

<b>Meeting of:</b>	<b>COMMUNITIES, ENVIRONMENT AND HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>15 JUNE 2026</b>
<b>Report Title:</b>	<b>AUDIT WALES REPORT BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICE</b>
<b>Report Owner: Responsible Chief Officer / Cabinet Member</b>	<b>CORPORATE DIRECTOR - COMMUNITIES</b>
<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	<b>JONATHAN PARSONS – GROUP MANAGER PLANNING &amp; DEVELOPMENT SERVICES</b>
<b>Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:</b>	<b>There is no impact on the policy framework and procedure rules.</b>
<b>Executive Summary:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>In July and August 2025 Wales Audit undertook a study of the Planning and Development Service at Bridgend and examined whether the Council supports the service to deliver value for money in the use of its resources.</b></li> <li>• <b>The audit focused on the Development Control team and the Strategic Planning Policy Team within the Council’s Planning and Development Service.</b></li> <li>• <b>Building Control, Strategic Transportation, Highway Development Control and Highway Estate Development are also functions within the wider Planning and Development service, but were not included within this audit.</b></li> <li>• <b>Wales Audit noted the Service’s performance but did not examine the reasons for its performance or make judgements on it.</b></li> <li>• <b>Wales Audit did not look at the decisions of individual planning applications.</b></li> <li>• <b>This report provides a summary of the findings of the audit and the proposed management response</b></li> </ul>

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to submit to the Communities, Environment and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee the Audit Wales report on the Planning & Development Service at Bridgend together with the management response and an update on progress. A copy of the report and the management response form is attached as Appendix 1.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 Audit Wales undertakes a programme of work during the year to help the Auditor General discharge his duties under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. The Auditor General's functions include auditing accounts and undertaking local performance audit work at a broad range of public bodies, alongside conducting a programme of national value for money examinations and studies. The Auditor General also assesses the extent to which public bodies are complying with the sustainable development principle when setting and taking steps to meet their well-being objectives.
- 2.2 Audit Wales carried out its audit of the Planning & Development Service (the Service) in Bridgend during July and August 2025 and published their report, 'Planning Development Service – Bridgend County Borough Council' in December 2025. The audit noted the Service's performance but did not examine the reasons for its performance or make judgements on performance and did not look at the decisions of individual planning applications.

## **3. Current situation/ proposal**

- 3.1 The Planning & Development Services Group comprise of the statutory town & country planning functions – development control & strategic planning as well as building control, strategic transportation, highway development control and highway estate development. However, for the purposes of the report, the audit focused on development control and strategic planning functions.
- 3.2 The report indicated that Planning Services can play a key role in supporting councils to deliver their well-being objectives. The service is responsible for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and its policies that set out what kind of development is suitable in different parts of the County Borough. This informs other Council services, developers, communities, and residents what development can happen and where. The report highlights that the Service together with the Council's Development Control Committee decide individual planning applications and these vary from major developments, such as new school buildings, housing and industrial estates, to house extensions, or changes of use of buildings. As part of the determination process the service must balance the need for new development with the importance of protecting the environment and local amenities. The service also 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.
- 3.4 The main issues identified in the report are summarised as follows and outlined below in more detail.

- The Council has limited recognition and understanding of the important role the Planning & Development service has in supporting its priorities.
- The report identified 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.

- 3.5 It was indicated that the Service is represented on different Council programme boards, which helps ensure that major projects receive the necessary professional planning advice. However, it would appear that other Council services often engage with the Service too late, which means that proposals may be at an advanced stage before consulting the service. If the Service subsequently finds that planning developments are not in line with planning guidelines or the RLDP, it can delay progress or impact on meeting funding deadlines and may mean resources have been allocated to projects that do not meet land use planning policies or requirements. This may be due to a lack of understanding as to the role of the Service.
- 3.6 The report identified that following changes to the Council's Corporate Plan in April 2025 there is no direct reference to the Service. Given the major planning developments underway within the County Borough, Audit Wales queried why the service does not have a higher profile in the Corporate Plan particularly as many of the aims within the Council's Wellbeing Objectives and its RLDP overlap. These include redevelopment, new developments, regeneration and placemaking. These cannot be achieved without the Service, yet the important role it plays is absent.
- 3.7 With regards to resourcing, the report highlighted that the Service is facing a range of challenges, which pose a risk to its resilience in meeting its demands. Also, the Service has not met its income targets for the last two years. The current funding arrangement for the Service is based on 70% of fee income (mainly from planning applications) and 30% of base budget funding. The report commented that this formula does not appear to be based on robust modelling and financial planning making the Service reliant on fluctuating planning fee income 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 for the medium to long term.
- 3.8 It was acknowledged that the Service has 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 stated the potential impact on the service's ability to support delivery of the Council's major projects and its competing demands. In 2022, the service presented the CCMB with a proposed new staff structure with an increased budget requirement 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 (EMR). The use of EMR is a short-term funding solution and does not support the service in the medium to long term and at the time of audit the reserves had run out.

