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Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru  
Auditor General for Wales

# Planning in Wales – Summary Report



WALES AUDIT OFFICE  
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU



# Planning in Wales

## What is planning?

- 1 Planning ensures that the right development happens in the right place at the right time, benefitting communities and the economy. It plays a critical role in identifying what development is needed and where, what areas need to be protected or enhanced and in assessing whether proposed development is suitable.

## Who is responsible?

- 2 In Wales, there are 25 'local planning authorities', the 22 unitary authorities and the three National Parks. Local planning authorities have three key roles:

### Exhibit 1 – the role of local planning authorities

The local planning authority plays a key role in supporting and managing development that benefits everyone living in and visiting Wales

## Local Planning Authority Services

### Planning Policy

the Local Development Plan sets out local planning policies and identifies how land is used, determining what will be built where. Adopted local plans provide the framework for development across Wales and are developed and managed by the local planning authority.

### Development Control

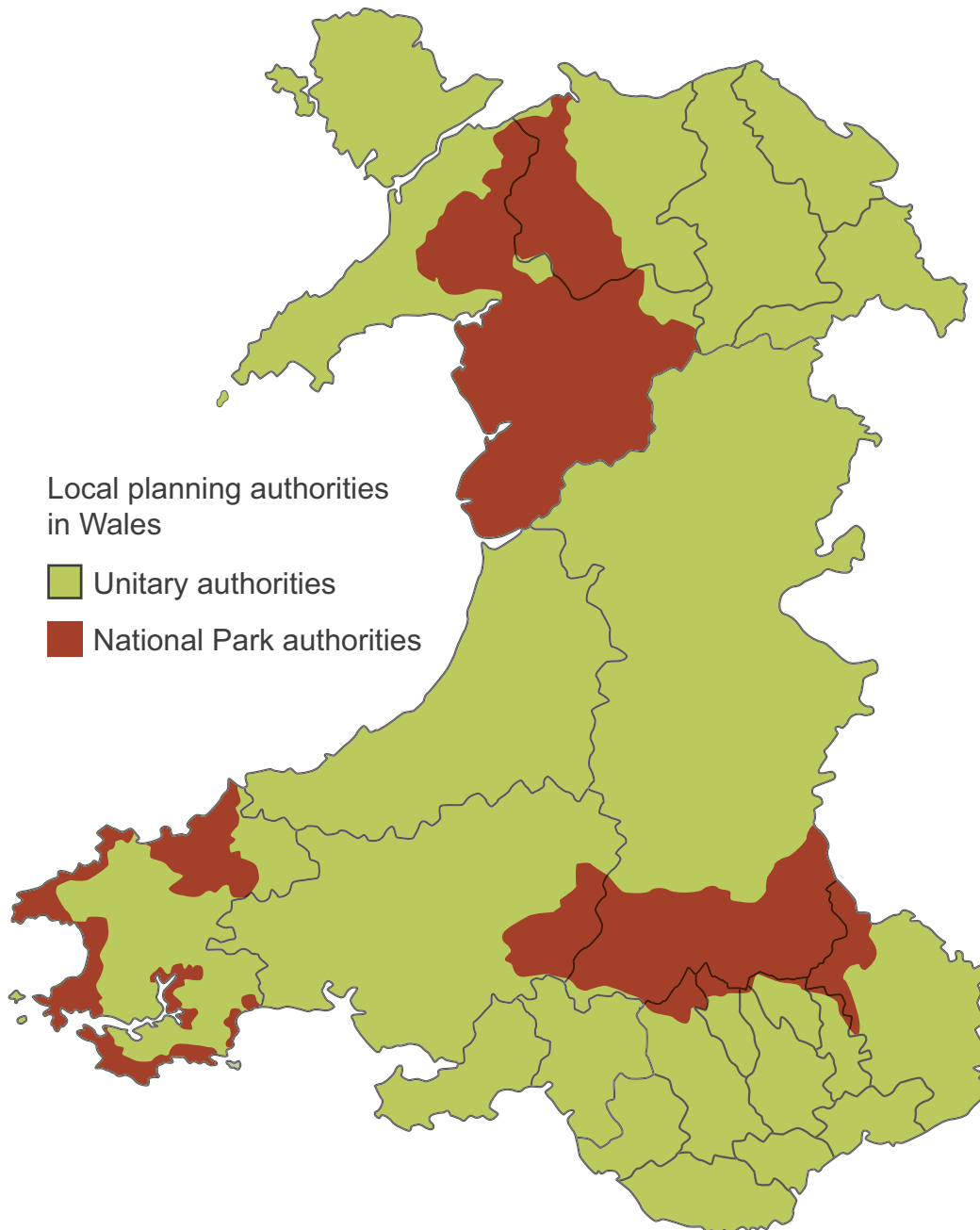
most new buildings or major changes to existing buildings or to the local environment need consent before they go ahead, and it is the local planning authority that decides on the majority of planning applications.

