

Merthyr Tydfil Local Planning Authority (LPA)

PLANNING ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT (APR) – 2015 (based on 2014/15 data)

PREFACE

Introduction to the report by the Cabinet Member responsible for the planning service.

Welcome to the first version of Merthyr Tydfil LPA's Annual Performance Report. The ambition for Merthyr Tydfil Council is that the County Borough is more economically prosperous, more vibrant, and a more viable place to live. Planning is acknowledged as being key to this in order to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of the County Borough so that they reflect local aspirations, provide a basis for rational and consistent decisions and guide growth while protecting local diversity, character and sensitive environments.

Councillor Chris Barry - Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Countryside

CONTEXT

Merthyr Tydfil is the smallest local authority in Wales with an area of around 11,100 hectares. Approximately one fifth of the County Borough lies within the Brecon Beacons National Park to the north, leaving some 8,668 hectares of land under the planning control of the County Borough Council.

Merthyr Tydfil has a population of approximately 59,500, of which, approximately 45,000 reside in the main town of Merthyr Tydfil which functions as the main commercial, retail and service centre of the County Borough and the Heads of the Valleys Region. The remainder of the population is distributed amongst eight interdependent settlements situated further south along the Taff and Taff Bargoed river valleys. These settlements contain a range of lower order services and facilities serving local needs. Merthyr Tydfil fulfils a key strategic role at the centre of the Heads of the Valleys region, benefiting from high levels of accessibility through its location at the intersection of the A470 (T) and A465 (T) strategic transport corridors in the north, and the A470 (T) and A472 strategic transport corridors in the south. The County Borough lies just 25 minutes north of Cardiff and the M4 corridor. The dualling of the A465 (T) will contribute to the establishment of an important new growth corridor across the Heads of the Valleys, and electrification of the Valley lines and the Metro will enhance levels of access to Cardiff and beyond.

Planning background

The Merthyr Tydfil Local Development Plan was adopted in May 2011 and covers the period from 2006 – 2021. The previous adopted development plan framework in Merthyr Tydfil was provided by:-

The Mid Glamorgan (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough) Replacement Structure Plan 1991 -2006 (adopted August 1996)

The Merthyr Tydfil Borough Local Plan 1994 – 2006 (adopted May 1999)

The Mid Glamorgan (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough) Minerals Local Plan for Limestone Quarrying (adopted September 1999).

Place and fit within the community strategy and/or wider strategic and operational activity of the authority

The Single Integrated Plan (SIP) for Merthyr Tydfil was approved by the Merthyr Tydfil Local Service Board in 2013 and is the key overarching plan for the County Borough. The SIP forms part of the process for the local community to debate its own requirements and acknowledges that a partnership approach is essential to effective delivery of its aspirations.

The SIP's Vision for Merthyr Tydfil is: *To strengthen Merthyr Tydfil's position as the regional centre for the Heads of the Valleys, and be a place to be proud of where:*

- *People learn and develop skills to fulfil their ambitions;*
- *People live, work, have a safe, healthy and fulfilled life; and*
- *People visit, enjoy and return.*

The SIP and the LDP are complementary, with the latter expressing in appropriate land use terms, those elements of the SIP that relate to the development and use of land, such as reducing net outward migration, promoting community safety and improving access to facilities / services. The priorities of the SIP are also reflected, where appropriate, in the LDP. For example, a number of the LDP's strategic objectives reflect the supporting principles and priority outcomes of the SIP. The provisions of the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mean it is essential for future revisions of the SIP (Local Well-being plans) and the LDP to be developed from a common evidence base, be informed by common assessment processes and be targeted at delivering common objectives.

The Corporate Plan sets out the main priorities for the Council for 2013 – 2017, which are Raising standards, Improving Wellbeing, Economic Growth and Developing a Sustainable Environment. The overall vision of the LDP and its 12 strategic objectives contribute to the ability of the Council to meet these priorities.

The LDP also supports the following corporate plans and strategies:-

Local Housing Market Assessment (2014-2019)
SE Wales Local Transport Plan (2015)
Biodiversity Action Plan (2014-2019)
Town Centre Regeneration Strategy – the Big Heart of Merthyr Tydfil (2002)
Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Strategic Review (2009)

Existing and previous major influences on land use (e.g. heavy industrial, agricultural, energy, transport)

The historical development of Merthyr Tydfil has been heavily influenced by the location and exploitation of mineral resources. There are a number of resources that continue to be worked within the County Borough as well as further reserves of coal and sandstone. In relation to the former, there are extant permissions for coal extraction at the Ffos-y-Fran land reclamation scheme on the eastern flank of the Merthyr Tydfil basin, which will restore over 900 acres of derelict land over a 15 year period up to 2024; limestone extraction at the Vaynor Quarry located to the north of the main Merthyr Tydfil settlement straddling the boundary of the Brecon Beacons National Park; and sandstone extraction at the Gelligaer Quarry situated to the east of the County Borough near Gelligaer Common.

Historic/landscape setting of the area, including AONBs, conservation areas etc

The County Borough benefits from a rich and distinctive natural heritage which includes highly valued landscapes and biodiversity sites. The landscape of the countryside is primarily characterised by steeply sloping valley sides with their high ridges and open moorland. Much of this landscape has, however, been modified through human activity over the centuries and this is reflected in two historic landscape designations, namely the Merthyr Tydfil Landscape of Outstanding Historic Interest and the Gelligaer Common Landscape of Special Historic Interest. Two thirds of the County Borough is semi-natural in character. It consists of a complex array of landscape types including open moorland, common land, broad-leaved and coniferous woodlands, agriculturally productive land, semi-improved grassland, old industrial landscapes and reclaimed areas. Merthyr Tydfil benefits from a range of environmental resources with a number of sites identified as having particular biodiversity and / or nature conservation importance. These include a Local Nature Reserve, two Sites of Special Scientific Interest and numerous Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. The built fabric of the Merthyr Tydfil reflects a rich heritage ranging from imposing bridges and viaducts to more humble workers cottages. The County Borough has 8 Conservation Areas, over 230 Listed Buildings and 50 Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Urban rural mix and major settlements

The County Borough comprises of a mix of urban, semi-urban and rural communities situated in a rich and varied natural, semi-natural and historic environment containing exceptional wildlife habitats, historic landscapes and archaeological features. The steeply sloping valley sides

with their high ridges and moorland vegetation define the character of the area and provide an environmental and ecological context for the settlements of the County Borough.

Being the smallest authority in Wales, the number of towns and villages is limited with many settlements serving a mainly residential role, as such the LDP divides the County Borough into three distinct zones, namely the Primary Growth Area, comprising the northern sector which includes the main town centre of Merthyr Tydfil; the Secondary Growth Area, comprising the southern sector communities and the Other Growth Areas comprising the mid valley communities.

Population change and influence on LDP/forthcoming revisions

The primary aim of the adopted LDP is to facilitate a reduction in levels of out migration from the County Borough so that population levels stabilise by 2011 and a 10-year period of enhanced growth is achieved thereafter.

The 2011 Census data revealed that the first five years of the plan period had seen a significant level of population growth, from 56,627 in 2006 to 58,851 in 2011. This period also saw 1047 homes built in the County Borough, a much higher level of house building than there had been in the previous 20 years.

The population increase was primarily due to an increase in migration although there were also changes to the data for natural change (births and deaths). The 2011 based WG projections show the population of the County Borough increasing (albeit at a slower rate) to 62,316 by 2031, with the number of households increasing from 24,882 to 26,090. If this trend was used as a basis for any subsequent LDP strategy there would be an approximate housing requirement of approximately 1200-1400 dwellings, or 80-100 dwellings per annum.

