

Implementing Audit Wales recommendations to improve the Planning Service

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

December 2025

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 In June 2023, we issued a report to Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (the Council) on its Planning Service¹ (the service). We made four recommendations. In July 2023, the Council's Governance and Audit Committee received this report along with the Council's actions to address the recommendations (see **Appendix 2**). This audit looked at whether the Council has addressed them.
- 2 We also looked at the Council's arrangements to monitor and report its progress in addressing external audit recommendations. We used the four service's recommendations to assess the arrangements.
- 3 We undertook this audit in October 2025.

Why this is important

- 4 External audit reports provide an independent view on the Council's arrangements. Our reports include recommendations for the Council when we identify gaps or weaknesses in its arrangements. Acting on these recommendations can help ongoing improvement. That is why it is important for the Council to have effective arrangements to monitor and challenge progress against them.

¹ Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council – Review of the Planning Service | Audit Wales

What we have found

- 5 Despite staffing challenges, the service has made good progress in addressing our recommendations. The Council did not have strong systems to track external audit recommendations, but through the federated model with Torfaen County Borough Council, it is making improvements.

What we recommend

- 6 We made one recommendation for the Council to review the effectiveness of its arrangements when overseeing its external audit recommendations.

Our findings

Despite staffing challenges, the Planning Service has made good progress in addressing the recommendations

- 7 Since our 2023 audit, the service is facing staffing issues which is impacting its capacity, including sickness absence, secondments, retirements, maternity leave, and vacancies. Despite this, the service has made good progress in addressing the recommendations, although not all are complete.
- 8 With support from the Performance and Democratic Service, the service changed the Development and Estates Business Plan (the business plan) to be clearer on how it supports the Council's priorities (recommendation 2). The service completed this within its expected timescale.
- 9 The service is implementing a new IT system (Idox) which makes planning information more accessible to the public. It also supports the service to monitor its performance and improve data quality (recommendation 3). The service first used the system to report its Q4 2024-25 performance data. Although the service has addressed this recommendation, it did not complete it within its timescale.
- 10 The service revised its Planning Protocol and Scheme of Delegation (recommendation 4). In September 2023, full Council approved changes to the Planning Scheme of Delegation. This was within the Council's timescale. The Planning Committee approved the Planning Protocol in November 2023, slightly later than its timescale. The service also revised several of its Public Advice Notices (PANs), so did more than needed to address the recommendation. The revised documents clearly present the governance and decision-making arrangements supporting the Planning Committee and the service. Planning Committee members received good training to inform them of the changes.

- 11 The service's business plan lists several performance measures but doesn't include baseline data or targets (recommendation 1). However, inserted in the business plan are the service's performance reports to the Planning Committee. These reports show how the service is performing against three national indicators published by the Welsh Government and how it compares with other Local Planning Authorities². However, these don't include all the business plan performance measures and future performance targets. As a result, it is difficult to understand the service's performance ambitions.
- 12 The federated model with Torfaen County Borough Council has led to a greater focus on performance management in the Council³. The service has recently started to develop a performance scorecard. At the same time, the Council is reviewing its business plans and creating performance dashboards which will include baseline data and targets. These improvements should help the Council to prioritise what is important, understand how it is performing, and make better informed decisions.
- 13 Overall, the service has made good progress in addressing three of the recommendations. Work is underway to complete the remaining one.

² [Development management quarterly surveys | GOV.WALES](#)

³ Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen County Borough councils have agreed to work in federation to strengthen strategic capacity, improve resilience, and deliver better outcomes for residents and communities, while maintaining the sovereignty, democratic accountability, and statutory independence of each Council. Source: Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Report to Full Council, October 2025

The Council lacked robust arrangements to monitor external audit recommendations, but through the federated approach is making improvements

- 14 At the time we issued the Planning Service report, the Council lacked robust arrangements to monitor and report its progress in addressing recommendations. Since then, the Council has begun introducing new arrangements to manage and monitor external audit recommendations by learning from the federated model with Torfaen County Borough Council. At the time of this audit, not all the arrangements were in place. Although we are unable to assess the effectiveness of the new arrangements, we have indicated below where they are likely to strengthen some of the previous weaknesses.
- 15 In October 2024, the Council's Senior Leadership Team received a report containing external recommendations with reasons provided by the relevant services to close each of them. It contained the four Planning Service recommendations. However, the explanations to close three of the four Planning Service recommendations were identical and did not fully address the recommendations. This does not give us confidence that senior officer oversight arrangements were robust.
- 16 At the time we issued the Planning Service report, the Governance and Audit committee received external audit reports along with the relevant management response form (MRF). However, the Council did not have an arrangement to provide the Committee with updates on its progress in addressing them. This meant members were unable to gain assurance that the Council was making progress. We reported this lack of member oversight in our Corporate Safeguarding follow-up report⁴.