### Building Control

building regulations are the minimum standards for design, construction and alterations to virtually every building in Wales. Building control oversees much of this work but these services are not provided by National Park Authorities.

Source: Wales Audit Office

## Exhibit 2 – The 25 Local Planning Authorities in Wales



Source: Wales Audit Office

## How are local planning authorities changing?

- 3 In 2014, the National Assembly for Wales adopted a new Planning (Wales) Act. The new Act came into force in July 2015 and seeks to ensure the planning system is 'fair, resilient and enables development' against 5 key objectives:
  - a a modernised framework for the delivery of planning services – the act introduces powers to allow planning applications to be made directly to Welsh ministers in limited circumstances;
  - b strengthening the plan led approach – the Act introduces a legal basis for the preparation of a national framework and strategic development plans;
  - c improving resilience – allows Welsh ministers to direct local planning authorities to work together and to merge;
  - d improving the development management system – the act introduces statutory pre-application procedures for defined categories of application; and
  - e enabling effective enforcement and appeals – secure prompt, meaningful action against breaches of planning control and increase the transparency and efficiency of the appeal system.

## What we have done?

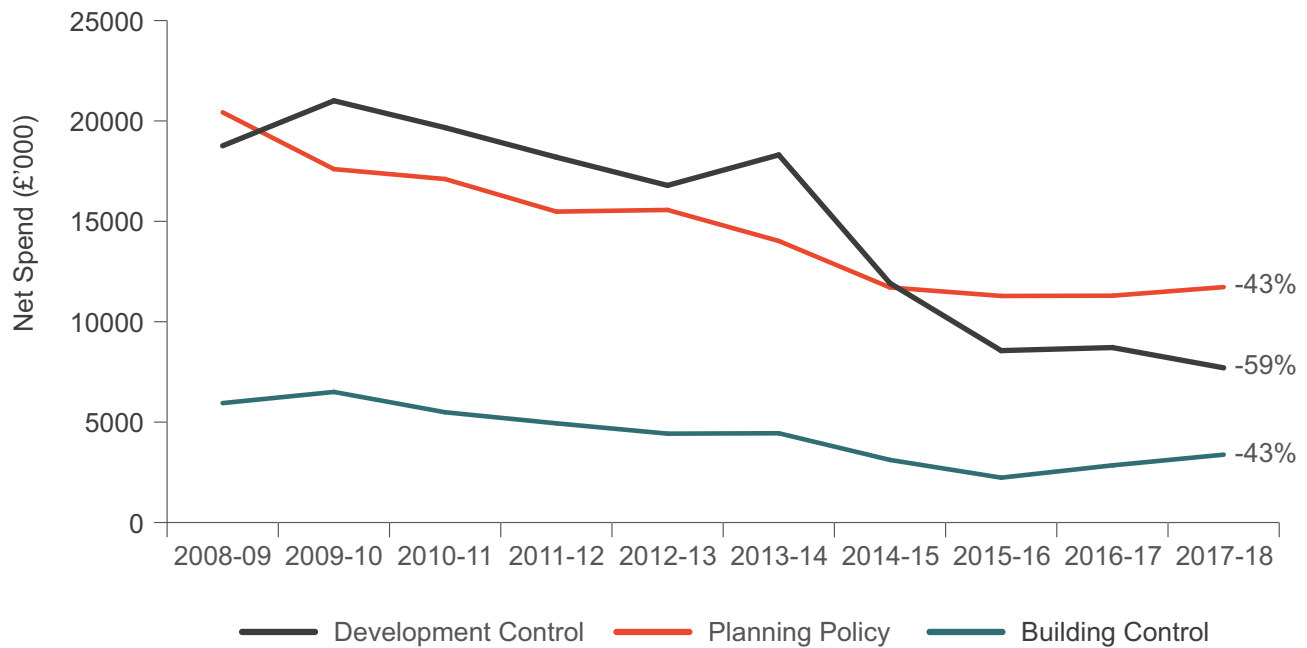
- 4 The Auditor General for Wales has completed a review of how local planning authorities are working and how they are implementing their new responsibilities.

## How are planning services performing?

- 5 Since 2008-09 local planning authorities have had their budgets cut in real terms, considering inflation, by 50%. Net expenditure has fallen from £45.1 million in 2008-09 to £22.8 million in 2017-18 – [Exhibit 3](#).