PLANNING SERVICE

Setting within the wider organisation

The organisation charts on the following pages outline the reporting structure of the organisation which following a senior management re-structure in February 2015 is split into two directorates namely People and Performance and Place & Transformation. Each Directorate has one Director who report directly to the Chief Executive.

Planning sits within the Place and Transformation Directorate, reporting directly to the Corporate Director of Place & Transformation. The Place & Transformation Directorate also includes Regeneration, Neighbourhood Services (inc Property & Estates), Finance, Corporate Services and Public Protection & Housing.

The Planning & Countryside Department includes the following services: Development Control, Planning Policy & Implementation (including Development Plan, Built Heritage & Conservation, Landscape, Ecology & GIS) Building Control & Rights of Way which are all headed up by the Head of Planning & Countryside.

Following an Authority wide accommodation reorganisation in 2012 all the services that report to the Head of Planning and Countryside (apart from Rights of Way) now sit in the same office. The Head of Service is supported by three Group Leaders who have line management responsibility for Development Control, Policy & Implementation and Building Control respectively. The Planning & Countryside service is supported by three technical support / registration staff who sit within the same office.

Wider organisational activities impacting on the service

The Council operates a transformation board, where identified efficiencies are reported on and monitored, the board consists of senior managers and Cabinet members and Service Heads are called to the transformation board to report on progress in delivering the savings. Consultants carried out a Council wide value for money review in early 2015 but no meaningful results have been identified. At the end of 2014/15 a 5% Directorate levy was imposed on each service area within the directorate in order to balance overspend in other areas.

In order to meet the budget savings other departments who support the planning service such as IT have reduced staff hours which has resulted in a reduced level of service directly affecting customer service in areas such as online access to planning applications etc, in addition the relationship with the IT/data base providers has suffered due to a change of roles in IT and their response rate is noticeably slower. The support now received is reactive rather than proactive which can be a hindrance to planning service delivery improvements.





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Operating budget

Planning application fee income	2012-13	2013 - 14	2014 - 15
Projected Income	£297,470	£314,470	£314,470
Actual Income	£315,059	£160,710	£180,000

Over the last 3 years, the operating budget for the service area has been reduced by approximately 9%. As well as salary reductions as a result of two f/t posts being reduced to p/t, the budget lines affected include the LDP (acknowledged by Council that it will need to increase again in the LDP review years) and the inquiry & appeals DC budget, which was reduced (by 50%) on the basis of the trend for a low number of appeals being received and the limited no of these being dealt with by means of inquiry.

The level of income received is one factor in setting the following years operating budget, others include requests for growth to accommodate reductions in income targets or specific work streams (i.e. the LDP review, IT provision etc), which to date has accommodated any forward planning or operational activity of the service.

As noted in the table above whilst the income target was exceeded in 2012/13, the actual income received in the following two years was vastly reduced due to the economic climate and latterly the change in PD rights. Historically the income target has been influenced by the preceding year, as a result of failing to meet the income target in both 2013/14 and 2014/15 the target for 2015/16 has been reduced and is likely to be met by month 8 (as a result of 2 solar farm applications), whilst this is positive, negotiations are currently ongoing to ensure that next year's income target is set at a realistic point (which is not too high) by taking a longer term view looking at the trend over the last 5 years.

The service does not retain its fee income in order to re-invest in the service; any additional income received (which from 1st Jan 2015 includes pre-app charges) is recovered by the corporate centre in order to offset the net cost of operating the service or reduce overspend in other areas. A 5% directorate levy was imposed on all services within the directorate at the end of 2014/15 in order to offset spend in other areas.

Staff issues

The Planning & Countryside Service is currently fully staffed and has no vacancies. Three posts did become vacant during 2014/15 (two planning policy officers and the conservation officer) however, the Chief Executive, the Corporate Director and the Head of Finance were all supportive of the posts being filled immediately, subject to a review of staffing levels in line with the efficiency drive; having carried this out it was determined that one of the policy officer posts could be reduced to part time resulting in a budget saving, and we were successful in

recruiting and filling those posts.

During 2014 one of the full time DC planning officers and the full time enforcement officer were on maternity leave for a year at the same time. At that time the DC team consisted of the Group Leader and principle planning officer, two full time planning officers, one part time planning officer, one full time enforcement officer and one part time enforcement officer, which would have resulted in a loss of 33% of the staff for a year. Fortunately with the support of the Corporate Director we seconded a planning officer from RCTCBC for a period of 6 months to cover part of the maternity leave so that service delivery was not adversely affected. We also recruited a part time enforcement officer for four months.

Upon return to work both officers requested a reduction in hours to part-time, this coincided with all service areas within the Directorate being required to make savings / budget reductions of 5%. Analysis and comparison of enforcement performance and demand during 2014 when capacity was reduced from 1.5 officers to 0.5 of an officer for 8 months, highlighted that the enforcement service could still be delivered with a lower compliment of staff, albeit with support from planning officers when the single remaining enforcement officer would be on leave or off sick. Councillors were made aware of the potential reduction in response times and an increase in ombudsman complaints etc but accepted the proposal to operate with only one enforcement officer as it contributed to the budget reduction and facilitated the member of staff's requested reduction in hours.

The remaining budget reduction was achieved by facilitating the F/T planning officers request to reduce their hours to P/T. Councillors were advised that this could adversely affect performance if there was a significant increase in planning application numbers.

As a result of the re-structuring outlined above, the Planning & Countryside service now consists of 15 full time staff (including the Head of Service, two group leaders and 3 support staff), 2 part time staff and 2 part time job share enforcement officers (equivalent to 1 post)

The Development Control team consists of a total of 5.5 staff comprising the group leader, a principal planning officer, two full time planning officers, one part time planning officer and one enforcement officer (job shared by two people). The planning officers validate their own applications, registration and administration of applications is carried out by the tech support team.

The Planning Policy & Implementation team comprises of the Group Leader, two full time policy officers, one part time policy officer, a conservation officer, an ecologist, a countryside officer, a landscape architect and a GIS officer. The implementation team consists of SPOD' s (single points of dependency) and as such operates on a risk management basis when the post holder is on sick or leave. The Conservation post was vacant for 5 months from February 2015 due to the new post holder having to give 3 months notice.

The service therefore lost the equivalent of two part time posts during 2014/15, fortunately these were realised through voluntary reduction in hours so no redundancies have been made.

The Planning & Countryside Service Plan, which is reviewed annually, includes a workforce plan and succession plan, where skill shortages, development needs and strength areas are identified. 80% of planning officers are full RTPI members and the remaining 20% are encouraged to progress from licentiate members to full members. The Council does not pay for employee's membership of professional bodies. The departments training budget, whilst limited has not been reduced over the last three years as the importance of training and staff development is valued highly in such a small service area so as to remain resilient and high performing, in this respect the free training sessions recently facilitated by both Welsh Government and RTPI Cymru are welcomed and the opportunity for staff to attend is always taken. Monthly 1:1's and team meetings are an opportunity for both the employee and line manager to identify training needs. Staff have recently been supported through ILM qualifications using RCTCBC's training resources, and the Council is currently developing a "management academy" where training on performance & capability, grievance handling, disciplinary etc will be rolled out to all managers.

YOUR LOCAL STORY

Workload

The LDP was adopted in May 2011, Annual Monitoring Reports (AMR) have been submitted to Welsh Government in each of the years following adoption, the latest AMR submitted is attached at Appendix 1. The first review report will be submitted to Welsh Government in spring 2016.

