

## Examination Note F94: Planning Development Management Capacity and Resource

1. This examination note responds to questions raised during the Brentwood Local Plan examination hearing session for Matter 8 Housing Provision. It was requested that further evidence be provided on the ability of the Council's Planning Development Management service to adequately process and determine future planning applications. In particular, this will inform the timeframes for the decision-making process as part of development delivery set out in the five year housing supply trajectory.
2. This note does not focus on the resource that the Council has implemented to deliver Dunton Hills Garden Village, which includes a project delivery team with a dedicated Development Management case officer and supporting assistance. Expertise and learning from the project team also benefits the Council's Development Management service for other applications. More information is provided in the [Dunton Hills Garden Village Topic Paper \(August 2020, examination reference F5B\)](#).

### Structure

3. The Council undertook a wholesale review of its Development Management service starting in 2016. This resulted in commissioning external management support, review of internal processes and restructuring roles and responsibilities within a new structure facilitated by necessary recruitment.
4. The team resource and structure currently in place reflects this process, shifting from a traditional development control approach to one that manages development according to strategic aims. Appendix A sets out the current service structure (organigram). Process management for the team is provided by Thurrock Council through a Memorandum of Understanding that acts like a service level agreement (providing service manager, delivery manager, Planning Administration Manager, and monitoring support). The rest of the team are Brentwood Borough Council employees, which includes two team leaders, two senior planners, four planning officers, and two assistant planners. In addition, there are two planning enforcement officers, and a Planning Administration Team (one senior officer, two officers, two assistant officers, plus two land charges officers).
5. The number of people and types of roles is consistent with other Essex authorities, with regular contact made through the Essex Planning Officers Association (EPOA) to review experiences. The number of applications that the Council receives can be compared to other Essex and/or similar sized authorities, as seen in the appendices. Vacancies and recruitment

can be a challenge, as experienced throughout the Planning sector. However, the Council manages this appropriately by utilising temporary contracts where needed and by prioritising permanent employment, including recruitment of junior staff with a strong track record of growing our own through training and continued professional development.

6. Provision of an effective Development Management service is an important corporate objective for the Council relying on support from other services too. Within the Planning and Economy directorate this includes the Strategic Planning Team (one manager, two senior planners, one assistant planner); Dunton Hills Garden Village project team (dedicated team part-funded by Homes England garden communities capacity funding, including strategic project lead and Development Management case officer); and the Economic Development Team (one senior officer, one officer and one apprentice). In addition, support is provided by teams such as Environmental Health, Strategic Housing, and other services and partners.
7. This demonstrates a clear structure that is appropriately resourced to deliver decision-making services from the local planning authority. Proof of an appropriate level of resource is evidenced by good performance outputs, as follows.

## Performance

8. A key objective of reviewing the structure and processes of the Development Management service was to improve performance figures for determining planning applications. These improvements have been embedded over time and the service regularly reports data, including monitoring through performance indicators to the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee. Key performance indicators monitored include timeframes for processing applications (according to minor, major and other application types), which in the latest year to date show performance at between 97% and 100%, well above the Council's minimum targets in each case.<sup>1</sup> Determination of major applications in time holds above 90%. This level of performance has now been achieved over several years.
9. The service can show improvements in performance since 2016. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government publishes local planning authority planning application statistics each year according to the number of applications determined in time, among other things. Figures for 2019/20 and 2020/21 show that the Council consistently ranks among the top group of authorities in England with 99% of applications determined in time. Appendix B provides further detail and context to these figures, including comparisons of the total number of applications received (or decisions made) and the percentage of applications approved. This data also provides comparisons with other Essex and/or similar sized authorities. Whilst Brentwood is a small borough, the number of planning applications received is high when compared with other authorities performing at this level.

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<sup>1</sup> Brentwood Borough Council, Democracy, Audit and Scrutiny Committee 11 March 2021, Item 7 Formal Complaints and Performance Indicator Working Group (Appendix A, Performance Indicator Dashboard Addendum 4, page 9, Planning Indicators P02 – P05):  
<https://brentwood.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s20063/Appendix%20A%20-%20Working%20Group%20Report.pdf>

10. The number and type of planning applications received each month and year are regularly monitored. This has remained broadly consistent since 2014. Appendix C and Appendix D provides further details.
11. The Council utilises Planning Performance Agreements on major applications and encourages pre-application discussion to resolve issues before an application is submitted. This is evidenced in the information provided for sites in the Council's [Housing Trajectory Update \(examination reference F81\)](#) and relevant statements of common ground.
12. This demonstrates that the Council publicly reports performance data to identify and prepare for any action required in the event that targets are not met. Notwithstanding this good performance, the Council is mindful of the potential for change through increased demand and so regularly reviews the service, as follows.

