

Committee: **Planning Committee**

Date of meeting: **15<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

Report Subject: **Understanding the well-being of Planners in Wales and Building Control Departments in the UK**

Report Submitted by: **Service Manager Development Services & Estates**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
X								Planning Committee

**1. Purpose of the Report**

To make Members aware of two recent reports that have been published by The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and Local Authority Building Control (LABC). These are the professional organisations representing planning officers and building control officers respectively. The reports examine the well-being of professionals working in their respective fields.

**2. Scope and Background**

Both Planning and Building Control play crucial roles in delivering a wide range of valuable outcomes such as addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies, economic development and supporting communities across Wales.

However, it is widely recognised that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and Building Control Departments, along with the wider public sector, are struggling to meet expectations with constant legislative and regulatory changes, recruitment challenges and trying to manage the well-being of their workforce.

In response to this, two important pieces of work have recently been commissioned which look at understanding the well-being of Planners and the current state of the Building Control Workforce. These documents respectively are called ‘The Big Conversation’ and ‘Building Control Workforce Insights’.

Full copies of both reports and the RTPI Wales follow up report are appended for Member’s information.

**The Big Conversation**

In 2022, RTPI Cymru set out to identify the issues facing the profession in trying to deliver the planning system. It was in direct response to a request by the Minister for Climate Change to understand the well-being of planners in Wales operating under challenging circumstances. The Big Conversation set out to better

understand the pressures being faced and undertake a health check of the profession in Wales.

Planning Departments in Welsh Councils have seen significant reductions in budgets along with reduced resources to other public services. Through a survey and roundtable discussions, they set out to better understand where the pressures are and how this is affecting those working in the system. They wanted to learn about good practice which is being used to address issues and possible action which could assist in relieving pressures.

The Big Conversation is focused on the well-being of those working in and delivering the planning system; it is not a review of the planning system or its policies. However, it does reflect on changes which could support the well-being issues identified and explore ways to alleviate pressures.

### Headline Findings

- As previously identified by Audit Wales and Senedd Cymru's Public Accounts Committee, the workload of LPA's has increased alongside significant budget cuts. The Big Conversation found high levels of planners being overstretched in their work and this was having an impact on their well-being. 61% of all respondents reported being overstretched at least several times a week, 74% of LPA officers felt overstretched; 21% of all respondents felt they were overstretched all of the time.
- The need for planning to become more resilient as a profession was identified and particularly the resilience of planning officers in relation to handling difficult situations and high expectations.
- Whilst the Big Conversation identified weaknesses, it is also clear that services continue to be delivered and planners take pride in their role and value what they are delivering.
- A wide variety of issues were identified as the reason for the increase in workload. Reoccurring themes include staff resources and recruitment difficulties linked to pay and rewards, the expectations of developers, their agents, the public and politicians and the broadening of planning and process requirements.
- Availability of other specialist officers including ecologists, highways and drainage officers, was also identified as having an impact on workload. Staff resource issues of Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) were also raised as impacting on the delivery of services. There was also a suggestion that the private sector was under pressure, and this was resulting in poorer quality designs and applications, further impacting on the workload of LPAs.

- A lack of investment in digital resources to support planning delivery and a move to hybrid and remote working were also raised as factors.
- There were notable levels of abuse, partly encouraged through social media reported by those working in planning as well as intimidation, raising safety issues. The increasing levels of formal and informal complaints is having an impact on workload and time resource.

RTPI Cymru recognises that fully addressing the shortfall in investment and budgets for planning at the current time is not straightforward and there is a need to consider wider additional solutions. Those proposed are centred around:

- Increasing public sector resources to support planning.
- Improving the understanding of planning to support engagement and appreciation by others of the role of planning. This included providing better information for the public, but also targeting senior officials in local authorities, politicians and other public sector bodies.
- Exploring opportunities to grow the profession and encourage new entrants, as well as providing skills training across the profession.
- Investment in digital planning.
- Although the Big Conversation was not a review of the planning system itself, there were suggestions for amendments to the operation of the system to alleviate pressures. Regional planning was suggested as a way of sharing evidence gathering and pooling specialist resources.
- Finally, sharing good practice was an area raised which to provide a source of learning and development for individuals and organisations.

Following the publication of the report in January 2023, RTPI Cymru produced a follow-up paper (also appended) which provided their response to the findings and what they are committing to offer (tailored to Wales) in terms of support and upcoming plans. The RTPI confirmed they will also be encouraging other bodies to respond to the findings.

In terms of support the RTPI have confirmed that they will:

1. Provide well-being support for their members by partnering with Health Assured to provide help with mental wellbeing, legal advice and counselling (amongst other things).
2. A trust to provide support to families in financial hardship.
3. Undertake regular Member Surveys
4. Campaign for Chief Planners in every local authority (akin to other statutory roles such as s151 officer) whose key role should be to provide advice to the

local authority on spatial and place-based implications of decisions and investments.