2014/15 saw the lowest number of applications received for some time; however numbers have increased again in 2015 and are expected to be the highest number of applications received in the last 6 years. On average f/t DM officer's deal with approximately 108 applications a year, however the principal planning officer has a smaller caseload of the more complex applications. In addition to determining applications officers also validate their own applications, stamp and issue decisions, carry out desk duty rota and respond to pre-apps.

As such whilst Merthyr Tydfil receives the lowest number of applications, it must be acknowledged that the number of planning officers dedicated to determining applications is low, being 3 full time and one part time. In addition, as previously advised one of the f/t officers was on maternity leave for a year during 2014/15 and whilst their post was covered for 6 months by a secondment from RCTCBC the planning officers also had to take on enforcement duties as the f/t enforcement officer was also on maternity leave for the year (and p/t cover was only provided for 4 months).

Despite these staff reductions as a result of maternity leave during 2014/15, it is pleasing to note that performance levels were maintained and continued to be well above the Welsh Average, sitting either first or second in all four quarters throughout the year. This is attributed to the team spirit instilled, management constantly seeking to improve efficiency and processes and the flexibility of officers in covering for colleagues. Managing customer service and expectations during this time was identified as being of utmost importance from the outset. In addition to this, pre-application charging was introduced in January 2015.

The number of enforcement complaints received has reduced gradually over the last 3 years, which was a contributory factor to the decision to reduce the level of enforcement staff. It is noted that 9% of all applications received in 2014/15 were as a result of enforcement investigations and the enforcement indicators at Section 5 of this report highlight that a good level of performance is being provided.

Current projects

During 2014/15 the following key projects were developed:-

- Merthyr Tydfil CBC is the first Authority in Wales to develop and produce an Open Spaces Strategy, which it is hoped will be adopted by Council in early 2016. The strategy aims to bring parity of provision of open space to all; in providing for healthy lives, a well-cared for environment and a vibrant economy.
- Following a joint examination with Caerphilly CBC in January 2014, Merthyr Tydfil CBC adopted the community Infrastructure Levy on 2nd June 2014.
- Co-ordinated Planning support and engagement in the Council's Vibrant & Viable places programme, providing advice and guidance on steering / working groups (as well as determining the planning applications).
- Nature & Development SPG.
- Introduction of pre-app charging on 1st January 2015.

Local pressures

- Mineral applications – The LPA currently has an SLA with Carmarthenshire to determine its minerals applications and related work, however if that service was withdrawn or the Planning service budget was cut, service delivery would be affected as the work would have to be dealt with by officers without the appropriate skills and experience.
- Reliance on the principle planning officer to deal with the major and complex applications.
- Officers not being trained or equipped to deal with new types of renewable energy in advance of applications being submitted.
- Monitoring compliance of conditions and major site restoration at Ffos y fran land reclamation site.

Service improvement

The recommendations of the previous service improvement plan were:-

To improve the percentage rate of planning applications determined in 8 weeks

This recommendation has been implemented and the positive results are evidenced in the WG quarterly performance figures. Processes are being monitored to identify if recent legislation changes will affect performance and as such what issues require addressing.

To improve the percentage of enforcement cases resolved in 12 weeks

This recommendation has been implemented. As a result of the way the indicators are measured changing during the year it is not possible to assess whether there has been a positive or negative change yet.

Improved visual presentation of information to committee in order to aid the decision making process

This recommendation has not been implemented due to capacity and other income generating workstreams (such as processes for pre-app charging and discharging conditions) taking priority. It is proposed to implement this recommendation during 2015/16.

To determine discharge of condition applications in a timely manner for the benefit of all customers

This recommendation has been implemented. A formal process for discharging conditions has been designed and implemented in October, the system will be monitored and reviewed over the next 6 months in order to assess if it is fit for purpose.

Performance Framework

The two identified areas for improvement (set out in Annex A) relate to:-

- i) The local planning authority's current housing land supply in years, and*
 - ii) The local planning authority does not allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee*
-
- i) The LPA has a housing land supply of 2.8 years. In an attempt to address this the Council has used funding from the Welsh Government's Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) programme in order to increase levels of confidence over the delivery of housing sites by securing outline planning permission on allocated sites and commissioning a significant amount of survey work. It is anticipated that by carrying out survey work (site investigations, ecology surveys etc.), prior to the submission of applications, potential developers will have more certainty in regard to the level of risk on site; in turn increasing the attractiveness of these sites to housebuilders. It is intended to complete all survey work by the end of 2015. The Council will produce a portfolio of sites to take to market. There may also be scope for VVP funding to contribute towards physical works on some sites, such as ground remediation or access improvements. A steering group consisting of staff from Planning, Regeneration, Estates and housing has been established to co-ordinate this work and it is noted that the 2015 JHLAS shows a housing land supply of 2.8 years which is an increase on the 2.5 years reported in the 2014 JHLAS. The Council recognises that it is important that the steering group is adequately resourced and its success will be measured by the JHLAS.
 - ii) The Council's Constitution does not allow members of the public to address the planning committee, as such in order to address this Council would need to support a change to the Constitution. At present neither the Chief Executive nor the Chair of Planning support such a change and as such it is not anticipated that this indicator will be addressed.

WHAT SERVICE USERS THINK

In 2014-15 we conducted 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.

The surveys were sent to 159 people, 24% of whom submitted a whole or partial response. The majority of responses (71%) were from local agents. 21% were from members of the public. 0% of respondents had their most recent planning application refused.

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.

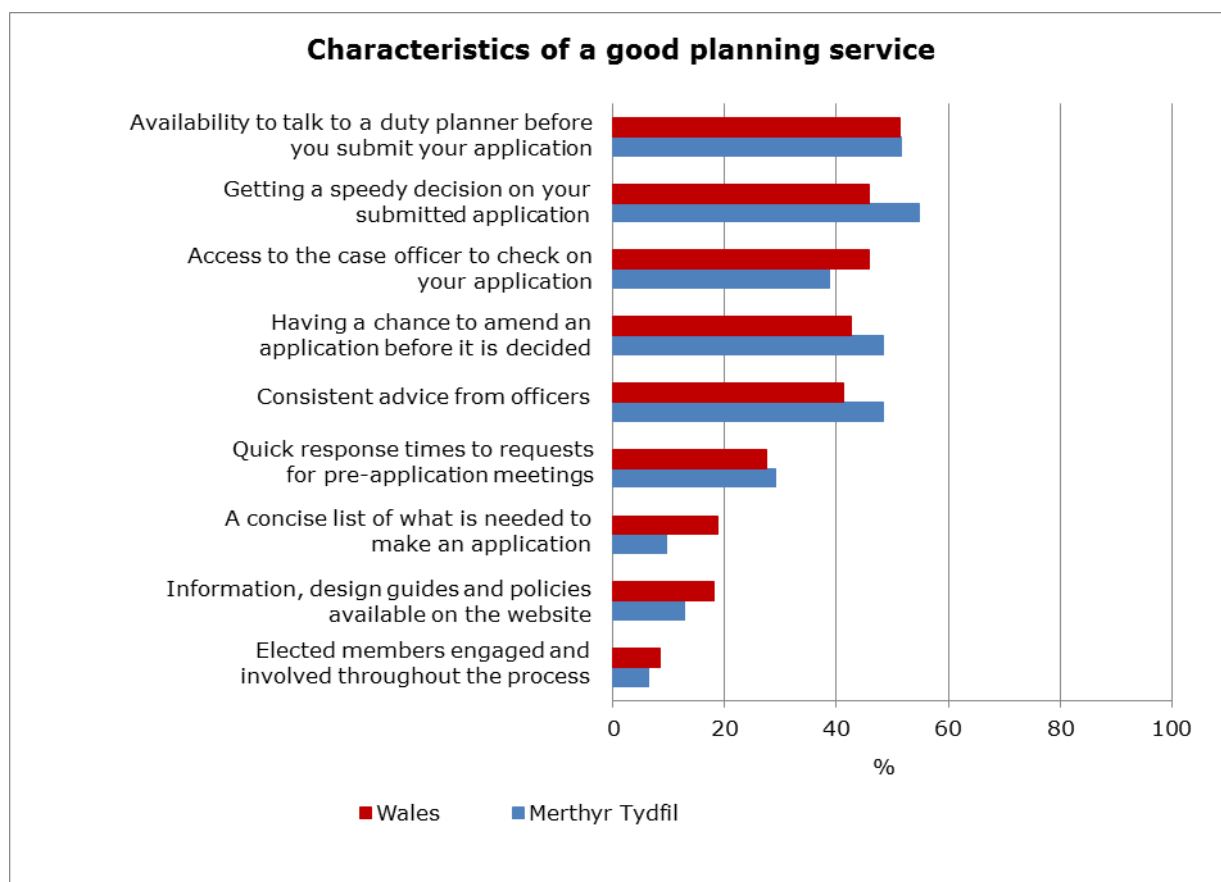
Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents that selected either 'tend to agree' or 'strongly agree' for each statement for both our planning authority and Wales. It is noted that for each statement the percentage of Merthyr Tydfil respondents who agreed is higher than the Welsh average, which indicates that satisfaction with the service is higher in Merthyr Tydfil than in the rest of Wales.