## Review

13. The Council is acutely aware of the likelihood that several future planning applications will be for larger and more complex schemes when compared to historic experience. This is shown through the types of proposed housing and employment allocations in the new Local Plan compared with typical applications. The progress that the service has made, as described above, is a journey. The Council is always considering how to improve services informed by current and projected needs.
14. In January 2021, the Council commissioned Mondrem Community Interest Company to independently review the Development Management service and consider capacity according to the expected step-change in future applications. Titled "gearing up for growth", the work has involved collecting performance data and interviews with a range of internal and external stakeholders. The review considers not just the structure of the service but also individual and collective productivity. The capacity of the service to meet needs is a product of the number of people in suitable roles but also their productivity guided by ways of working.
15. Foundation phase feedback is being compiled ready for recommendations that will help inform how the service can implement necessary processes and resources over the next six-months, responding to growth. Initial conclusions suggest caseloads are increasing, even without expected site allocation major applications. 2020/21 has seen an increase in planning applications when compared to the previous year. This shows resilience in the market but also means higher levels of work-in-progress for the service. There are no immediate issues, as shown through the consistent levels of performance to date in the appendices. However, forecasts indicate a change is needed to ways of working. These forecasts show that workload is likely to outstrip service capacity soon if nothing is done.
16. The review has identified tools and processes that can be used to help the team reduce stress, increase efficiency and give a better experience for customers making planning applications. Initial outputs include use of models to separate minor and major applications data to project impact according to work in progress at any given point. The potential use of fast-tracking would shift earlier determination of simpler applications and unlock time spent on more complex applications. Exploration of automation technology for tasks such as validation could help to further prioritise officer time. Use of project management tools for major applications, with regular updates through corporate highlight reports and an account

manager approach for each application, would help to organise resource more efficiently and identify issues early. These are just some of the potential ways that productivity can be increased.

17. These tools will help the service to adjust to increased workloads now and provide a new baseline when planning for the complexity of major applications soon, likely requiring recruitment of additional senior planners. The outcome will be improved productivity and additional senior expertise to help with major applications and assist upskilling in the team, providing succession planning in the long-term.
18. This demonstrates that the Council is on the front-foot, aware of the step-change in the number of major applications expected and already working to adapt before there is any drop in performance. Future needs of the Development Management service have already been identified through the Council's corporate priorities, as follows.

## Corporate Priorities

19. The Council's [Corporate Strategy 2020-25 \(examination reference F68\)](#), sets clear objectives to grow the local economy and develop communities, among other things. The strategy, recent evidence of schemes, supply and increasing delivery indicate the Council's understanding that bringing forward development is critical to achieve corporate objectives. The Council's Planning and Economy directorate is an important part of delivering these objectives, which includes strategic planning and the Development Management service. The Council is committed to ensuring the necessary capacity and resource is in place to effectively determine planning applications so that corporate objectives can be achieved.
20. The Council annually reviews corporate objectives. At its Ordinary Council meeting on 10 March 2021, the Council considered achievements from 2020/21 and approved new objectives for 2021/22 in line with the Corporate Strategy<sup>2</sup>. This included an objective to establish an account management approach to major and commercial planning applications, anticipating the recommendations of the gearing up for growth review. In addition, objectives were set to submit planning applications for redevelopment schemes at Westbury Road and William Hunter Way. The Council reported achievements progressing 2020/21 corporate objectives for its part submitting the first Brentwood Development Partnership planning applications at 1-2 Seven Arches Road and Maple Close (20 residential units combined, approved by Planning and Licensing Committee on 18 March 2021 following submission in December 2020 through the decision-making process)<sup>3</sup>. This shows an accountability to monitoring objectives and specific examples of delivering development in line with targets.
21. The Council's Planning and Licensing Committee meets each month, as set by the civic calendar. The Council operates an election by thirds approach, which usually means that in three out of every four years committees would not be held during the pre-election period and until a Council is formed at the Annual Council meeting (typically between April and May). The Council schedules committees accordingly to maximise time available in the civic year.