**Exhibit 3 – net expenditure by local authorities on planning services in real terms in Wales between 2008-09 and 2017-18.**

There has been a significant reduction in expenditure on planning in the last decade



Source: Revenue outturn (RO) data, StatsWales. Analysis by Wales Audit Office using 2009 deflators.

- 6 The number of planning applications made to local planning authorities has remained stable at 24,000 or so in the last four years. The number dealt with by authorities ranges from 300 to 2,600 – **Exhibit 4**.

#### Exhibit 4 – number of planning applications decided on: total for Wales and range across the 25 local planning authorities

The number of planning applications decided on has remained broadly stable but there is a wide variation in the range of applications individual planning authorities deal with.

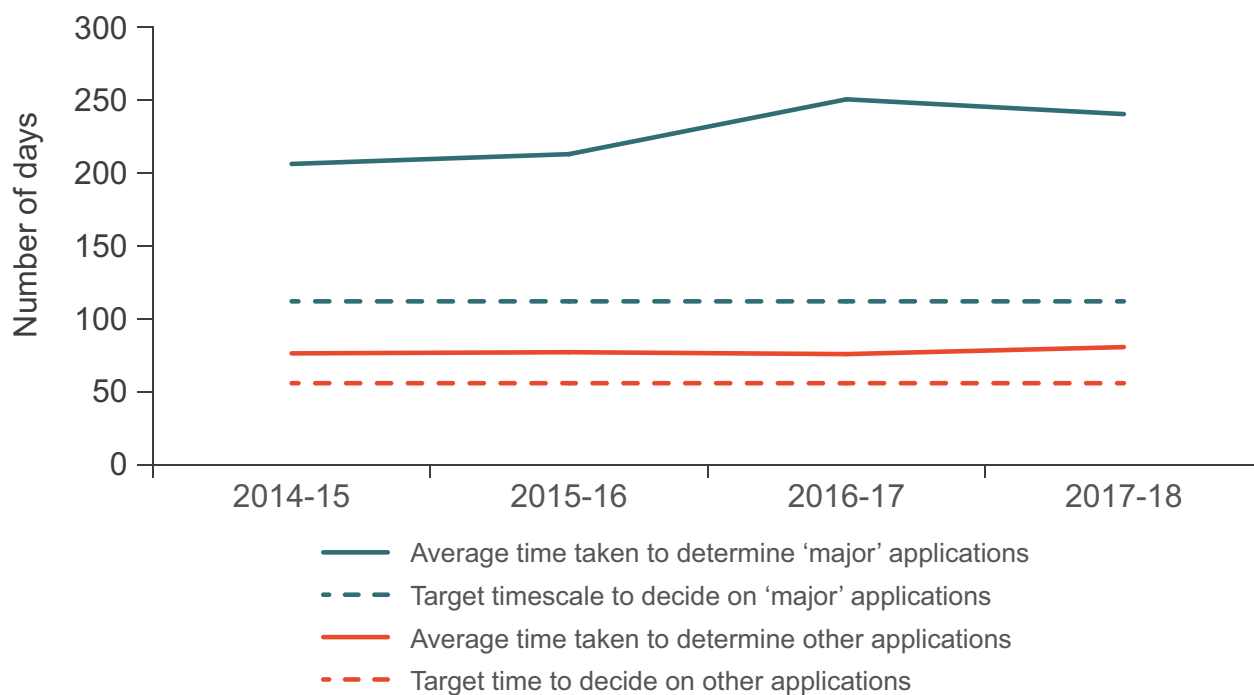
Year	Wales total	Lowest number	Highest number
2014-15	24,203	308	2,596
2015-16	25,247	362	3,053
2016-17	25,008	326	2,819
2017-18	24,098	307	2,636

Source: Welsh Government, [gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports](http://gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports)

- 7 However, with less money and less staff to deliver planning, performance has declined. In 2017-18 only 70.9% of planning applications for smaller development were dealt with in on time. However, for major developments only 20% of applications are processed on time – [Exhibit 5](#).

### Exhibit 5 – the average time taken to decide on planning applications by local planning authorities between 2014-15 and 2017-18

The average time taken to decide on applications is increasing for major applications and well above the Welsh Government’s targets.



Source: Welsh Government, [gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports](http://gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports)

- 8 The length of time taken to deal investigate complaints about development, including building and engineering works and changes of use, that may have been carried out without permission or consent is widely variable across Wales. The best performers deal with enforcement issues very quickly, often within a week. The worse performers take over a year. On average it takes authorities over 37 weeks to investigate and deal with an enforcement case.