5. Continue to engage with the Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW) to discuss issues and provide a Team-Wales approach to delivering a positive planning system in Wales.
6. Strive to improve perceptions of planning by developing communication strategies. This includes the public and politicians.
7. 'Grow our Own' by promoting careers in planning and working closely with Cardiff University. Look to set up recognised Apprenticeships
8. Share learning from digital planning strategies pursued elsewhere and will encourage Welsh Government to embark on such investment. This is a plan to use data and technology to transform the planning system and put data at the heart of decisions to create and shape great places.

#### What does this mean for Blaenau Gwent Planners?

This report was a refreshing read for the Council's Planners in that staff were reassured they aren't alone in terms of the daily pressures they face, particularly in terms of acknowledging workload and lack of specialist consultees.

Providing a resilient planning system requires all the constituent parts to be working efficiently particularly in a small authority like Blaenau Gwent. Unlike larger Council's, we do not enjoy the benefit of dedicated appeals officer, s106 officer, specialism in key areas like listed buildings or urban design/placemaking or a dedicated GIS officer. This places greater pressure on case officers who are unable to specialise in any particular area of work.

The planning system is reliant on input from a number of other professionals, and it should also be noted the pressures faced by key officers in other Departments. There are single points of failure in many areas and these officers also have responsibilities above and beyond their input into the planning system.

With regard to this point, I would specifically highlight highways, ecology, rights of way, trees and environmental health as key players. Their input as consultees on planning applications is required to enable planning officers to deal with the day-to-day case work. There is little resilience in the system meaning that staff absences or priorities to other work results in understandable delays for which the planning system is often blamed. This compounds the pressure on planning officers.

The Development Plans team comprises of just three officers; the smallest in the region. This presents its own challenges in terms of delivering the replacement LDP. Members will also be aware that in the near future, the region (via the CJC) will be faced with preparing a Strategic Development Plan (SDP). The means of delivering the SDP is yet to be agreed but it is going to be extremely challenging for the team to deliver on both fronts as well as fulfilling other responsibilities such as advising on policy matters to the planning applications team.

The RTPI have made it clear that all relevant bodies need to be looking at how the well-being of planners can be improved, their commitment on how to assist has already been set out above.

The findings of the report should be acknowledged by the Council and measures need to be embraced to ensure workload is effectively managed. Staffing levels and structures must be appropriate to meet a demanding workload, the team need to feel valued, their pay must fairly reflect their roles and responsibilities and that staff must receive the necessary support needed to constantly adapt and adjust to change.

It is also paramount that the team is future proofed in terms of succession for when older members of the team retire, or other members of the team leave for career opportunities. Training is key in achieving this along with ensuring that any recruitment opportunities that may arise within Blaenau Gwent are attractive to potential employees.

The Service Manager is working closely with the Corporate Director and Team Manager Development Management to ensure appropriate steps are being taken to achieve the above and is also working with OD in contributing to a departmental workforce plan.

The introduction of new I.T. software will revolutionise the way we work, making the process more efficient and easing some pressure in terms of workload. It will also increase our web presence and make us more visible for the public which may help in terms of perception and understanding of the role of a planner.

The Team also works very closely with other Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to discuss common issues and share and embrace new/improved working practices. Cumulatively, LPA's have a good working relationship with Welsh Government and meet twice a year to discuss common issues.

LPAs across Wales are all on a journey for change and Blaenau Gwent LPA is no exception. Some of the issues in tis report are already being addressed including revising many work practises which are currently being discussed with the Chair and will be brought to Members attention in the coming months.

### **Building Control Workforce Insights**

This report was written by Kinetiq on behalf of LABC. They are a company that examines workforces and looks at ways to harness the energy of the workforce to achieve a sustainable, high performance work climate.

Kinetiq examined a number of critical questions about the state of the Building Control workforce in the UK:

- What is the overall composition of the workforce?
- How do employees perceive their working environment?

- What factors influence them to remain engaged with their work and 'minded' to stay with their organisations?

They used these questions help to inform a national debate about the health of the building control profession as it adapts to the imminent introduction of the Building Safety Act which is designed to ensure consistency across the building control profession and drive-up standards.

This new Act sees the creation of the Building Safety Regulator (BSR), headed up by the Chief Inspector of Buildings, who will be responsible for the oversight of Building Control Bodies (BCB's). The new regime will see the introduction of a register for all building control professionals undertaking restricted activities and / or functions and the new Operational Standard Rules.