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<sup>2</sup> Brentwood Borough Council, Democracy, Ordinary Council 10 March 2021, Item 8 Corporate Strategy 2020-2025 Annual Review: <https://brentwood.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=128&MId=2187>

<sup>3</sup> Brentwood Borough Council, Democracy, Planning and Licensing Committee 18 March 2021: <https://brentwood.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=363&MId=2206>

Major development, such as those housing and employment allocations proposed in the Local Plan, would be brought to committee following officer recommendation in line with the Council's Constitution. Regular committees enable the Council to maintain decision-making in line with statutory timeframes, as indicated by performance achievements above. A flexible approach is employed, where the Planning and Licensing Committee can be moved, or additional meetings held if necessary, according to the forward plan. A very recent example of this includes two committee meetings being held in March 2021 to deal with the number of planning applications requiring decision at this time and before the pre-election period<sup>4</sup>.

22. This demonstrates that the Council has prioritised delivery of development to meet the borough's needs and is committed to the decision-making process being an effective part of this. The Council's committee schedule allows for flexibility as part of the decision-making process.

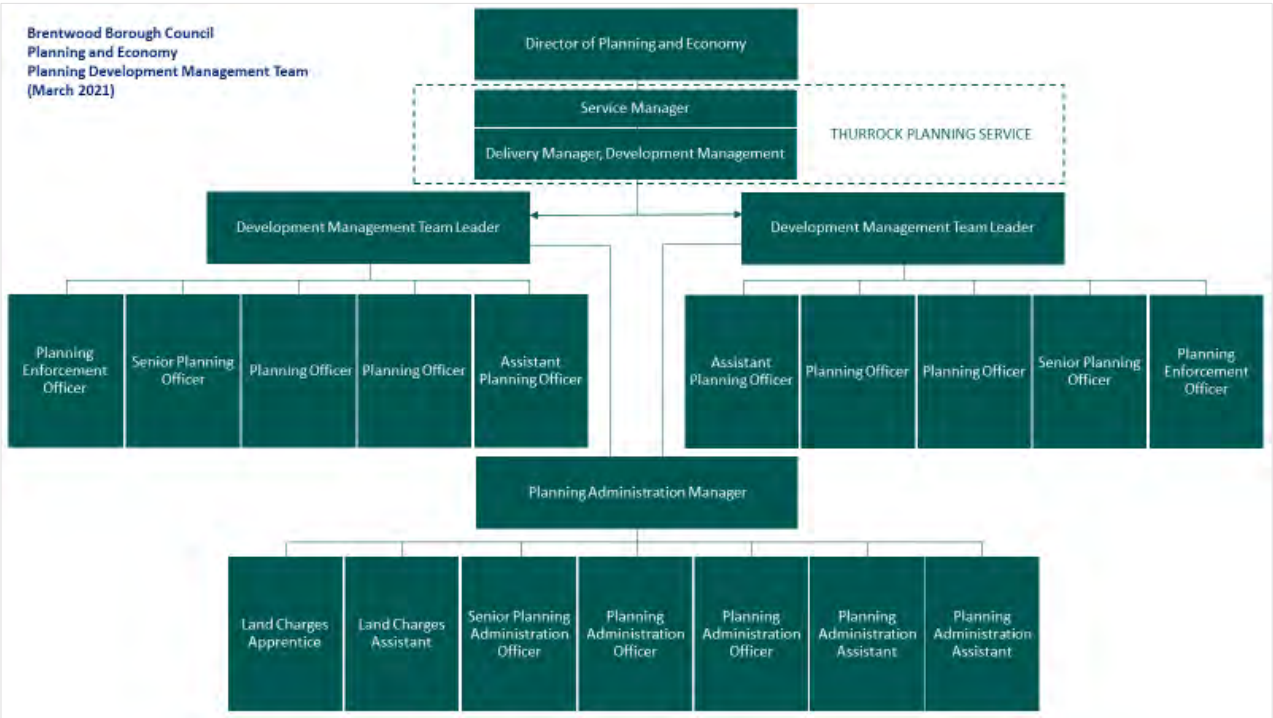
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<sup>4</sup> Brentwood Borough Council, Democracy, Planning and Licensing Committee, Browse Meetings: <https://brentwood.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CommitteeId=363>

# Appendix A: Development Management Service Structure

Figure 1 below sets out the current structure of the Council’s Planning Development Management service.