- 3.9 The report recognised that 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 audit, no value for money assessment had been undertaken on the use of agency staff.
- 3.10 The report also referred the Council's proposal to set up a S106 and infrastructure delivery team. It is estimated that the RLDP could generate approximately £116 million in Section 106 (S106) monies over its term. S106 income can help fund community infrastructure projects, such as parks and community facilities. Having a dedicated team demonstrate that the Council recognises the importance of overseeing this income and need to mitigate the potential for any underspends.
- 3.11 The report highlighted that the service does not have a risk register setting out its current and future risks and how it manages and mitigates these risks. There are no arrangements for the recording and oversight of service risks once such significant and long-standing risk is the capacity to support delivery of the Council's regeneration programme and its statutory responsibilities. For example, the RLDP is expected to attract more developers to the Borough with an anticipated increase in major planning applications which 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 within the service to respond to this increase in workload,
- 3.12 At a corporate level the report identified an overall lack of awareness of the requirement for a service plan as set out in its Performance Management Framework (PMF). These plans should inform Directorate Business Plans and the Corporate Plan and whilst there is a high-level annual Communities Business Plan, there is a complete lack of service planning. In the absence of a service plan, there is no clarity on service priorities, performance, and risks. There is no plan as to how the Service will set out how it will deliver its responsibilities. Furthermore, there is a corresponding lack of evidence as to how the Council monitors compliance with its service planning in its PMF.
- 3.13 In terms of performance there is limited awareness of the Service's performance. Whilst data is submitted every quarter to the Welsh Government for inclusion into national performance indicators. the Service does not analyse this data nor is there oversight outside of the Service to understand its performance. The report indicated that the Service focuses on making the right decisions rather than the timeliness of making decisions. The report highlighted that 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. However, 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. In this area, the service is performing better

than many other Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in the time taken to make decisions.

3.14 In its report Audit Wales has made four recommendations to the Council which focus on resource management, service planning, risk and performance management as outlined below.

- **Recommendation 1 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.

- **Recommendation 2 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.

- **Recommendation 3 Service planning arrangements**

The Council should comply with its Performance Management Framework and ensure the Planning and Development Service has a service plan.

- **Recommendation 4 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.

3.15 Following the feedback from Wales Audit the Council has proposed a further EMR to provide a short-term resourcing solution. This will allow recruitment of vacant posts and develop a revised structure including additional back office and technical roles to support the planning function and free up other officers. Work is now underway on developing a revised structure with new added roles.

3.16 An 'equalisation' fund has been set up to ensure that any income surplus is ring fenced to the Service. Also, longer term income will be modelled to allow realistic fee targets to be agreed and the establishment a sustainable funding model for the Service going forward. The Service will also be supported to maximise its use of resources through business process reengineering and the emerging use of artificial intelligence.

3.17 The Service will set up and maintain a service risk register outlining current and predicted work streams together with resource requirements cross referend to the Council's wider aims. A Service Plan will be developed outlining the functions, responsibilities, aims and targets for the Service. The plan will also incorporate the risk register and will be updated annually and reported to the Development Control Committee and Corporate Management Team to ensure that the risks are identified and shared with senior management, members and other services. The report will

include statistical data as well as commentary and updates on the risk register and targets set in the Service Plan.

- 3.18 It is proposed to develop the above by Autumn 2026 and align with other statutory reporting deadlines such as the Annual Performance Report (APR) and the RLDP Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) both of which are submitted to Welsh Government,
- 3.19 A full copy of the Audit Wales Report together with the completed Management Response Form is attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.20 The Audit Wales report was presented to the Governance & Audit Committee on the 29<sup>th</sup> January and the Development Control Committee on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 2028. The links to the relevant papers for these meetings are below.

<https://democratic.bridgend.gov.uk/documents/s37078/GAC%20Audit%20Wales%20Reports.pdf>

<https://democratic.bridgend.gov.uk/documents/s37151/Wales%20Audit%20Reporta.ppx.pdf>

#### **4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)**

- 4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, socio-economic duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report and it is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

#### **5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives**

- 5.1 The well-being goals identified in the Act were considered in the preparation of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable impacts upon the achievement of well-being goals/objectives as a result of this report.

#### **6. Climate Change and Nature Implications**

- 6.1 There are no climate change or nature implications arising from this report.

#### **7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications**

- 7.1 There are no safeguarding or corporate parent implications arising from this report.

#### **8. Financial Implications**

- 8.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **9. Recommendation(s)**

- 9.1 That the Communities, Environment and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report.

### **Background documents**

None