Table 1: The percentage of respondents who agreed with each statement, 2014-15

Percentage of respondents who agreed that:	%	
	Merthyr Tydfil LPA	Wales
The LPA enforces its planning rules fairly and consistently	51	45
The LPA gave good advice to help them make a successful application	68	57
The LPA gives help throughout, including with conditions	57	48
The LPA responded promptly when they had questions	71	55
They were listened to about their application	60	56
They were kept informed about their application	63	46
They were satisfied overall with how the LPA handled their application	60	57

We also asked respondents to select three planning service characteristics from a list that they thought would most help them achieve successful developments. Figure 1 shows how often each characteristic was selected as a percentage of the total number of selections. For us, 'getting a speedy decision on a submitted application' was the most popular choice.

Figure 1: Characteristics of a good planning service, Merthyr Tydfil LPA, 2014-15



Comments received include:

"Overall ok, but very inconsistent between planning officers with regards to advice given."

"Always found them to be fair, consistent and reasonably speedy. My only criticism is the relocation away from the Town Centre. It's too remote although I understand the reasons."

"Inconsistency is the biggest problem" [sic]

The findings of the consultation exercise were extremely helpful and have been used to further improve service delivery. For example, the application validation process has been refined and simplified so that all officers now undertake the validation process in exactly the same way. A Supplementary Guidance Note: A Design for Householder Development has also been introduced to aid both officers and applicants/agents in the assessment/submission of such applications. These should result in greater consistency and enhanced customer satisfaction.

It is also noted that customers in Merthyr Tydfil value *"getting a speedy decision on your application"* highest and that 93% of our applications were determined within required timescales during 2014/15 which was the highest in Wales (see Figure 2).

OUR PERFORMANCE 2014-15

This section details our performance 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.

Performance is analysed across the five key aspects of planning service delivery as set out in the Planning Performance Framework:

- Plan making;
- Efficiency;
- Quality;
- Engagement; and
- Enforcement.

Plan making

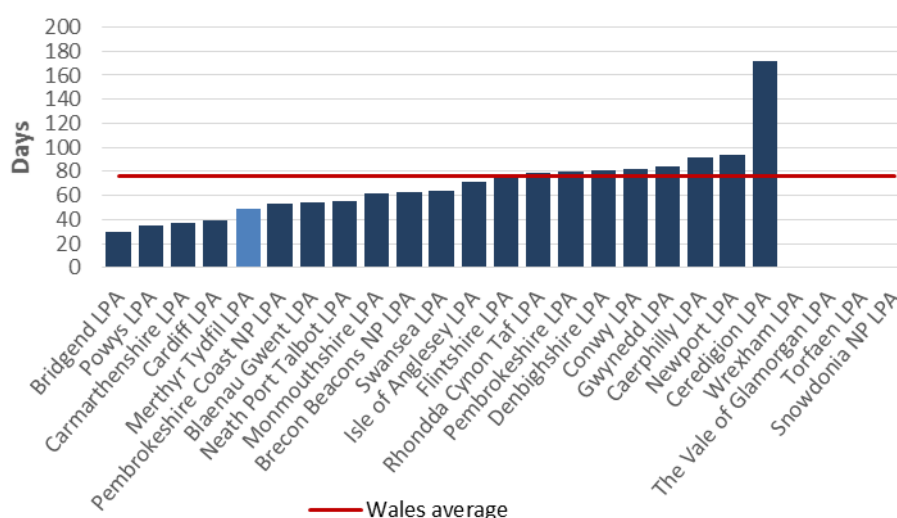
As at 31 March 2015, we were one of 21 LPAs that had a current development plan in place. We are required to submit an Annual Monitoring Report in October 2015. This document has been prepared and is attached at Appendix 1.

During the APR period we had 2.5 years of housing land supply identified, making us one of 18 Welsh LPAs without the required 5 years supply.

Efficiency

In 2014-15 we determined 308 planning applications, each taking, on average, 50 days (7 weeks) to determine. This compares to an average of 76 days (11 weeks) across Wales. Figure 2 shows the average time taken by each LPA to determine an application during the year.

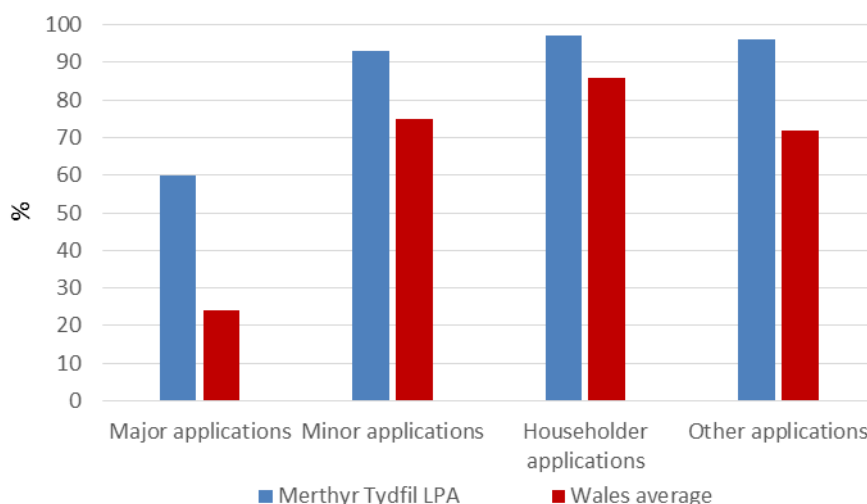
Figure 2: Average time taken (days) to determine applications, 2014-15



93% of all planning applications were determined within the required timescales. This was the highest percentage in Wales and we were one of 5 LPAs that had reached the 80% target.

