of the service. We reviewed the data published by the Welsh Government from the period April 2023 to March 2025. At the time of this audit, the Welsh Government had not published performance data from April 2025 onwards.

Below is the performance of the service compared to the other LPAs.

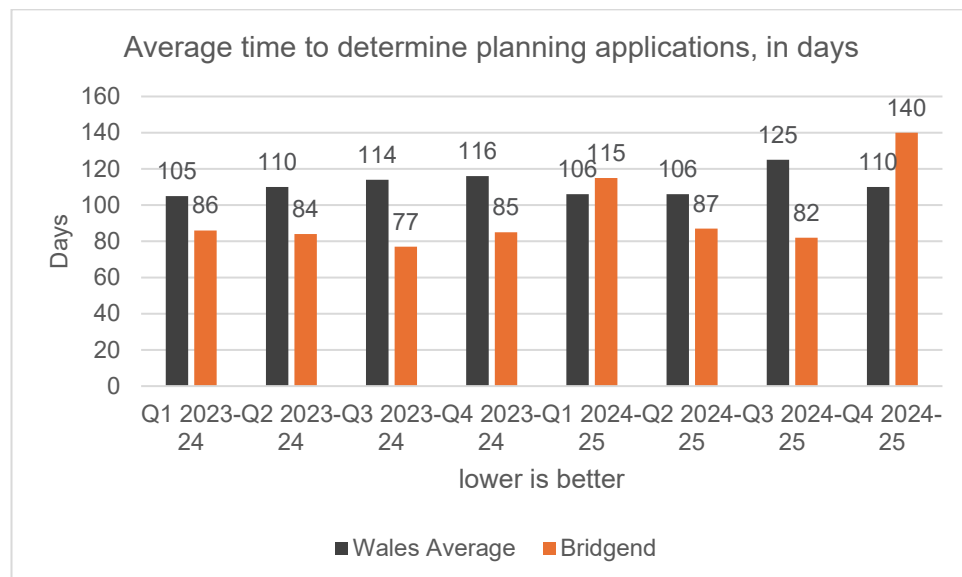
### Exhibit 1: percentage of planning applications determined within statutory and agreed timescales



Source: Welsh Government, [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#), July 2025

For the two-year period between April 2023 to March 2025, the service consistently performed well below the Wales average for the percentage of planning applications determined within statutory and agreed timescales.

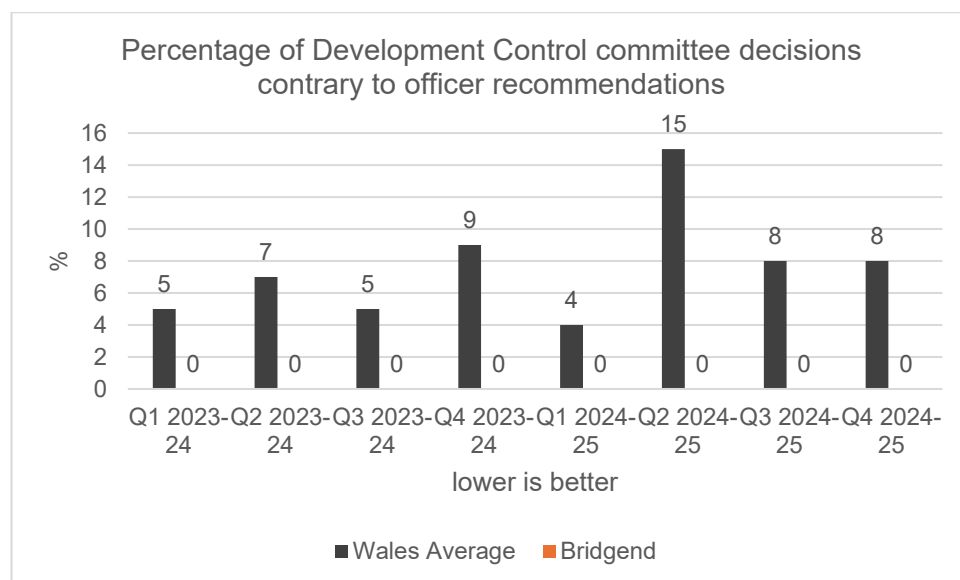
## Exhibit 2: average time to determine planning applications, in days



Source: Welsh Government, [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#), July 2025

Aside from quarter 1 2024-25 (April to June 2024) and quarter 4 2024-25 (January to March 2025), the service performed significantly better than the Wales average over the two-year period for the average time in days to determine planning applications.

### Exhibit 3: percentage of Planning Committee decisions contrary to officer recommendations



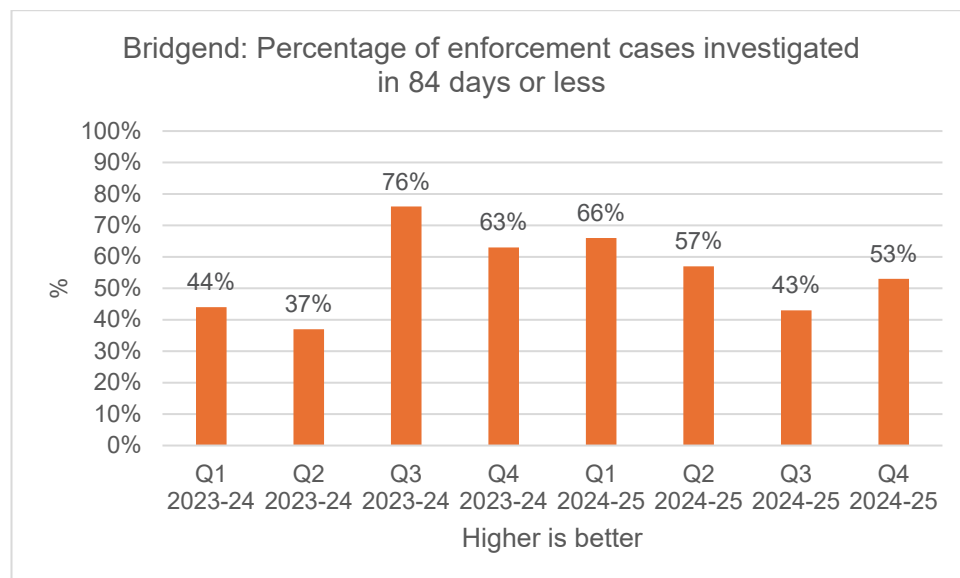
Source: Welsh Government, [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#), July 2025

For the two-year period between April 2023 to March 2025, the Development Control committee did not made any decisions contrary to officer recommendations.