### Headline Findings

- The UK Building Control workforce is, predominantly white, male dominated and an ageing but experienced workforce.
- The best things experienced by the profession were feeling valued, job autonomy, work life balance and strong managerial support who are trying to raise the profile of building control.
- The most difficult challenges were identified as lack of resources and the sheer volume of work and the unrealistic expectations of staff, staff retention and the cost of living.
- The employing organisation "personality" was considered both positively and negatively. Some examples of the positive language used to describe the organisation was supportive, honest, caring, hardworking, diligent, helpful, committed, inclusive, fair, approachable and ambitious. Some examples of the negative language used were that the organisation is challenging, disorganised, slow, chaotic, outdated, slow, wounded, aging and old fashioned, dysfunctional, painful and overworked.
- Recruitment process issues were identified as having financial constraints, applicants had a lack of experience and that pay and benefits package isn't attractive.
- The new Registration Process will bring new challenges in terms of policy, process and procedures behind the process and ensuring the necessary support, training and development would be in place.
- In terms of workplace experience, the survey responses received were as follows:

The report concludes that the need to address the issues identified above is amplified by the age profile of the workforce. It is recognised that effective recruitment is required to offset the large proportion of the workforce that could be expected to leave through natural retirement in the coming years.

The need to obtain registration to practice under the new Building Safety Act, arguably adds further challenges to retaining the right people. In essence, recruitment into the profession is hampered by a lack of suitably qualified applicants.

Financial constraints are a contributing factor, potential applicants compare their expected overall financial package with opportunities elsewhere in the 'broader careers market'. The achievement of registration was also seen as a context for an enhancement to pay and conditions, in line with greater responsibilities.

#### What does this mean for Blaenau Gwent Building Control Department?

Members may be aware that within the last 2 years the Council's Building Control Section has suffered in terms of retention and recruitment of experienced staff.

Whilst the team is now at full capacity, the range of experience and knowledge varies considerably which has a significant impact on the team in terms of workload. This is exacerbated by the introduction of ever changing legislative and regulatory processes, in particular the Building Safety Act.

The results of the Kinetiq survey/report have been considered by the Council's Building Control Team and they are of the view that this is a fair representation of the way they feel.

Accordingly, it is vitally important that the Council seeks to ensure that considering the enforced changes coming into effect that the team feel valued, that their pay fairly reflects their roles and responsibilities and that they receive the necessary support needed to adapt and adjust to change.

It is also paramount that the team is future proofed in terms of succession for when older members of the team retire, or other members of the team leave for alternative opportunities. Training is key in achieving this along with ensuring that any recruitment opportunities that may arise within Blaenau Gwent are attractive to potential employees.

One of the key challenges is salary. Building Control competes with the private sector for work. Historically this Council has secured a high proportion of work from Approved Inspectors as the private sector has concentrated efforts to secure work in more lucrative areas like the M4 corridor. However, two things have changed in recent years:

Firstly, as build rates have improved in the valleys, there is a growing presence of AI's who are commonly used by national housebuilders rather than LABC services.

Secondly, with the shortage of new graduates entering the profession, AI's have been successfully employing local authority BCO's offering significantly higher salaries and benefits packages such as company cars, health insurance and professional fees paid as part of the contract of employment. Along with neighbouring authorities we have lost experienced staff to the private sector and replacing staff is proving extremely difficult. During the crisis in the Department

last year, it was only possible to recruit via an agency and staff costs were upwards of £55 per hour.

Again, the Service Manager is working very closely with the Building Control Team Leader to ensure appropriate steps are being taken to achieve the above and is also working with OD in contributing to a departmental workforce plan.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

Note the content of the report and endorse the measures set out to protect well-being of staff, staff retention and building resilient teams.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

The outcome of both pieces of work that were undertaken is that well-being at work amongst planners and building control officers in the public sector is suffering due to a number of factors. This view is shared by the staff in the Planning and Building Control Sections within the Council.

The well-being of staff is a key priority within the Council and the endorsement of the recommendations set out will ensure the Council is delivering in terms of its responsibilities and commitment to staff in protecting their well-being and staff retention. In retaining staff, we build stronger teams to deliver corporate objectives in a timely manner.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

We need to ensure that staff retention issues are addressed. Recruitment of experienced staff is difficult as well as the disruption caused by vacancies, the knock on stress for retained staff and of course the cost of recruitment is avoided where possible.

We need to ensure that all roles are paid competitively with other Council's and the competitive market within which they operate. This will entail Job Evaluation where required which could result in additional staffing costs.

There will be a cost in sourcing relevant training. This cost can be reduced by Training the Trainer.

5. ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

N/A

5.3 ***Legal***

N/A

5.4 ***Human Resources***

N/A

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 Reports attached.



6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

None.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

N/A, this report is for information only and will be presented to the Planning Committee.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The discussion papers suggest measures that will future proof forward planning for both the Planning Department and Building Control.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

Acknowledging the pressures being faced is the first step to addressing the underlying causes.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The services continue to collaborate with key partners through forums such as Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW), South East Wales Policy Group (SEWSPG), all Wales development Management Group and LABC.

We also work closely with other authorities more directly such as the LABC partnership scheme and with planning, we procure listed building advice from Mon CC.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

The resilience of the planning and building control services is key to delivering these aspirations.

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IAA)***

N/A – no decisions required.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

Formal 1-2-1's on a quarterly basis

**Background Documents /Electronic Links**

- a. The Big Conversation
- b. RTPi Response to the Big Conversation
- c. Building Control Work Insights