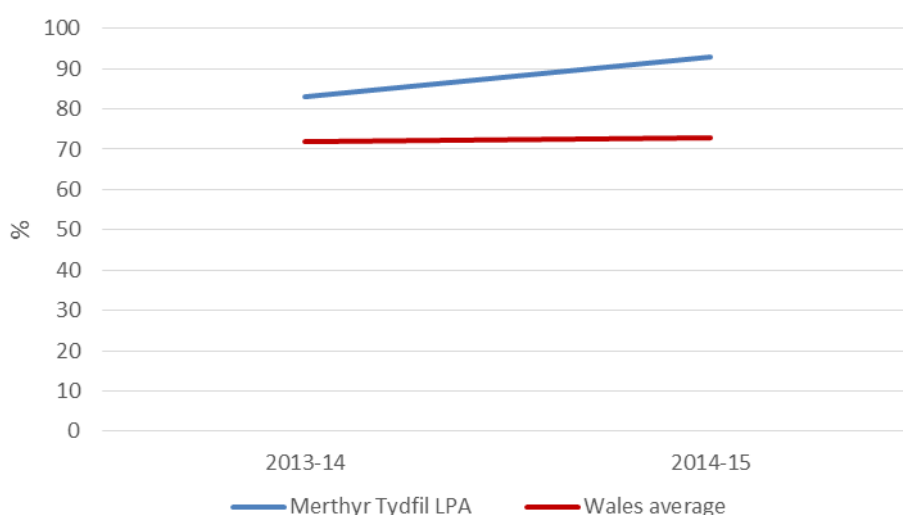
Figure 3 shows the percentage of planning applications determined within the required timescales across the four main types of application for our LPA and Wales. It shows that we determined 97% of householder applications within the required timescales, and that our performance was higher than the Welsh average across all four categories.

Figure 3: Percentage of planning applications determined within the required timescales, by type, 2014-15



Between 2013-14 and 2014-15, as Figure 4 shows, the percentage of planning applications we determined within the required timescales increased from 83% to 93%. Wales also saw an increase this year.

Figure 4: Percentage of planning applications determined within the required timescales



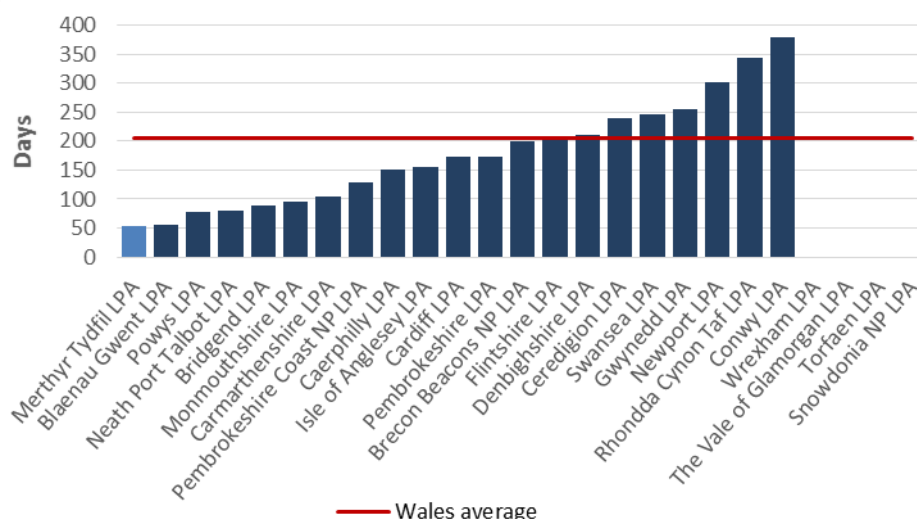
Over the same period:

- The number of applications we received decreased;
- The number of applications we determined decreased; and
- The number of applications we approved decreased.

Major applications

We determined 10 major planning applications in 2014-15, none of which were subject to an EIA. Each application took, on average, 53 days (8 weeks) to determine. As Figure 5 shows, this was the shortest average time taken of all Welsh LPAs.

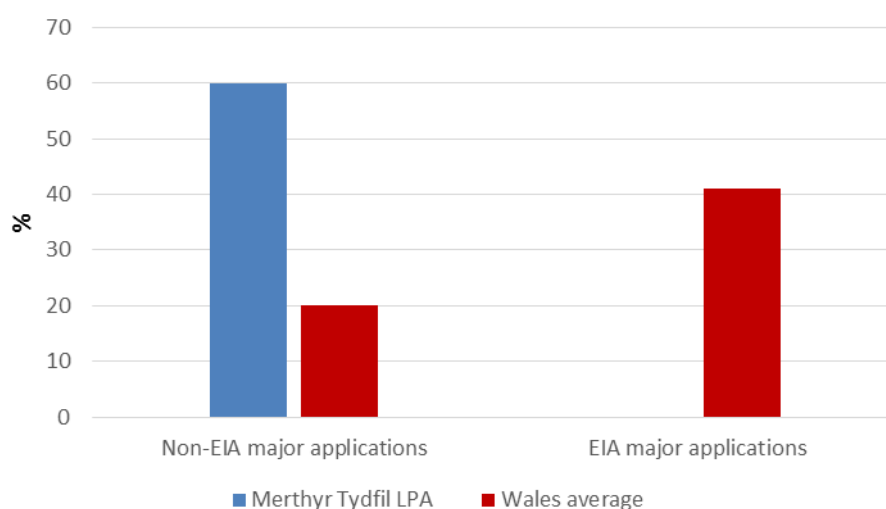
Figure 5: Average time (days) taken to determine a major application, 2014-15



60% of these major applications were determined within the required timescales, the highest percentage of all Welsh LPAs.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of major applications determined within the required timescales by the type of major application. 60% of our 'standard' major applications i.e. those not requiring an EIA, were determined within the required timescales during the year.

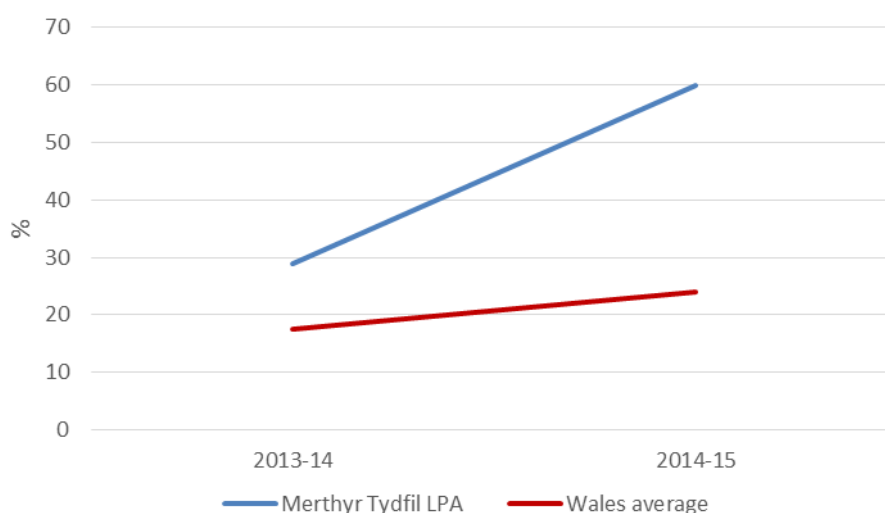
Figure 6: Percentage of major applications determined within the required timescales during the year, by type, 2014-15



Since 2013-14 the percentage of major applications determined within the required timescales had increased from 29% to 60%. In contrast, the number of major applications determined decreased as had the number of applications subject to an EIA determined during the year.