We also reviewed the Council's quarterly performance returns to the Welsh Government for the period April 2023 to March 2025. While the service reports this information to the Welsh Government, the Welsh Government does not publicly report this information. Therefore, we are unable to present comparable performance information for **Exhibits 4 to 6** with other LPAs.

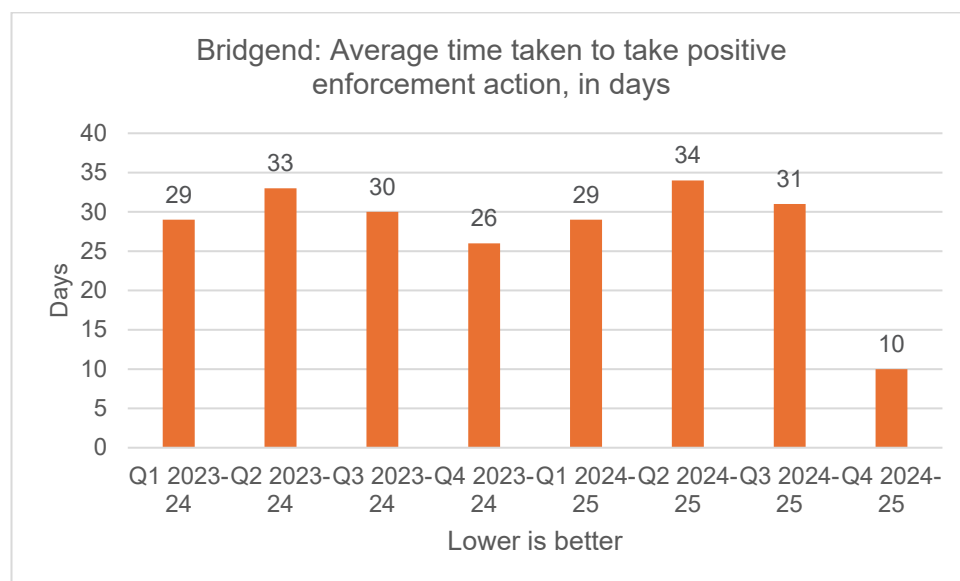


#### Exhibit 4: percentage of enforcement cases investigated in 84 days or less



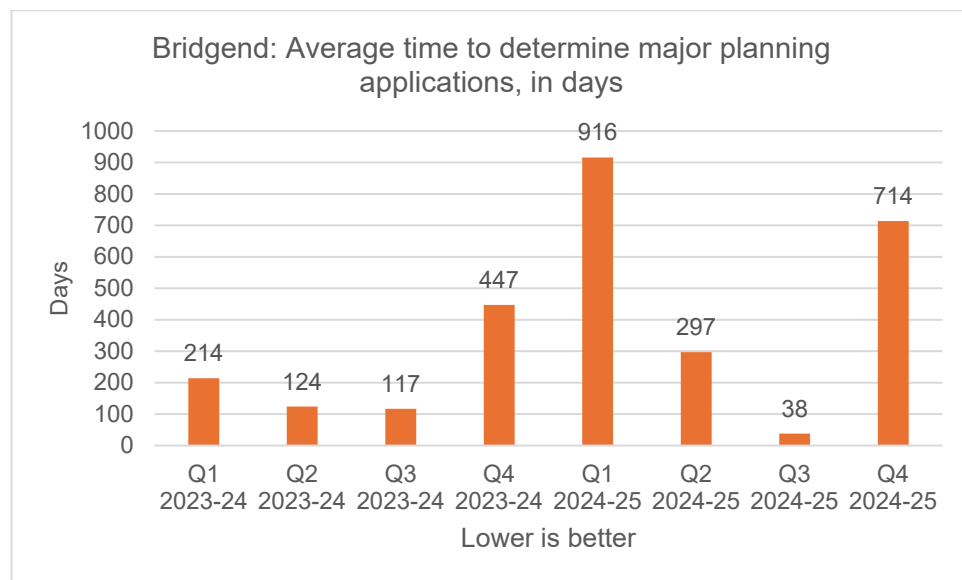
Source: Bridgend County Borough Council, **Development Management Quarterly Surveys**

#### Exhibit 5: average time taken to take positive enforcement action, in days



Source: Bridgend County Borough Council, **Development Management Quarterly Surveys**

## Exhibit 6: average time to determine major planning applications, in days



Source: Bridgend County Borough Council, **Development Management Quarterly Surveys**

## 3 Service Plan benefits

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There are several advantages to having a service plan. It can:

- reflect the range of the service's activity and contributions to the Council;
- help the Director and Cabinet Member identify actions and performance measures that support the Communities Business Plan and corporate priorities;
- state the service's performance aspirations;
- include the service's improvement actions;
- include key challenges, priorities and actions;
- identify service risks and mitigating actions;
- provide a structure for an induction into the service;
- inform future staffing resource needs; and
- provide a structure for performance monitoring and reporting.

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