**Figure 1: Brentwood Borough Council Planning Development Management Service Organigram (March 2021)**



## Appendix B: Local Planning Authority Performance

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) publishes planning application statistics for all local planning authorities in England (314 districts). Table 1 shows the top performing authorities in 2019/20, ordered by percentage of applications decided within statutory timeframes (100% & 99%), and then total decisions. Table 2 shows this data published for 2020/21 so far.

**Table 1: MHCLG planning applications in England (2019/20)**

Local Planning Authority	Total decisions	Total granted	% granted	% decided in time
1. Bury	1,001	959	96%	100%
2. Thurrock	813	615	76%	100%
3. Chorley	708	669	94%	100%
4. St. Helens	675	636	94%	100%
5. Bolsover	364	350	96%	100%
6. Mid Sussex	1,468	1,339	91%	99%
7. Southend-on-Sea	1,364	986	72%	99%
8. Dudley	1,156	1,057	91%	99%
9. Rotherham	1,073	971	90%	99%
10. Brentwood	936	717	77%	99%
11. Amber Valley	917	826	90%	99%
12. North Tyneside	806	772	96%	99%
13. Broxtowe	680	631	93%	99%
14. Ipswich	623	560	90%	99%
15. Castle Point	573	453	79%	99%
16. South Tyneside	528	502	95%	99%
17. Wellingborough	401	363	91%	99%
18. Rossendale	348	278	80%	99%
19. Corby	297	247	83%	99%



**Table 2: MHCLG planning applications in England (April – December 2020)**

Local Planning Authority	Total decisions	Total granted	% granted	% decided in time
1. East Lindsey	833	811	93%	100%
2. Rotherham	819	743	91%	100%
3. Dudley	785	705	90%	100%
4. Newham	776	577	74%	100%
5. Bury	690	656	95%	100%
6. Thurrock	638	443	69%	100%
7. Chorley	572	515	90%	100%
8. St Helens	526	504	96%	100%
9. North East Lincolnshire	418	402	96%	100%
10. Castle Point	415	340	75%	100%
11. Wellingborough	337	304	90%	100%
12. Ebbsfleet*	24	23	96%	100%
13. Old Oak & Park Royal*	8	7	88%	100%
14. Maidstone	1,128	903	80%	99%
15. Mid Sussex	1,015	946	93%	99%
16. Coventry	942	853	91%	99%
17. Brentwood	728	542	74%	99%
18. North Tyneside	609	567	93%	99%
19. South Derbyshire	489	456	93%	99%
20. Broxtowe	443	416	94%	99%
21. Newcastle-under-Lyme	415	396	95%	99%
22. Knowsley	297	278	94%	99%
23. Copeland	281	279	99%	99%
24. Tamworth	229	209	91%	99%

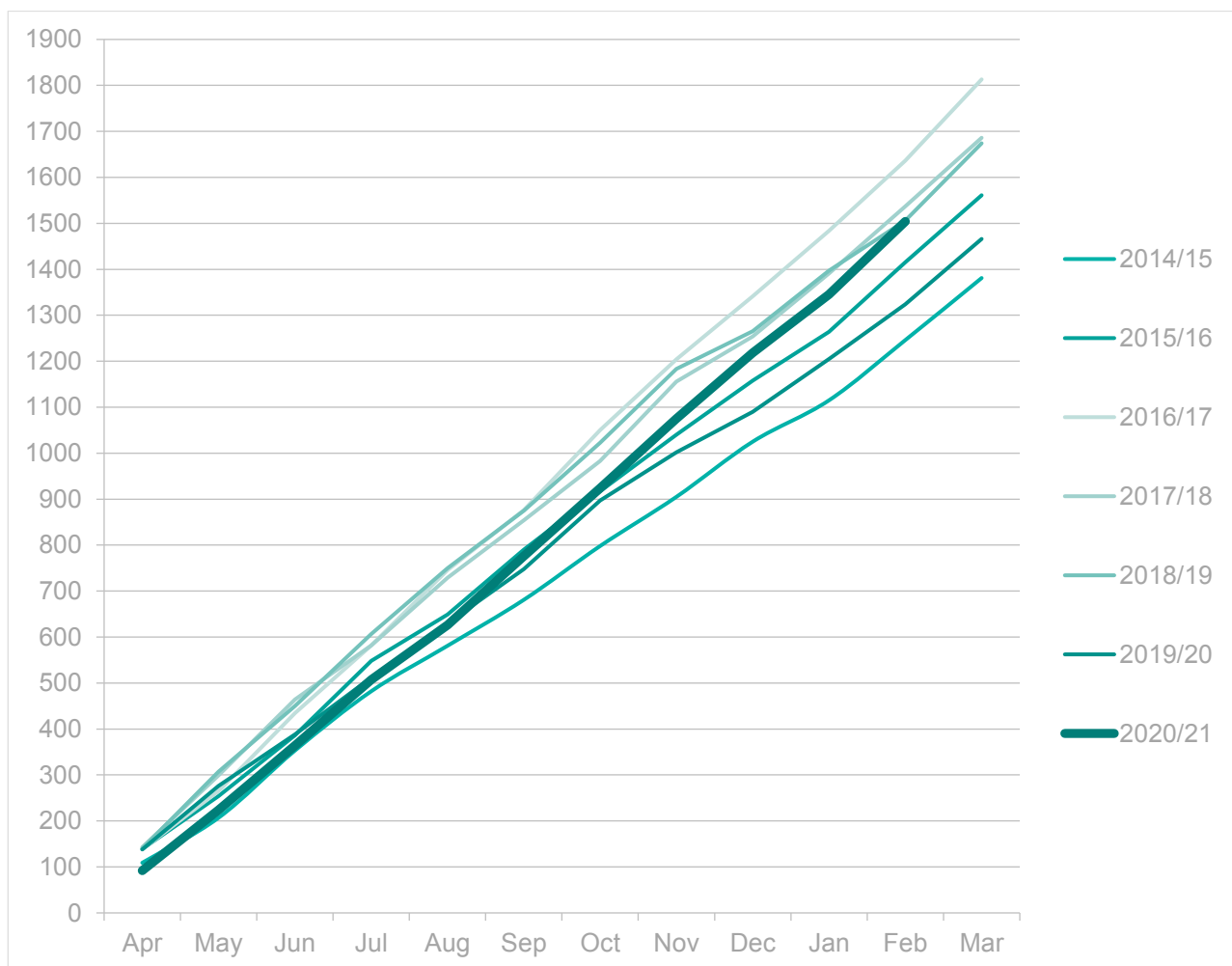
\* Development Corporation



## Appendix C: Valid Planning Applications

The Council monitors all application types and benchmarks against experience. Figure 2 below shows the cumulative number of valid planning applications over the course of the year, between 2014/15 and 2020/21 (up to February 2021)<sup>5</sup>. Compared with previous years, 2020/21 looks to be slightly above the average experience.

**Figure 2: Brentwood Borough Council all valid planning applications (2014 – 2021)**



<sup>5</sup> Valid application types following PS1/2 requirements (S191/2, Prior and BBC, including COND, CROSS, OBS, NMA and MOD106, but not EIASO, TPO/CAT/THRN)

## Appendix D: Application Type Performance

Table 3 below separates planning applications from those shown in Appendix C, according to those deemed to be minor or major applications. It shows good performance for determining applications in time and provides an indication of the proportion of major applications received.

**Table 3: Brentwood Borough Council Minor and Major applications (2019 – 2021)**

	2019/20		2020/21*	
	Number of applications	% determined in time	Number of applications	% determined in time
Minor applications				
Number received	228	98.2%	214	96.3%
Number determined in time	224		206	
Major applications				
Number received	18	94.4%	12	100%
Number determined in time	17		12	

\* 2020/21 figures are taken from mid-way through March 2021. Therefore, these figures are not final although unlikely to change significantly given the short time remaining until financial year end

## Appendix E: Evidence Base List

Reference	Document Title
F5B	Dunton Hills Garden Village Topic Paper (August 2020)
F68	Brentwood 2025 “Where Everyone Matters” (Brentwood Borough Council Corporate Strategy, 2020 – 2025) (January 2020)
F81	Housing Trajectory Update (March 2021)