Figure 7 shows the trend in the percentage of major planning applications determined within the required timescales in recent years and how this compares to Wales.

Figure 7: Percentage of major planning applications determined within the required timescales



Over the same period:

- The percentage of minor applications determined within the required timescales increased from 87% to 93%;
- The percentage of householder applications determined within the required timescales increased from 94% to 97%; and
- The percentage of other applications determined within the required timescales increased from 78% to 96%.

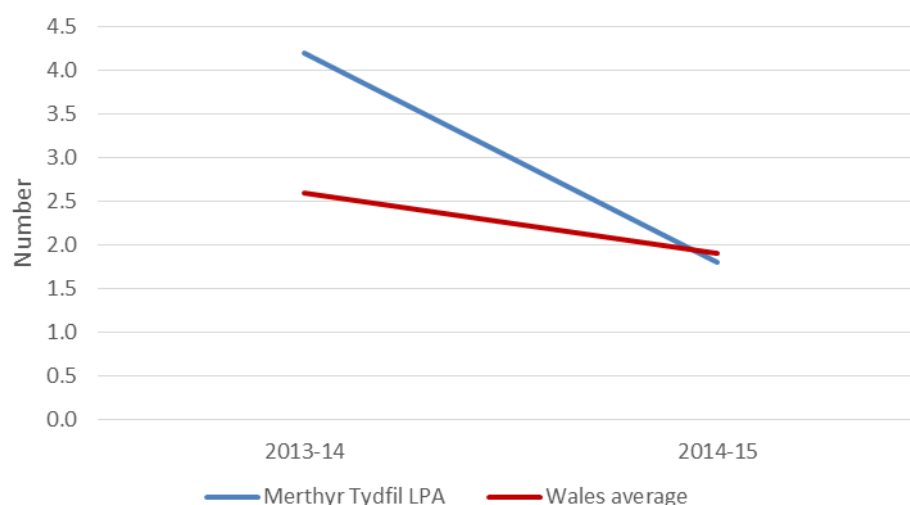
Quality

In the last two quarters of 2014-15 (October 2014 – March 2015) our Planning Committee made 17 planning application decisions, which equated to 11% of all planning applications determined. Across Wales 7% of all planning application decisions were made by planning committee over the same period.

0% of these member-made decisions went against officer advice. This compared to 11% of member-made decisions across Wales. This equated to 0% of all planning application decisions going against officer advice; 0.7% across Wales.

In 2014-15 we received 6 appeals against our planning decisions, which equated to 1.8 appeals for every 100 applications received. Across Wales 1.9 appeals were received for every 100 applications. Figure 8 shows how the volume of appeals received has changed since 2013-14 and how this compares to Wales.

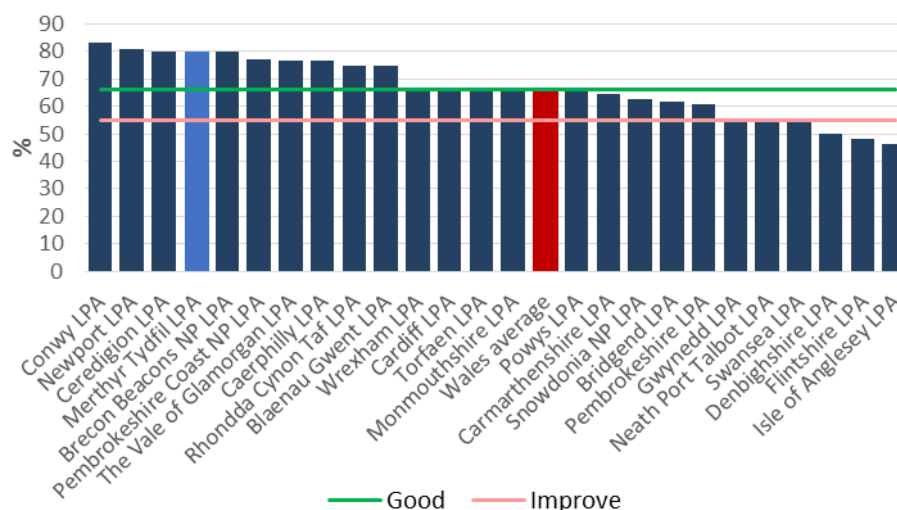
Figure 8: Number of appeals received per 100 planning applications



Over the same period the percentage of planning applications approved decreased from 92% to 91%.

Of the 5 appeals that were decided during the year, 80% were dismissed. As Figure 9 shows, this was the third highest percentage of appeals dismissed in Wales and we were one of 14 LPAs that reached the 66% target.

Figure 9: Percentage of appeals dismissed, 2014-15



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

Engagement

We are:

- one of 3 LPAs that did not allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee; and
- one of 20 LPAs that had an online register of planning applications, which members of the public can access, track their progress (and view their content).

As Table 2 shows, 68% of respondents to our 2014-15 customer satisfaction survey agreed that the LPA gave good advice to help them make a successful application, which is higher than the Wales average.

Table 2: Feedback from our 2014-15 customer satisfaction survey

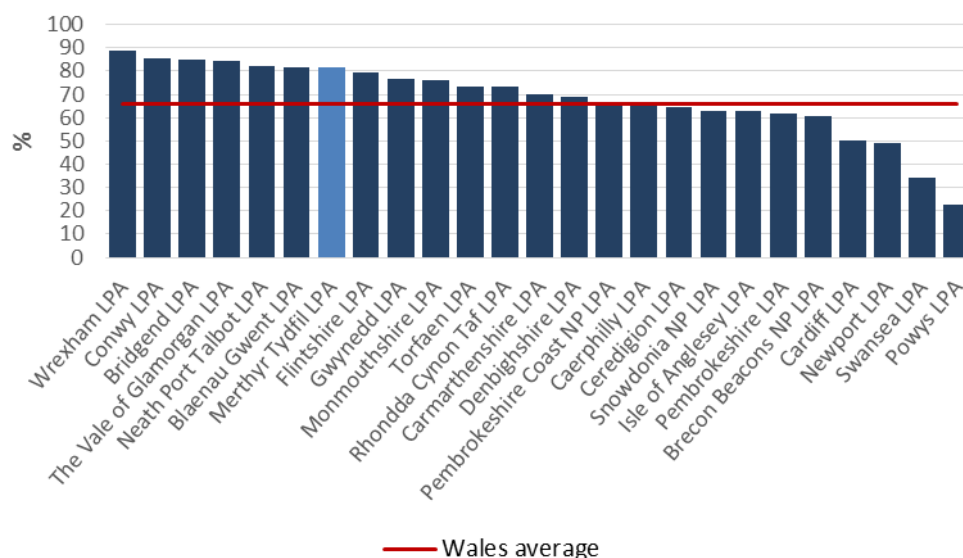
	%	
Percentage of respondents who agreed that:	Merthyr Tydfil LPA	Wales
The LPA gave good advice to help them make a successful application	68	57
They were listened to about their application	60	56

Enforcement

In 2014-15 we investigated 168 enforcement cases, which equated to 2.8 per 1,000 population. This compared to 2 enforcement cases investigated per 1,000 population across Wales. We took, on average, 4 days to investigate each enforcement case.¹

We investigated 82% of these enforcement cases within 84 days. Across Wales 66% were investigated within 84 days. Figure 10 shows the percentage of enforcement cases that were investigated within 84 days across all Welsh LPAs.