- 9 Planning committees take responsibility for determining larger applications that are not delegated to officers. Decisions are based on officer recommendations which committee members need to weigh up and consider. We found that the proportion of member-made decisions against officer advice remains high. In 2017-18, 8.6% of recommendations were overturned and ranged from no recommendations being overturned in some authorities to 60% in one authority – **Exhibit 6**.

**Exhibit 6 – percentage of member-made decisions against officer advice – Wales average and range across the 25 local planning authorities**

There is a wide range of performance by planning committees in deciding on the advice of officers when determining planning applications.

Year	Wales average	Lowest %	Highest %
2014-15	10.5%	0%	81.8%
2015-16	7.1%	0%	39.5%
2016-17	10.9%	0%	59.2%
2017-18	8.6%	0%	60.7%

Source: Welsh Government, [gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports](http://gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports)



- 10 Where an authority has refused a planning application then the applicant has the right to appeal the decision. We found that appeals remain high with 37.4% of appeals upheld, overturning the original authority decision. The range of appeals overturned range from 0 in some authorities to two-thirds in one authority – [Exhibit 7](#).

**Exhibit 7 – percentage of appeals dismissed – Wales average and range across the 25 local planning authorities**

There is a wide range of performance by local planning authorities successfully dismissing an appeal against its planning decision.

Year	Wales average	Authority with the lowest % dismissed	Authority with the highest % dismissed
2013-14	65.3%	47.6%	100%
2014-15	65.6%	46.2%	83.3%
2015-16	66.5%	6.0%	90.5%
2016-17	60.9%	40.0%	83.3%
2017-18	62.6%	35.7%	100.0%

Source: Welsh Government, [gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports](http://gov.wales/planning-services-performance-reports)

## What do citizens think about current services?

- 11 People take pride in their community! The decision made by planners and planning committees can have a positive impact on their lives by supporting the development of new homes, creating employment opportunities, enforcing high design standards and improving the infrastructure that can make things work well.
- 12 An effective local planning authority will also set out a clear vision on how they will work in the medium-to-long-term to improve their communities. Having a clear vision of the future possibilities – of what can be – can inspire people and motivate them to give their best.
- 13 Citizens we spoke to however told us that they do not believe that their planning authorities are ambitious enough to help deliver the improvements needed in their community. Citizens are frustrated by planners focussing too much on individual applications and not enough on encouraging and creating a vibrant and sustainable community:
  - a ‘Planners just focus on the technocratic elements of land use planning, not how the place will look and feel like in the long term. Design and spatial technology, social media, and virtual reality is not used to show people what is possible.’
  - b ‘The current planning system is structurally flawed and ‘transactional’ in approach, it needs to be more creative, innovative and dynamic in its approach and more organic. If we have any chance of planning for future generations & well-being of Wales, make sure that WFG principles become reality.’
  - c ‘Planning should be more than just using lots of words to talk about land use. There is an opportunity here to inspire people to improve their environment, incentivise good design, and promote examples of good schemes. The planning system in Wales is driven by a fear of failure rather than a shared vision of what the future could look like.’

- 14 As well as wanting to see local planning authorities upping their game and becoming more ambitious and innovative, citizens are concerned that they are not effectively engaged or involved at present. For instance, a large number noted that communities/residents do not have the same level of influence on local planning authorities or planning committees as large-scale developers. Developers are often able to use the system to benefit themselves and get what they want to be delivered. Several citizens noted that developers have the resources to play the system that the public does not have access to:
- a 'Public confidence in the local planning authority is severely undermined by a lack of transparency and consultation. There is next to no community involvement in future planning and the matter is becoming increasingly politicised.'
- 15 This is not helped by the often poor-quality information provided by local planning authorities to help explain what they are doing, where and when. Too often this is inaccessible and not useful. Over half of those responding to our survey stated that it is not easy to access information and 67% that local planning authorities are not good at engaging with stakeholders about planning proposals and their potential implications:
- a 'I knocked on 27 houses and not one householder was aware of the candidate areas, aware of the proposed change of use or aware they could object.'
  - b 'By their nature, planners are not good communicators. Most older people don't own computers, so they can't check on how planning applications that affect them are progressing... Planners need to upskill their communications efforts.'

## What needs to change?

- 16 We have made five recommendations to help support local planning authorities focused on:
  - a improving how they involve stakeholders when making decisions and considering choices;
  - b addressing deficits in funding and working collaboratively to increase capacity;
  - c strengthening decision making; and
  - d creating a clearer and more ambitious vision for their local area.
- 17 We have also recommended that Welsh Government review charges for development control and improve local planning authority's performance.

## For more information

- 18 **Our full report, including our detailed recommendations, can be found on our website.**



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