⁴ [Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council – Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements Follow-up Report | Audit Wales](#)

- 17 In response, the Council is improving its senior officer and member oversight arrangements. Now, when the Council receives an external audit report, the Council's Leadership Team reviews it along with the completed MRF. The relevant Scrutiny Committee and Governance and Audit Committee will then receive the report and MRF. This process should ensure all senior officers and members are aware of external audit reports and approve the actions to address recommendations before these are put in place.
- 18 The Council is also improving how it monitors progress. In June 2025, the Scrutiny Committees received their first report on progress in addressing external recommendations. At the time of this audit, the Council was making further changes. From November 2025, the new Joint Executive Team will receive quarterly updates and from April 2026, the Scrutiny and Governance and Audit Committees, will receive annual progress reports. This will give senior officers and members an opportunity to review and challenge progress in addressing the recommendations. Regular reporting to the Joint Executive Team will allow senior officers to make timely decisions if progress is lacking or actions need to change.
- 19 When the Joint Executive Team receives the quarterly updates, it will decide if there has been enough progress to close recommendations. These will no longer need future monitoring. The relevant scrutiny committee and the Governance and Audit Committee will then scrutinise and approve these decisions. This should improve clarity and oversight of decision-making.
- 20 The Council's evolving arrangements gives members new responsibilities. The Council expects members to challenge and scrutinise:
 - proposed actions;
 - progress; and
 - whether recommendations have been addressed and can be closed.

Ensuring that members have a clear understanding of their responsibilities is critical for the effectiveness of the new arrangements.

- 21 As the Council is still developing its new arrangements, it has not yet tested them to see if they are working as expected. Once fully implemented, it's important that the Council regularly reviews its arrangements to ensure they are effective and to identify any changes needed.

Recommendations

R1 **Review of the Council's arrangements**

Once the Council has fully implemented its new arrangements for overseeing external audit recommendations, it should routinely evaluate the effectiveness of these (**paragraph 21**).

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

This audit focussed on whether the Planning Service addressed the Audit Wales recommendations issued in 2023. This audit also looked at the Council's arrangements to oversee and report progress in addressing external audit recommendations and we used the service's recommendations to assess the arrangements.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

This audit sought to answer the following questions:

- Has the Council addressed the recommendations contained in the Planning Service review report issued in 2023?
- Does the Council have arrangements to oversee how it addresses external audit recommendations?

Criteria

We assessed whether:

- the Council acted in line with its expected timescales;
- the Development and Estates business plan shows how the service contributes to the delivery of the Council's priorities with performance measures including baseline data and targets;
- the service has robust data quality arrangements ensuring it accurately reports its performance;

- the Council revised its scheme of delegation and planning protocol;
- the Council presents external audit reports to members and senior officers;
- there is a central register of external audit recommendations;
- services with external audit recommendations provide progress updates in line with corporate requirements;
- members and senior officers receive updates on progress against its actions to address external audit recommendations and provide challenge;
- there is an arrangement for members and senior officers to decide when an external audit recommendation has been addressed; and
- the Council understands the impact of addressing external audit recommendations.

Methods

We read documents, watched a Planning Committee meeting, and interviewed officers and members.

2 Planning Service Organisational Response form 2023

Ref	Recommendation	Organisational response <small>Please set out here relevant commentary on the planned actions in response to the recommendations</small>	Completion date <small>Please set out by when the planned actions will be complete</small>	Responsible officer (title)
R1	Include performance measures in the Development and Estates business plan to demonstrate the service's performance ambitions and to enable effective monitoring of the service	<p>Work to be undertaken with the Planning Service and Performance Team to include national data, information available quarterly.</p> <p>Further work to be undertaken with the Planning Service and Performance Team to look at the establishment of local PIs and including these into the new Planning System including data extracts for future reporting.</p>	<p>In line with quarterly returns.</p> <p>By April 2024</p>	Planning Service and Performance Team

Ref	Recommendation	Organisational response Please set out here relevant commentary on the planned actions in response to the recommendations	Completion date Please set out by when the planned actions will be complete	Responsible officer (title)
R2	Include in the Development and Estates business plan the service's contribution towards delivering the Council's corporate objectives to demonstrate its important enabling role	Work to be undertaken with the Planning Service and Performance Team to review the current business plans in the service and make alignments to the Corporate Plan.	Within 3 months	Planning Service and Performance Team
R3	The Council needs to assure itself that the planning service has robust data quality arrangements to ensure that it reports accurate performance data so that staff, members, Welsh Government and the public can place reliance on its integrity to make accurate and informed decisions	Planning information to be included within the directorate report for Regeneration and Community Services as well as the Joint Report. Planning information will also be included within the Council's annual self assessment.	In line with reporting requirements through the democratic process By October 2023	Planning Service Performance Team
R4	Full Council to consider the outcome of the scheme of delegation and planning protocol review by summer 2023 and decide on future planning governance arrangements	Work ongoing to progress this. Discussion to take place with Monitoring Officer to progress.	Reporting through Committee in September 2023	Planning, Legal and Democratic Services

About us

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