Figure 10: Percentage of enforcement cases investigated within 84 days, 2014-15

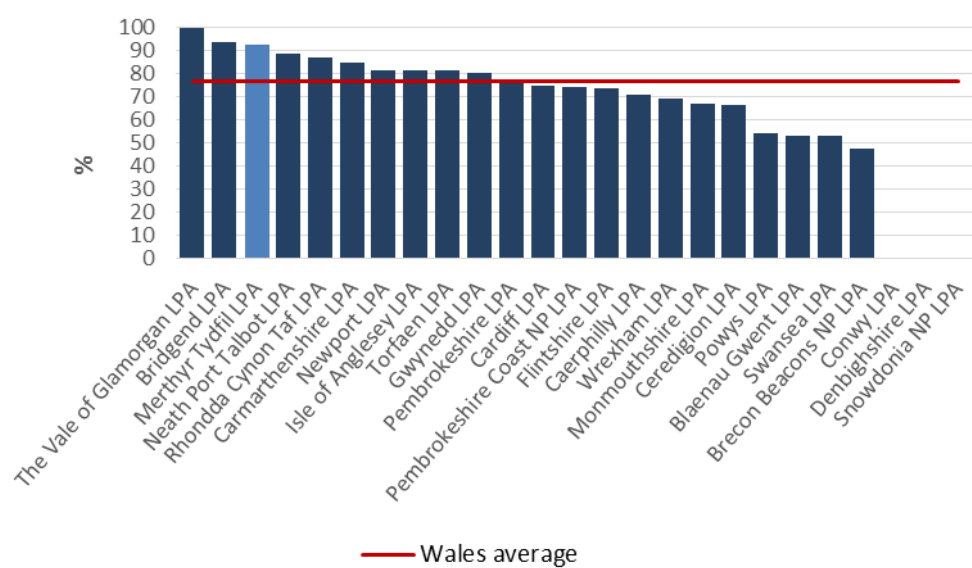


Over the same period, we resolved 81 enforcement cases, taking, on average, 76 days to resolve each case.

93% of this enforcement action was taken within 180 days from the start of the case. As Figure 11 shows this was the third highest percentage in Wales.

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

Figure 11: Percentage of enforcement cases resolved in 180 days, 2014-15



ANNEX A - PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

OVERVIEW

MEASURE	GOOD	FAIR	IMPROVE
Plan making			
Is there a current Development Plan in place that is within the plan period?	Yes		No
LDP preparation deviation from the dates specified in the original 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 required	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 Section 78 appeal upheld in the reporting period	0	1	2
Engagement			
Does the local planning authority allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee?	Yes		No
Does the local planning authority have an officer on duty to	Yes		No

WALES AVERAGE	Merthyr Tydfil LPA LAST YEAR	Merthyr Tydfil LPA THIS YEAR
Yes	Yes	Yes
60	N/A	N/A
Yes	Yes	Yes
4.2	3.6	2.5
24	29	60
206	No Data	53
73	83	93
76	No Data	50
11	0.5	0
66	60	80
0	0	0
Yes	No	No
	-Yes	-Yes

MEASURE	GOOD	FAIR	IMPROVE
provide advice to members of the public?			
Does the local planning authority's web site have an online register of planning applications, which members of the public can access, track their progress (and view their content)?	Yes	Partial	No
Enforcement			
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	Not set	Not set	Not set
Average time taken to investigate enforcement cases	Not set	Not set	Not set
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)?	Not set	Not set	Not set
Average time taken to take enforcement action	Not set	Not set	Not set

WALES AVERAGE	Merthyr Tydfil LPA LAST YEAR	Merthyr Tydfil LPA THIS YEAR
Yes	Yes	Yes
66	No Data	82
71	No Data	4
77	No Data	93
175	No Data	75.5

SECTION 1 – PLAN MAKING

Indicator	01. Is there a current Development Plan in place that is within the plan period?	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
A development plan (LDP or UDP) is in place and within the plan period		

Authority's performance	Yes
<p>The Merthyr Tydfil Local Development (2006-2021) was adopted in May 2011 and remains extant. A review of the LDP has commenced and a review report will be produced in Spring 2016 which will set out whether a full or short form revision procedure will be followed. The remaining 5 years of the plan period provides sufficient time for a revised/new LDP to be produced, ensuring that Merthyr Tydfil continues to have an extant LDP in place.</p>	

Indicator	02. LDP preparation deviation from the dates specified in the original Delivery Agreement, in months	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
The LDP is being progressed within 12 months of the dates specified in the original Delivery Agreement		

Authority's performance	N/A
N/A as the Merthyr Tydfil LDP was adopted in May 2011.	

Indicator	03. Annual Monitoring Reports produced following LDP adoption	
"Good"		"Improvement needed"
An AMR is due, and has been prepared		An AMR is due, and has not been prepared

Authority's performance	Yes
Annual monitoring reports have been produced and submitted every October since the adoption of the LDP in May 2011.	

Indicator	04. The local planning authority's current housing land supply in years	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
The authority has a housing land supply of more than 5 years		

Authority's performance	2.8
<p>The 2015 Joint Housing Land Availability Study shows a housing land supply of 2.8 years, which represents an increase on the 2.5 years reported in 2014.</p> <p>As a means of addressing this shortfall, the Council has used funding from the Welsh Government's Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) programme in order to increase levels of confidence over the delivery of housing sites. In particular, the Council has secured outline planning permission and has commissioned a significant amount of survey work. It is anticipated that by carrying out survey work (site investigations, ecology surveys etc.), prior to the submission of applications, potential developers will have more certainty in regard to the level of risk on site; in turn increasing the attractiveness of these sites to housebuilders. It is intended to complete all survey work by the end of 2015. The Council will produce a portfolio of sites to take to market. There may also be scope for VVP funding to contribute towards physical works on some sites, such as ground remediation or access improvements.</p>	

SECTION 2 - EFFICIENCY

Indicator	05. Percentage of "major" applications determined within time periods required	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	60
<p>80% of major applications determined during this period were subject of pre-application negotiations. This process enabled applications to be submitted with the necessary supporting reports, a scheme that had been agreed in principle and, if necessary, section 106 obligations established and a draft agreement prepared.</p> <p>Internal processes enable the application to be registered and transferred to the case officer within a short period of time (3 days). A planning committee is targeted which provides the best possible opportunity for the application to be determined in 8 weeks.</p>	

Indicator	06. Average time taken to determine "major" applications in days	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	53
<p>In order to determine major applications as quickly as possible there needs to be commitment, trust and a good working relationship between the local planning authority (and other relevant lead officers of the Council) and the applicant and/or agent. A productive, informative, detailed and speedy pre-application process is an essential part of the process which improves both the quality of the application and speed of performance.</p> <p>Effective and consistent registration processes have been introduced which enable planning officers to start assessing the application (i.e. site visits etc) shortly after the application has been validated and registered.</p> <p>Since all major applications have to be reported to The Planning, Regulatory and Licensing Committee, the working relationship between officers and all Councillors (whether members of the committee or not) is open, honest and effective. This is reflected in the fact that all of the</p>	

applications reported to the Committee in 2014/15 were approved/refused in accordance with the officer recommendation.

Indicator	07. Percentage of all applications determined within time periods required	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
More than 80% of applications are determined within the statutory time period		

Authority's performance	93
<p>In 2013 the Development Control section carried out a review of all processes and procedures with the main aim to improve service delivery. The consistency and quality of decisions and the speed at which they were delivered formed the main emphasis of the workshops. A new scheme of delegation was also agreed by the Council. The main benefits of the new delegation scheme are that applications submitted by the Council (other than major applications) do not have to be reported the Committee. Likewise those applications (other than major applications) which are subject to objections can still be determined under delegated powers.</p> <p>This review resulted in refined, new and more efficient processes and procedures. These changes combined with the commitment of planning officers, planning support staff, Councillors and other sections of the Council has not only enabled a significant improvement in performance but also allowed this to be consistent over the 12 month period. Indeed, in 2014/15 Merthyr Tydfil were either the top or second leading performing local planning authority in Wales in terms of determining applications in 8 weeks.</p> <p>In addition to the above, weekly team meetings and monthly 1:1's help to resolve those more complex applications early in the decision making process.</p>	

Indicator	08. Average time taken to determine all applications in days	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	50
<p>To determine all applications in an average time of just over 7 weeks reflects one of the major aims of the changes to procedures and processes that were introduced in 2013. The changes allow officers to determine application as soon as possible (i.e. following the 21 day statutory consultation/publicity exercises) rather than dealing with applications numerically based on the date they were validated.</p>	

SECTION 3 - QUALITY

Indicator	09. Percentage of Member made decisions against officer advice	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	0
<p>As stated above, the effective communication between planning officers and Councillors and the commitment of members of the Planning, Regulatory and licensing Committee to make decisions that accord with the Local Development Plan has resulted in no decisions being made contrary to officer recommendation.</p>	

Indicator	10. Percentage of appeals dismissed	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
More than 66% (two thirds) of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal	Between 55% and 66% of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal	Less than 55% of planning decisions are successfully defended at appeal

Authority's performance	80
<p>The pre-application process has helped to provide applicants/agents with sufficient advice to enable them to conclude whether or not to progress with their proposal. The 'new' processes and procedures also provide sufficient time for officers to seek amendments or alterations to submitted applications to prevent potential acceptable applications being refused. These improvements in service delivery have not only resulted in a reduction in appeals but also helped reduce the number of appeals that are allowed. Having an up-to-date LDP also assists</p>	

Indicator	11. Applications for costs at Section 78 appeal upheld in the reporting period	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
The authority has not had costs awarded against it at appeal		

Authority's performance	0
There were no applications for costs in 2014/15.	

SECTION 4 – ENGAGEMENT

Indicator	12. Does the local planning authority allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee?	
“Good”		“Improvement needed”
Members of the public are able to address the Planning Committee		Members of the public are not able to address the Planning Committee

Authority’s performance	No
The Council’s Constitution does not allow members of the public to address the Planning Committee.	

Indicator	13. Does the local planning authority have an officer on duty to provide advice to members of the public?	
“Good”		“Improvement needed”
Members of the public can seek advice from a duty planning officer		There is no duty planning officer available

Authority’s performance	Yes
A duty planning officer is available from 08.30 – 17.00 Monday to Thursday and 08.30 – 16.30 on Friday to provide general planning advice both face to face and by telephone. Advice can be provided by a welsh speaking planning officer upon request.	

Indicator	14. Does the local planning authority's web site have an online register of planning applications, which members of the public can access track their progress (and view their content)?	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
All documents are available online	Only the planning application details are available online, and access to other documents must be sought directly	No planning application information is published online

Authority's performance	Yes
All documents are available to view online.	

SECTION 5 – ENFORCEMENT

Indicator	15. 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"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	82
<p>Merthyr Tydfil has one Enforcement Officer therefore it is essential that the officer strictly follows set timescales and robustly monitors the enforcement caseload. The size of the Development Control team necessitates an extremely close working relationship between all officers and support staff. The Enforcement Officer attends the weekly team meetings which enables more complex cases to be discussed and a way forward to be agreed. This process, along with regular 1:1's ensures that enforcement cases can be investigated as quickly as possible.</p>	

Indicator	16. Average time taken to investigate enforcement cases	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	4
<p>This average time-scale is in accordance with the Councils approved enforcement procedure which is to investigate each enforcement case within 5 days of the date of the complaint.</p>	

Indicator	17. 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"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	93
It is considered that this performance is very good albeit difficult to fully assess without benchmarking. 9% of all valid planning applications received were those which had been submitted following enforcement investigations, which identifies that a number of enforcement cases are resolved through the submission of a planning application The Enforcement Officer has a pro-active approach to encourage the submission of applications which also involves helping applicants to submit valid applications.	

Indicator	18. Average time taken to take enforcement action	
"Good"	"Fair"	"Improvement needed"
Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked	Target to be benchmarked

Authority's performance	75.5
Likewise, it is considered that this performance is very good albeit difficult to fully assess without benchmarking. This performance is a reflection of all the processes and procedures already highlighted in section 5 and the emphasis on both individual and team performance.	

SECTION 6 – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

The purpose of the Sustainable Development Indicators is to measure the contribution the planning system makes to sustainable development in Wales.

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. 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 of 54 data items); In quarter 2 we provided a full response (54of 54 data items); In quarter 3 we provided a full response (54 of 54 data items); In quarter 4 we provided a full response (54 of 54 data items).
•	

Indicator	SD1. The floorspace (square metres) granted and refused planning permission for new economic development on allocated employment sites during the year.
------------------	--

Granted (square metres)	
Authority's data	0

Refused (square metres)	
Authority's data	0

No new floor space was granted or refused on allocated employment sites during the year. Page 10 of the AMR (attached as Appendix 1) addresses this issue.

Indicator	SD2. Planning permission granted for renewable and low carbon energy development during the year.
------------------	--

Granted permission (number of applications)	
Authority's data	4

Granted permission (MW energy generation)	
Authority's data	2

These applications related to 2 wind turbines, a biomass generator and a hydroelectric scheme.

Indicator	SD3. The number of dwellings granted planning permission during the year.
------------------	--

Market housing (number of units)	
Authority's data	514

Affordable housing (number of units)	
Authority's data	99

19% of all dwellings granted were affordable. The AMR comments on the number of dwellings granted in more detail.

Indicator	SD4. Planning permission granted and refused for development in C1 and C2 floodplain areas during the year.
------------------	--

Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that DID NOT meet all TAN 15 tests which were GRANTED permission	
Authority's data	0

Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that did not meet all TAN 15 tests which were REFUSED permission on flood risk grounds	
Authority's data	0

Number of residential units (and also hectares of non-residential units) that MET all TAN 15 tests which were GRANTED permission	
Authority's data	4

Despite a significant amount of land in Merthyr Tydfil being within the C2 floodplain, the data shows that advice is being followed in accordance with TAN15 and PPW.

Indicator	SD5. The area of land (ha) granted planning permission for new development on previously developed land and greenfield land during the year.
------------------	---

Previously developed land (hectares)	
Authority's data	18

Greenfield land (hectares)	
Authority's data	2

In accordance with the LDP the vast majority of development is permitted on previously developed land.

The 2ha granted on greenfield land consists of one renewal application for 9 dwellings and an affordable housing regeneration scheme close to the town centre.

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.
------------------	---

Open space lost (hectares)	
Authority's data	0

Open space gained (hectares)	
Authority's data	3

No open space was lost and in accordance with LDP policy, open space was secured as a result of new residential development.

Indicator	SD7. The total financial contributions (£) agreed from new development granted planning permission during the quarter for the provision of community infrastructure.
------------------	---

Gained via Section 106 agreements (£)	
Authority's data	34,000

Gained via Community Infrastructure Levy (£)	
Authority's data	16500

CIL was adopted by the Council in June 2014.

APPENDIX 1 – ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT