LABC Consultative Peer Review

BC Solutions

October 2022

A. Executive Summary

A.1   Report overview

LABC were invited by BC Solutions (BCS) - (which is a two-way shared service between West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council) to undertake this review, as part of its scoping for the future direction of the building control service.

BCS was established in April 2015, as a two-way shared service with the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (RBWM) and in July 2016 West Berkshire District Council (WBDC) joined the arrangement, under a new agreement which expired in June 2021. In September 2019 the RBWM announced its intention to leave the shared service on the expiry of the agreement, and it was not possible to obtain formal approval to extend the agreement with WBDC, which has meant BCS has been operating across WBDC on a goodwill basis since June 2021. Having no formal arrangement in place is considered to have had a destabilising effect and impacted on the ability of the Service Manager to manage and market the building control service, this is commented on within this report and accounts for some of the recommendations made.

The review will also explore the possibility of creating a three-way shared service, following an approach made by Reading Borough Council.

The review will be split into two key areas:

1. A service review of the BCS service, which will cover:

- Views of staff members (confidential staff survey)
- View of senior management and building control staff (stakeholder interviews)
- Staffing structure – competencies, resilience and succession planning
- Service compliance in terms of regulations, processes and standards
- Fees and charges – including compliance with statutory requirements
- Market share
- IT systems
- Recommendations

Information gathering was undertaken by a mixture of confidential staff surveys, stakeholder interviews, 'secret shopper' exercises, accessing business and marketing databases, instructing a subscriber report and analysis of published data on the West Berkshire and Wokingham area.

A separate report will be issued in relation to the second part of the review

2. A Business Change Case review, considering:

- Financial and operational viability of a three-way service with Reading Borough Council
- Future operating models, including the continuation of the current shared service model under the Local Government Act 1972 or other models that may be appropriate and associated governance structure
- Branding and positioning
- Outline business case for change

The key findings are as follows:

- BCS is delivering a good service for Wokingham and West Berkshire however there appears to be concern over its governance and identity as a local authority service, work needs to be done to ensure all parties are satisfied their councils objectives are achieved.
- BCS is performing well compared to other building control services, although the strain currently being felt by the team may adversely impact on this – the Service Manager is acutely aware of this and is continually reviewing the service and making changes where necessary, however recruitment and retention will remain a challenge.
- The proportion of work undertaken by BCS across Wokingham and West Berkshire appears to be on a steady decline, the introduction of the new Business & Marketing Manager post should enable focus on promotion and engagement with existing and prospective clients, which in turn should improve market share.
- BCS is supporting a programme of learning and development which should ensure the necessary provisions are in place to fulfil its statutory obligations under the proposed Building Safety Act to the new building control regime, including the registration of all building control staff, due to come into effect in 2023.
- Financial management of Building Control does not appear to be fully in accordance with all the provisions of the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 and recommendations have been made to develop better working relationships with BCS and the Finance team.
- A Processes and Controls Audit was undertaken on the 13th October 2022, while some minor opportunities for improvement were raised, it was clear processes and practices are generally very good.

Copies of the service review presentation slides used to give a brief overview of the findings at the virtual meeting on the 2nd February 2023 are included in Appendix 5.

B. The Brief

B.1   LABC was commissioned by BC Solutions (BCS) to undertake a review of their Building Control Service and provide further commentary on the business change case for a potential three-way shared service with Reading Borough Council.

The review will focus on two key themes:

1. A consultative peer review of the BCS service, covering:

- Views of staff members (confidential staff survey)
- Views of senior management and building control staff (stakeholder interviews)
- Staffing structure – competencies, resilience and succession planning
- Service compliance in terms of regulations, processes and standards
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- IT systems
- Recommendations

Information gathering was undertaken by a mixture of confidential staff surveys, stakeholder interviews, 'secret shopper' exercises, accessing business and marketing databases, instructing a subscriber report and analysis of published data on West Berkshire and Wokingham.

2. A Business Change Case review*, considering:

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- Branding and positioning
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*note, this will be dealt within in a separate report

The finding of the review will be presented by LABC to representatives of West Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading council's.

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C. Background on LABC

C.1   Member organisation

LABC is the member organisation representing all local authority building control departments in England and Wales with around 3,500 professional surveyors and technical support staff.

LABC members nationwide deal with around 67% of all building control applications across all sectors of the built environment: domestic extensions, conversions and improvements; new homes and apartments; commercial new-build and conversions (offices, retail, hospitality, industrial and logistics); education; healthcare; care homes; leisure and entertainment; stadiums.

LABC builds awareness of local authority building control amongst the public, developers, designers, and contractors. It also works with government, trade organisations, manufacturers, distributors, research establishments and professional institutions to support competence, standards and safety in building.

C.2   LABC's key functions for member local authorities are:

- Government policy working with ministry committees; liaison with the Government Departments, the LGA, Fire & Rescue Services, HSE, Trading Standards and Public Protection and OPSS.
- National standards, national ISO, national performance measures, competencies, and validation programmes
- Learning, qualifications, training programmes, apprenticeships, CPD and specialist knowledge – in recent years LABC has invested well over £2 million pounds to improve standards and learning.
- Successfully obtained grant funding to support training, development and recruitment to the profession.
- Member technical conferences and events
- Research into building control, compliance, and enforcement
- Technical liaison with industry, Competent Persons Schemes, BSI, testing, and certification, etc.
- Technical guidance and publications
- LABC schemes: Partner Authority Scheme & Registered Construction Details
- Management and legal opinions for members
- Crisis management support
- Change and transformation in local government
- National business relationships, brand awareness, portals, social media, and digital outreach
- Local business relationships and roadshows
- Building Excellence Awards
- Facilitating local authority sharing of structural calculation checks and plan appraisals.

D. LABC Consultants

D.1   Richard Scott – LABC Head of Member Support

Richard Scott contributed to this review by providing a co-ordinated perspective on all facets of service delivery, aiding all aspects of the review, and leading on the preparation of the final report for submission.

Richard is a successful former local authority manager, responsible for Building Control, Local Land Charges and GIS, developing additional income streams and cost saving initiatives.

Richard has over 30 years' experience in the construction industry. Originally from a construction contracting background, Richard has worked also in a private surveying practice, although most of his career has been spent in local authority building control in the East Midlands, where he was responsible for the oversight of many major schemes and co-ordinating council's response to major incidents. An advocate of continuous improvement and delivery of excellent service user provision, Richard is now responsible for providing practical, pragmatic support to local authority building control services considering change and transformation, delivering face-to-face management training and creating and delivering accredited on-line training for technical support. Richard is also developing a CIOB accredited Level 6 Certificate in Building Control Management, which will commence in March 2023. This together with other accredited learning has resulted in LABC being presented with the "Silver Award" for People Development Programme (Public Sector) at the prestigious Learning Awards 2020.

In a wider capacity, Richard is a former LABC President and board member, with a focus on human resources.

D.2   Paul Cooper – Interim Head of Building Control - Wyre District Council and Business Development Manager at Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

Paul contributed to this review as the peer consultant to undertake the qualitative strategic assessment of the service, including the standing and status of Building Control resilience, resourcing, finances, culture and morale. For many years Paul was the Building Control Manager at Doncaster Council and was considered a successful manager, an advocate of modernisation and innovation with in-depth specialist skills in finance, quality, and customer service. Paul now holds the position of Business Development Manager at Doncaster on a part-time basis and the rest of his working time is spent in the role of Interim Manager at Wyre District Council.

As Chair of the Doncaster's Safety Advisory Group Paul advises the Council on safety at a number of sports venues including the Keep Moat Stadium (Football), Castle Park (Rugby) and the home of the oldest classic horse race, the St. Léger festival, at Doncaster racecourse.

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Within the Building Control team, a core of highly skilled staff has successfully competed with private sector competition to secure work on many prestigious projects including the National HS2 rail college.

Paul has successfully worked with LABC, as a consultant, on numerous service reviews and business case development projects, acting as a critical friend and a 'sense checker', as a serving building control manager.

D.3   Tariq Abdoh – LABC Standards Manager

Tariq contributed to this review by assessing operational processes and practices. Tariq is an experienced quality management professional, having worked in this specialist area for more than 14 years, working with organisations to implement British and International Standards and devising the Certification Body's approach to auditing and certifying the organisation. Over the years Tariq has gained Lead Auditor status for core International Standards, Including ISO 9001 (Quality Management).

Prior to joining LABC Tariq was a Customer Support Manager responsible for developing large contracts through innovative solutions whilst ensuring adherence to ISO 17021 (the Accreditation Standard) and the key point of technical support for commercial employers, key accounts and independent management system consultants.

Tariq joined the LABC team in December 2017 and, over a period of 2 years he was instrumental in the roll out and implementation of the LABC (ISO 9001:2015) quality management system in over 250 Local Authority Building Control teams. The QMS is designed to achieve consistency of approach in public service building control by establishing procedural best practice and to instil a culture of and commitment to continual improvement. This roll out of the QMS is continuing with the intention to establish quality management and achieve 3rd party certification for all building control teams in England and Wales.

The BSCF, which is a community interest company established by, but outside the compass of LABC, provides a range of services to the construction industry. It is currently working towards accreditation under the UKAS ISO/IEC 17024 (conformity assessment for bodies operating the certification of persons) for which Tariq is taking a lead role in its development.

D.4   LABC Specialists

Together LABC's team provides extensive management awareness, full legal and technical understanding, in-depth knowledge of quality management systems, a perspective on the wider corporate pressures on budgets, services, and resources in local government as well as wide-ranging experience in the promotion of local authority building control services.

External management consultants do not have these insights nor access to the LABC network's experience across all local authorities in England and Wales.

E. Methodology

E.1   Methodology

This review was undertaken remotely. To gain an understanding of senior management and the status of BCS within West Berkshire and Wokingham Council's and where it 'fits' in terms of development and public protection, Richard Scott and Paul Cooper undertook virtual meetings with key stakeholders during September 2022. Roger Paine (Head of Service – BCS) supported the information gathering process, ensuring all relevant documents and information required to inform the review was provided. Tariq Abdoh (LABC Standards Manager) undertook the audit (virtually) on the Building Control team's processes and procedures, reviewing them against the LABC Quality Management System on 13th October 2022. In addition, 'secret' shopping exercises were commissioned, LABC and business databases accessed and published data on the West Berkshire and Wokingham areas were analysed.

E.2   Task Allocation

BC Solutions - Evaluation Project Plan	
Task and Method	**Lead**
• Confidential staff survey • Financial analysis	Richard Scott
• Interviews with Key Stakeholders (Senior Management/Members/Staff)	Richard Scott & Paul Cooper

• Remote audit covering: -
  - Processes, procedures, systems, and records
  - Assessment of essential practices against LABC Quality Management
    System and principles.
	Tariq Abdoh

• Secret shopper exercises	Anna Thompson
• Business planning data, metrics and published data analysis.	Dan Falchikov
• Web site assessment	Elise Bunyatova
• Key Findings and Recommendations	Richard Scott & Paul Cooper

F. LABC Quality Management System

F.1   The LABC QMS has been written specifically for public service building control. The processes are general and cover the things that all building control teams do when they are processing an application, checking a plan, consulting with the Fire Service or other Statutory Undertakers.

ISO 9001:2015 is simply about consistency, best practice, improvement, understanding stakeholders and understanding risks to service delivery – checking that we are doing what we say we are going to do and putting it right when we do not.

The point of LABC's QMS is that it distils the tasks and processes and has produced the 'essentials' procedures mapping of those activities that must be undertaken by a 'good' building control team. These should be identifiable in any team or within any QMS or ISO used within any team. The definition of 'essential' has been made by the LABC National Standards Committee made up of local authority experts from every region of England and Wales. Any additional activities that are specific to one individual authority and/or very detailed 'old-style' ISO process definitions are not in the scope of the National Standards and ISO.

Competencies are covered in the LABC National Quality Management System. Building control surveyors in local authorities are classed across six levels from technical support or trainee building control surveyor:

- **Level 3**   Technical support or trainee building control surveyor
- **Level 4**   Surveyor working with supervision on domestic projects
- **Level 4a**   Surveyor with proven capability to work without supervision on domestic projects
- **Level 5**   Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on non-domestic projects and with supervision on non-domestic low risk buildings
- **Level 5a**   Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on non-domestic low risk buildings
- **Level 6**   Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on higher risk/complex buildings
- **Level 6a**   Surveyor with specialist skills

Competencies are captured and outlined in the LABC Competency Matrix – a national matrix capturing qualifications, knowledge, additional specialisms, CPD and supervised experience for individuals. This provides a local authority competency profile which is used for planning learning and refresher training.

At present the BSI are developing an overarching framework for building safety competence of individuals (BSI Flex 8670) – LABC are working to embed the specification into its Learning and Management System.

F.2 The Quality Management System is made up of several parts:

- **The Quality Policy** – a statement of LABC's commitment to quality service, best practice, continual improvement and customer service.
- **The LABC Quality Manual** – how the whole Quality System works written in accordance with ISO 9001:2015. This describes LABC, public service Building Control, the commercial market, our influencers, the beneficiaries of our service and how the service will be measured, improved and where responsibilities lie.
- **The LABC Procedures Manual** – is a series of process maps for each of the public service building control functions from administering Building Notices and Initial Notices to dealing with Demolition Notices and Dangerous structures.
- **The Detailed Competency Matrix** – a comprehensive model of building control skills and competencies that allows managers to identify the knowledge, capabilities and skills of surveyors against the different levels of work type from domestic extensions and alterations to higher risk buildings. This is mapped against LABC's Learning Management System and Qualifications (Certificate, Diploma, Foundation Degree and Degree) so that surveyors can clearly identify future learning and development.
- **The LABC Code of Conduct and Professional Ethics** – the code by which all building control teams and individuals within them should work.
- ISO 17024 Competency Validation Assessments – UKAS accredited validation of the competence of persons. The BSCF currently offers validation assessments for domestic, general and specialist surveyors, covering all types of building control work.

G. Information Gathering

G.1   West Berkshire and Wokingham – background information
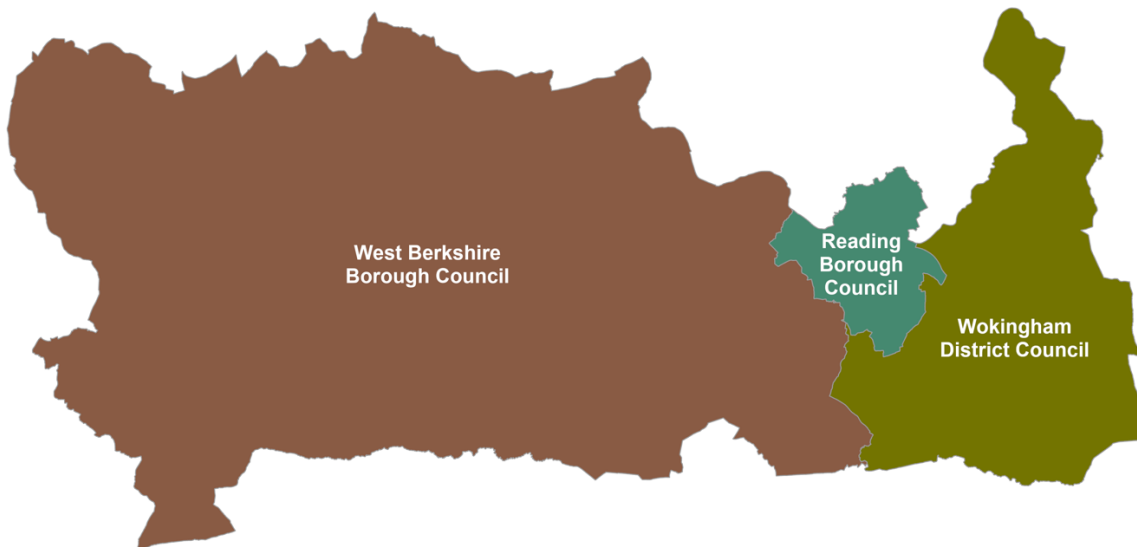
Introduction

West Berkshire District and Wokingham Borough councils are two of six unitary councils in Berkshire, providing the full range of local government services following the abolishment of the county council in 1998. They have a history of cooperation and currently jointly provide a number of services including building control (through a joint Building Control Board) https://www.bcsolutions.org.uk/. Other regulatory services (also with Bracknell Forest) are shared through a 'Public Protection Partnership').

Wokingham formally left this partnership in April 2022 but continues to contract with it for services such as trading standards, air quality, animal welfare and other regulatory services, with development control ASB, food, hygiene and pest enforcement (among others) taken back to its sole management.

West Berkshire and Wokingham (along with Reading Borough) have formed a joint health and wellbeing board to produce a new 10 year health and wellbeing strategy.

Demographic profile – Wokingham

Wokingham is a triangular shaped borough between Reading, Bracknell and Maidenhead. With the major settlements stretching from Twyford (population 7,000) in the north, to the fringes of Reading at Earley (pop 32,000) which includes parts of the University campus and Woodley (35,000), south east to Winnersh (9,000) and the largest town Wokingham (47,000) after which the borough takes its name. It is a relatively densely populated, highly suburban area with pop density of 992 persons per square km (compared to 486 across the south east as a whole). The borough has a total population of 177,500 according to the 2021 census estimates and has seen significant growth of around 15% in the last 10 years. The population is expected to continue rising to 185,500 by 2032 and will on average get older.

Wokingham's population is younger than the national average with more under 15s (21.3% in Wokingham compared to 19.2% in England as a whole). It also has fewer over 64s (17.6% v 18.5%), but this will grow to 23.8% by 2043 – slightly higher than the England average, but significantly lower than the south east by then. It is also whiter, with fewer ethnic minorities than the English average, although with a significant Asian/British Asian minority (7.4% of the population as compared to 7.8% in England as a whole).

Wokingham is one of the least deprived areas of the country with not a single output area in the three most deprived deciles and 84% of the output areas in the two least deprived deciles. In only one area – barriers to housing - does Wokingham have any areas in the most deprived deciles – most likely due to the high levels of its property prices relative to income (see below).

Wokingham is conveniently situated for both London and Reading with commuting in both directions and therefore is a high demand area for housing, commercial, educational and other facilities.
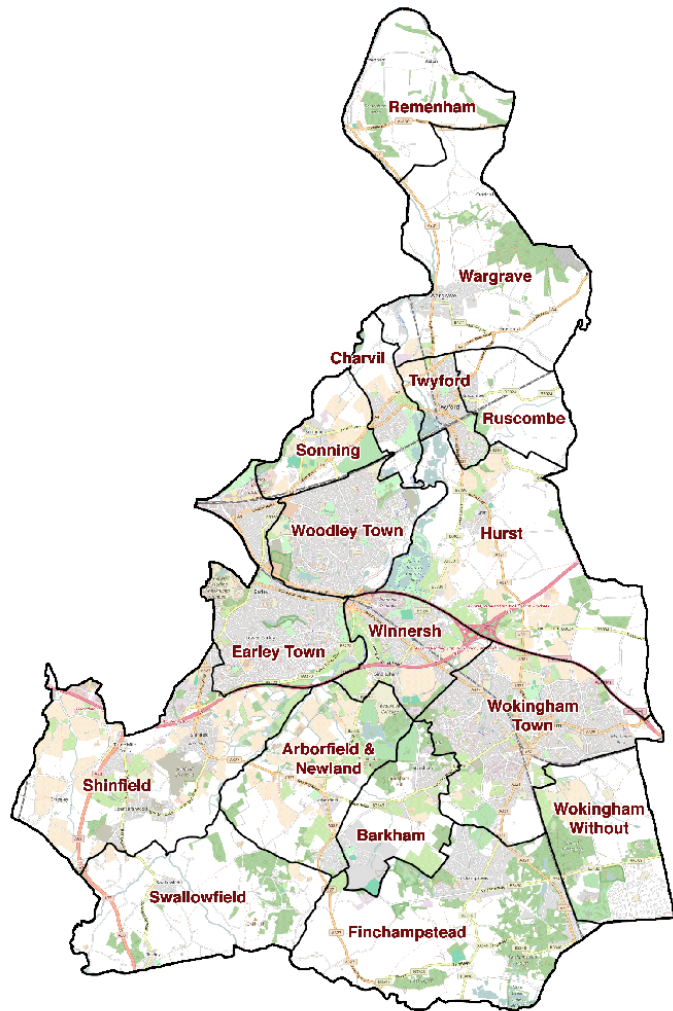
Housing profile

The borough has more than 71,500 homes with almost 80% being owned outright or with a mortgage. Wokingham probably has more detached housing than any other authority in the country with 36% of all properties being detached – more than twice the English average of 16%. It has very low levels of renting, low levels of homelessness and higher than average household size. The median property price (April 21-March 22) was £450,000 almost double that of the average for England (£270,000).

Over the last four years the borough has delivered more than 1,000 units of housing each year (5,400 new dwellings since 2017/18). See major developments below.

Wokingham's local plan

Wokingham Borough's core strategy was adopted in 2010 (covering the period up to 2026) and is currently being updated through the Local Plan Update (LPU) process. A change in political administration in 2021 has delayed the planned consultation on it this year, but the LPU is expected in due course.

The strategy envisages focusing development in *'those towns and villages that have or will have a significant range of facilities and services'* and highlights '*Arborfield Garrison, Earley, Green Park, Shinfield, Spencers Wood, Three Mile Cross, Twyford, Winnersh, Wokingham and Woodley'* as suitable for development.

Four major development projects were identified and are in various stages of development.

These are:
- Arborfield Garrison major development – including new homes, new schools, local shopping facilities, open spaces and roads
- Shinfield Parish major development – including new homes, new schools, local shopping facilities, open spaces and roads including the University of Reading's new science park with 55,000m2 of employment space
- North Wokingham major development – including new homes, a new primary school, local shopping facilities in a new neighbourhood centre, open spaces and roads
- South Wokingham major development – including new homes, new schools, local shopping and community facilities, new open spaces and roads.

However, as the core strategy is now significantly dated it doesn't appear to make reference to Crossrail (Elizabeth Line) which now serves the borough at Twyford on the way to Crossrail's western terminus at Reading. High capacity trains to destinations across London, Kent and Essex serve the station reaching central London in less than 50 minutes. This, along with existing fast trains serving Paddington in less than half an hour, are likely to see significant development demand in and around the station. Reading Borough has developed a tall buildings strategy and has seen a number of residential and mixed use tall buildings proposed and approved – particularly around the railway station.

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Issues for building control

Wokingham is an area of significant development with a strong policy direction and planning framework (but dated). Recent development pressure coming from the opening of Crossrail.

Need to identify BC's role in major developments outlined in the core strategy

With Crossrail now serving Twyford development pressures are likely to see demands for tall buildings in and around the station (like in Reading)

Demographic profile – West Berkshire

West Berkshire is a large and heavily rural district of more than 700km². It stretches from the outskirts of Reading to Hungerford and the border with Wiltshire. London is more than three times as far from Hungerford than Swindon (almost 70 miles v 20). The Council analysis shows 90% of the district is rural with 74% of the area within the North Wessex Downs AONB. The majority of the population live in either the Kennet Valley or in the east of the District along the border with Reading. The major population centres are Newbury/Thatcham (70,000 population), Hungerford (6,000), Theale (3,000) and suburban Reading including Pangbourne, Tilehurst and Calcot (31,000).
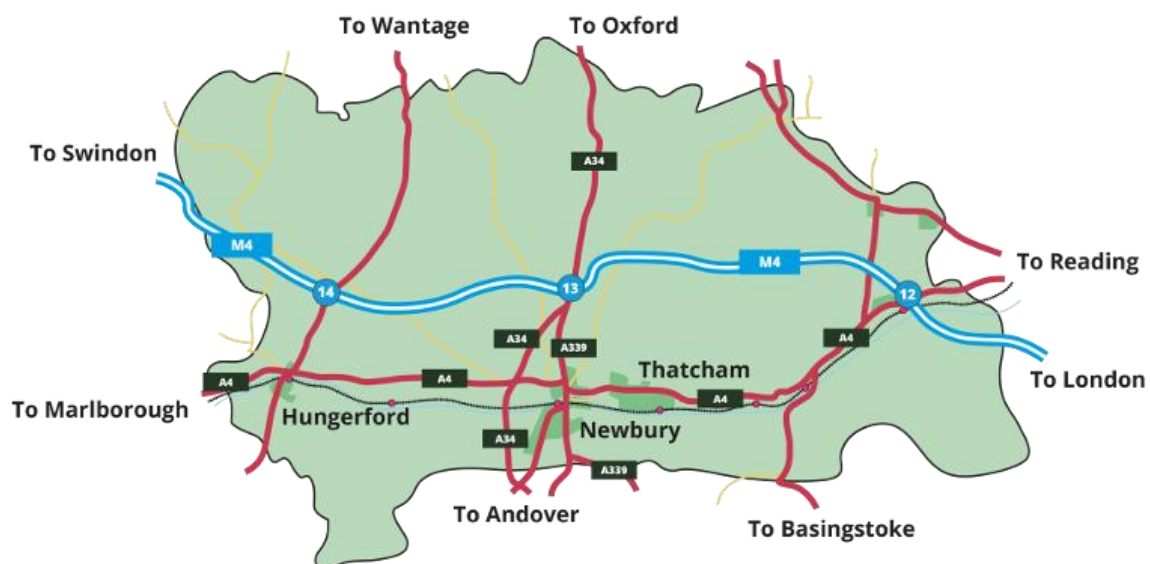
The 2021 Census estimates the district's population as 161,400 with a population density of just 229 persons per km² – less than half the average for south east England (486).

West Berkshire's population is slightly older than the English average with 19.6% of the population over 64 (v 18.4% for England as a whole) and this proportion is expected to grow to over 28% by 2043 (significantly higher than the projected England average of 22.2%).

West Berkshire's population has grown from 153,800 in 2011 to 161,400 in 2021 (c5% growth – less than Wokingham) and is projected to remain flat over the next 10 years

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In terms of ethnicity West Berkshire is even more white than Wokingham with just 5.2% of the population BME.

West Berkshire is one of the least deprived areas in the country (although not as much as Wokingham) with just two output areas in the three most deprived deciles. It also shows some levels of deprivation in education with 11 output areas in the three most deprived deciles nationwide. However, in housing and environment, West Berkshire shows significant levels of deprivation: here deprivation is measured by both 'geographical barriers' (relating to the physical proximity of local services) and 'wider barriers' (including issues relating to access to housing such as affordability). A total of 30 output areas are in the three most deprived deciles reflecting the district's rurality and (likely) relatively high housing prices – house prices in West Berkshire are 1/3 higher than the England mean (at £365,000 Apr 21-Mar22). It is also likely the quality of some of the district's housing stock is of poor quality as the district also reports 21 output areas in the three most deprived deciles for 'living environment deprivation' – this is a measure of both the 'indoor' quality of housing and 'outdoor' environment such as air quality.

Housing profile

There are 69,500 homes in the district with fewer flats (16% compared to 23% in the SE as a whole) and terraced homes (19% v 24%) and more semi-detached (27% v 21%) and detached (26% v 20%). Tenure is very similar to the SE of England as a whole with slightly more private ownership through a mortgage and slightly less private renting. Social home tenure is almost exactly on the average for SE England (13.8%:13.7%) with the major caveat that West Berkshire council has almost no council tenanted properties following one of the earliest housing stock transfers (in 1989) to a social landlord – West Berkshire HA now Sovereign Housing.

Since 2017/18 the council has overseen the delivery of just over 2,000 new housing units.

Local Plan

West Berkshire local plan review was launched in 2020 (an emerging draft was published in December 2020) with the aim of extending its existing strategic plan to 2037. It envisages between 8,840 and 9,775 additional homes to be built in this period (520-575 per year). As of March 2020 sites for an additional 4,653 homes had been identified with planning permission and a further 3,461 without it. This additional unconsented figure includes 1,000 homes at Sandleford Park in Newbury half of which are assumed to extend beyond the 2037 period.

The council envisages the vast majority of this development to take place away from the AONB and in the existing developed communities of the Kennet valley and western suburbs of Reading.

In addition, West Berkshire's planning has to accommodate two Atomic Weapons Establishment facilities at Aldermaston and Burghfield both of which require buffer zones around the facility. The plan further states: *"In the interests of public safety, residential development in the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone (DEPZ) of AWE Aldermaston and AWE Burghfield is likely to be refused planning permission by the Council, especially when the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) has advised against that development."*

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Flood risk is also a major issue for development with the emerging local plan stating, *"The risk of flooding within West Berkshire is widespread, arising not only from rivers, but also from surface water and groundwater flooding."* The emerging plan states the council will take a sequential approach and only accept plans for development in areas with flood risk if *"if it is demonstrated that it is appropriate at that location, and there are no suitable and available sites at a lower flood risk"*. In addition mitigation measures will need to be set out as part of any plans.

Issues for building control

West Berkshire is a highly rural area with development very much limited to ribbons of urban development – likely to have numbers of domestic/agricultural conversions etc as the core business of Building Control.

It has not delivered a huge number of new housing because of constraints – AONB, AWE and more geographical remoteness from London (possibly due to demand). But clearly there is an issue of relatively high house prices and relatively low wages leading to housing unaffordability and pressure will be on to deliver more in future.

Other than at the east of the district (Reading suburbs) it doesn't share a lot in common with Wokingham

Newbury and Lambourn are two of the biggest centres for the horseracing industry – this may involve work on public events and safety – but there may also be other associated opportunities.

Newbury is the site of Vodaphone's HQ – there are other large companies, such as AWE and Microfocus based in and around the borough for which there is a potential for partnering.

The service has been adversely impacted by the loss of two senior surveyors, both of whom left to work for a locally based approved inspector, taking valuable custom with them which has in turn had a significant impact on market share. It is understood that a number of national approved inspectors, as well as smaller local firms have their regional offices/headquarters based within or adjacent to the area BCS service.

G.2   Building Standards

Building Control is often considered as a small 'technical' service, the shared service arrangements between West Berkshire and Wokingham have enabled BCS to create a reasonable staffing structure, however vacancies exist on the establishment for which BCS, similar to other building control services, find recruitment difficult.

Irrespective of section size, BCS should more accurately be regarded as the team that ensures what is built in the borough and district areas meets the appropriate standards for individuals, communities and the councils own strategic goals, bearing in mind the market share the service current attains.

Building Control is the only local government regulatory function in competition. However, the private sector alternative does not follow the same processes as public service building control: they are profit making private companies without any formal enforcement powers. Across both council areas, BCS currently deals with around 54% of the overall number of building control applications within the borough, this is below the national average level for authorities in England & Wales, which is around 67%. The average across the Central region when LABC last undertook a survey (2020) was 56%.

A good Building Control team makes a difference to the quality of the built environment, making sure minimum standards are met. Enforcement is not solely made through prosecutions and the powers that can be used to have work put right - building control teams carry out site inspections and application assessments as 'soft' enforcement which prevent compliance issues occurring and contribute significant benefits in respect of reducing latent defects.

In relation to 'hard' enforcement, BCS have adopted LABC's formal enforcement policy document, this will provide staff with guidance on how enforcement should be managed. It is suggested this be available on the BCS website, for customer reference. In recent years there has been no formal enforcement action under Section 35 or 36 of the Building Act 1984 in relation to penalties for contravening building regulations and the removal or alteration of offending work. On average BCS receive in the region of 110 regularisation applications (for unauthorised works) each year, which is reasonably high. It is presumed these were dealt with through necessary remedial works to ensure compliance with the building regulations and not action through the Courts.

G.3   Other Strategic Contributions by Building Control

Local authorities have a duty to bring the Building Act 1984 into effect and enforce the building regulations in their area. They are obliged to undertake a range of functions aimed at securing the health, safety, welfare and convenience of people in and about buildings. But the work is not limited to chargeable functions (these are described in Section H11) - a duty exists to deal with other functions relating to public safety, such as dealing with demolition works, for which BCS receive around 60 demolition notices per year and processing applications and work which the local authority is not able to levy a charge for (statutory non-chargeable work), such as Disabled Facilities Grants, for which BCS receive around 21 submissions, as well as administering around 1700 Approved Inspector notices each year.

Another key statutory function is effectively and safely dealing with dangerous structures. Building Control undertakes a key role, not only in advising the Emergency Services on matters of structural stability and their safety in relation to entering premises but also in specifying remedial works and temporary works to makes structures safe.

Dangerous structures occur for many reasons: explosions, fire, collisions, adverse weather conditions, as well as partial collapse or unsafe working practices. These can occur night or day and other emergency services rely on Building Control to assess structural stability and other essential factors, during search, rescue and recovery phases of an incident. A timely, professional, and proportionate response is vital and can protect the borough in cases where claims and challenges are made through the courts by property owners and people who may have been impacted.

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Historically, Wokingham operated an out-of-hours dangerous structure rota, unlike the West Berkshire and former shared service partner – Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM). In 2021 this service provision was removed since it was no longer possible to guarantee contractor support and while existing shared service partners wanted to maintain/establish a functional dangerous structure out of hours call-out service, it was agreed each would have to be financed by the individual authority and to date this has not been possible to progress this to completion.

At present, dangerous structure cover is only provided during normal office hours and where attendance at a dangerous structure incident involves part out of hours working, this is a managed in accordance with the Wokingham Borough Council policy on overtime.

The registration of scaffolding and hoarding licences is carried out by BCS on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council (WBC), the inspection and enforcement element is undertaken by the highways team.

In July 2019, council members at Wokingham and West Berkshire unanimously declared a climate emergency, each separately setting out a commitment to become carbon neutral by 2030.

Both councils have published plans outlining the things they intend to do, to work towards being carbon neutral, these plans include things such as:

- Retrofitting domestic and commercial properties and schools
- Improving energy performance of housing stock
- Increasing the deployment of renewable energy across the Council's estate.

Both have made good progress, for example Wokingham Borough Council have so far facilitated over 1500 households to receive assistance from the 'help to heat' scheme, which includes loft and/or cavity wall insulation works.

The skills and knowledge of building control surveyors are perfectly aligned to support these plans and the initiatives being delivered however, to do this, consideration must be given to surveyor resources. Competency needs to be matched to work and there needs to be sufficient resources to ensure resilience so that core functions such as public safety, protection and enforcement are not compromised.

H. Key Stakeholder Feedback

H.1   Interviews and/or questionnaires were used with the following participants:

Portfolio Holder – Planning and Building Control at Wokingham BC	Lindsay Ferris
Interim Assistant Director, Delivery & Infrastructure at Wokingham BC	Trevor Saunders
Public Protection Manager at West Berkshire BC	Sean Murphy
Head of Development Management at Wokingham BC	Marcia Head
Head of Development Management at West Berkshire DC	Bob Dray
Head of Service at BC Solutions	Roger Paine
Financial Business Partners at Wokingham BC	Asher Stanford and Richard White
Building Control Surveying Team at BC Solutions	Sara Hiscox, Gareth Sexton, Charles Bradshaw, Warren Woodhams, Dan Cheeseman, Hannah Campbell, Lokendra Chemjong, Lorraine Kenny, Rohan Kumar, Sam Whitlock
Building Control Technical Support at BC Solutions	Lisa Allder, Natasha Mace, Laura Palmer & Rebecca Allder

H.2   Perception and Understanding of the Team across the Councils

LABC, as part of the review, were fortunate enough to hold stakeholder interviews with the building control team and those providing the administrative function. In addition to this, interviews were held with key elected members and senior staff across both authorities.

Stakeholder interviews are considered important to gauge the level of understanding of the service and its perceived 'standing' within the Council, among other things. The commentary below outlines the key points from these interviews.

Building Control services within local authorities do not typically have a high profile, and this lack of profile and standing can be exacerbated for shared services, particularly in the case of the non-host authorities.

The Interim AD at Wokingham believes BCS to be relatively 'invisible' within the council and concedes that there are currently few opportunities to raise the profile of the service.

The previous lack of building control attendance at management 'catch up' meetings may well have contributed to this, and it is encouraging to note the restructure which came into effect from March 2022, creating an integrated planning service within the Place & Growth Directorate in WBC. The Service Manager is now involved in these meetings which will enable him to be far more aware of what opportunities are likely to present themselves, although it is appreciated not everything discussed will be relevant to building control.

From the perspective of the Public Protection Manager at West Berkshire, it appears building control is only 'on the radar' when complaints are received. There is a real sense that the lack of physical presence within West Berkshire's council office has adversely impacted on the standing of the service, leaving some to feel as though they '*have become an authority without an internal building control service*' -, this should be considered concerning, in terms of the long-term future of the shared service.

It is understood pre-COVID, a team was located in WBDC offices, however a 'single team' approach was agreed pre-COVID as the best approach, meaning all staff were based at WBC offices. Since COVID remote working has been established across both councils, an unintended consequence may be considered a diminution of relationships with other team, in particular.

The Public Protection Manager also expressed concerns about the 'identity' of the shared service – believing more focus should be given to the local authority (public service) aspect. The issue of identity was also raised during the stakeholder interviews where a surveyor stated they had received numerous queries from clients who thought BCS were approved inspectors – there appears to be some misunderstanding about the nature of BCS, despite West Berkshire and Wokingham council's being featured on the BCS website. It may be a re-branding exercise is required, which could include reviewing the partnership name.

Regarding the website, the Head of Development Management at Wokingham commented on the fact that BCS has a stand-alone website (not part of the council(s)), this is another area where a lack of 'identity' may be an issue. It is noted that consideration was given to upgrading WBC's website, however a Building Control Board decision was taken to 'unify' the service with a separately hosted website.

It was encouraging to note the Portfolio for Planning and Building Control, who has been in post at Wokingham since the end of May 2022, considers building control to be a well-respected service compared with some other services within the council and he believes they are not a great drain on council resources.

In terms of elected members, it appears there is very limited exposure to building control. It is understood that the Building Control function is mentioned in member inductions, however this appears only to be a cursory note with no details of the specific functions undertaken and the competitive environment in which it operates. This is considered a missed opportunity to raise the profile of the service. It seems members are only concerned with the service when their constituents raise issues.

LABC has a formal presentation available that can either be delivered face-to-face with elected members and senior managers or as a recording. We recommend either is used every time there is a change of elected members.

The presentation deals with building regulations and compliance in fee-earning building control work.

The three key topics are:

•   Building Control's role
•   Operational context
•   Challenges facing the service

Little, if any, time or focus is given in terms of clear professional engagement and business development, to raise the profile of Building Control and make members and employees aware of its duties and functions. It is understood that the LABC member presentation has been offered to both authority's but has not been taken up.

It is clear the Interim AD appreciates the importance of the service and is doing what he can to 'fight the corner' for BCS. He supports the actions of the Service Manager whose skills he values. The Interim AD believes BCS could be more proactive, in terms of winning work and believes the Service Manager, as a seasoned professional, could be more effective in terms of general communications and taking the service forward, although he concedes this view needs to be considered in context with the pressures all council services have been under in recent times.

The Building Control Board met three times a year and management briefings were held quarterly, up until the expiry of the formal agreement in 2021, since then a lack of interest and attendance has seen these cease. The turnover of Assistant Directors at WBC over the past couple of years has not helped the situation, both could be seen as contributing factors for the perceived lack of 'identity' for the service.

Considering the responses 'as a whole' it is clear Building Control has relatively little 'standing' within the Council. It is not unusual for Building Control to have a lower political profile than other sections, especially Planning, since Building Control does not refer to a committee for decision making, meaning regular member involvement and engagement does not take place.

Recommendations

1. *Discussions to take place with Wokingham and West Berkshire to gain a better understanding of how a lack of physical presence impacts on the standing of the service and engagement with other council services.*
2. *Discussions to take place with Wokingham and West Berkshire to determine how best to 'frame' the partnership as a public service, this could be part of a wider 're-branding' exercise including the potential renaming of the service.*
3. *Briefings undertaken, to raise the awareness of the Building Control service to members, staff, and management.*
4. *Building Control Board meetings and management briefings be reinstated as a matter of urgency, to re-build relationships across the shared service.*

H.3   Opportunities through Development Management

Building Control sections within local authorities are in a prime position to engage with prospective clients, providing they are integrated within a "development team" approach.

When asked about the development agenda across Wokingham, the Interim AD informed us that there was plenty of opportunities for building control, with around 800 houses developed per year, around 4000 planning applications and significant town centre development planned. The issue appears to be the lack of integration across planning and building control, which means no one is putting the services of BCS forward.

The Head of Development at Wokingham confirmed there were strategic development locations (SDL's) for 10,000 new homes with around 75% complete and the local plan was being updated with two more SDL's for the next ten years.

The Head of Development Management at West Berkshire also confirmed their local plan revisions were in progress, ready for examination in Spring 2023. Again there appears to be a substantial amount of housing in the pipeline, as well as a sustained high level of applications over the past five years.

There is no evidence to suggest the BCS team have an effective working relationship with Planning, which is disappointing. This appears to have been impacted by the relocation of the service when BCS was established (prior to this planning and building control sat side by side in both authorities) as well as the lack of formal arrangements to support better integration, not only with BCS and Planning but with other relevant sections within both councils.

It is understood that the property team at WBDC have used the services of approved inspectors for their corporate projects for many years, despite approaches being made by the Service Manager on several occasions to facilitate a different approach. Similarly, Wokingham Housing Company continues to use the services of approved inspectors for its housing developments. It is encouraging to note a recent commitment has been given by WBDC to trial a new approach which includes the services of a lead senior building control surveyor within BCS for WBDC projects and perhaps the change in senior management at Wokingham may give their team an opportunity to take a similar approach. The adverse impact, losing council projects to approved inspectors, on the building control team cannot be stressed enough, such an approach is so damaging and approved inspectors will no doubt use this information when pursuing other projects.

Despite the lack of any formal arrangement, it is understood that BCS undertakes the work carried out on behalf of both councils, which should be the case, however clearly more work can be done to secure more non-council work.

Little if any promotional work is undertaken by the BCS team and it is understood little is done in terms of gaining an understanding of what projects are coming through the planning 'pipeline'. This should be considered a missed opportunity and an area where more focus should be given. Exciting developments such as the Shinfield Studios, which is described as 'a new powerhouse of British film, TV production and innovation, is a prime example of the work BCS could possibly be involved with were they more proactive.

If BCS engage with prospective clients at the earliest stages of the development process (e.g., major project team meetings at both councils) to provide timely advice and offer their services, it is likely they would be able to secure some additional future business.

Lack of effective promotion of the service and engagement with clients should be considered a missed opportunity, not only in terms of potential income but also in terms of influence on the built environment. Simply put, the greater the number of schemes dealt with by the BCS team, the greater the influence both councils will have on the quality of the built environment and the health and safety of residents and users of those buildings.

The Service Manager is clearly sensitive to this, and this will no doubt have been one of the factors leading to a change in the establishment to create and appoint to the new post of Business and Marketing Manager.

Recommendations

5. *Consideration be given to identifying the best and most appropriate ways to facilitate better working relationships between BCS, the planning teams at Wokingham and West Berkshire and other relevant council sections. This may include a structured approach to ensure Building Control is actively involved in all relevant pre-application meetings.*
6. *Discussions be held by senior management and elected members with responsibility for building control across both authority's about using BCS for all in-house and council funded schemes.*

H.4   Staffing & Resilience

A lack of resourcing was mentioned during stakeholder interviews and was reinforced in the feedback given as part of the confidential staff survey.

The Building Control establishment currently comprises:

- 1no. FTE - Service Manager
- 1no. FTE - Business & Marketing Manager (newly created post)
- 1no. FTE - Senior Technical Support Officer
- 3no. FTE - Technical Support Officers (one post vacant at present)
- 1no. FTE - Building Control Team Manager
- 1no. FTE - Principal Building Control Surveyor
- 2.66no. FTE - Senior Building Control Surveyors (one post vacant at present)
- 6.8no. FTE - Building Control Surveyors (one post vacant at present)

At present the vacant Building Control Surveyor (BCO) post is being covered by an agency surveyor, provided through the BRG Agency, his role is to cover site inspections within the Wokingham area, it is understood his contract runs until the end of March 2023. Up until around September 2022 the vacant Senior BCO post was being covered by a remote plan checking consultant, however it is understood, because of issues with plan checking target dates, plan checking across the whole service area is now undertaken by the Principal BCO and a BCO.

All other surveyors are undertaking site inspections only on a temporary basis, because of resourcing levels and the current commitment to training. During the stakeholder interviews there appeared to be an appetite for plan checking to be undertaken on an area basis. The benefit of this is that surveyors become more rounded as they undertake both aspects of application work.

The BCS team are a mix of experienced and less experienced staff, which provides a good balance and opportunities for development.

The technical support team consider themselves to be working well, however the surveyors currently feel that they are performing 'not too bad', compared to the KPI's set.

There is a reasonable establishment at BCS, however the issues around recruitment to the vacant posts is no doubt adding additional pressure to the team. This is something the Interim AD is fully aware of and feels the service would face really difficult times should even one member of staff leave.

BCS has a risk register, the three main areas of concern currently are:

- Staff resources
- Low staff morale
- Insufficient budget

All three have a gross rating of 16 on the risk matrix, meaning they are considered an extreme risk, with a high likelihood of occurring and a subsequent high impact.

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Preventative actions are outlined, for all three identified risks, although the new 'net' rating has only been determined for the risks associated with staff resources.

A buddy system was introduced around 10 months ago to help cover inspections, develop consistency of technical interpretation, deal with commitments on training and to maintain consistency of service delivery. While this seems a very sensible approach, some staff feel this is not working as effectively as it could and there doesn't appear to be a back-up plan, should issues arise, particularly around sickness and leave.

The confidential staff survey highlighted the pressure some staff are under, one member of the team stated, "I physically cannot keep up with the workload". This situation not only puts pressure on staff and may create stress, but it also has the potential to impact all the team.

The support team commented that as the 'face' of the operation and first point of contact for clients, they are often put in the situation where they are unable to answer queries because site notes are not up to date. Conversely, the surveyors commented on the fact that previously the support team used to deal with simple queries, however they now seem to pass all calls through. It is understood the support team receive approximately 100 enquiries per day, of which around 10 passed across to the surveying team, despite this the surveyors do not appear to consider the support team as 'the first line of defence'.

There certainly appears to be some tension between the technical and support teams, it was described by one member of the team as "a battle with no discussions to help resolve things". This may be an isolated opinion; however such perceived tensions are not conducive to effective working relationships.

Despite current workloads, emphasis has been placed on training and development, with staff having individual training plans which is encouraging and certainly in line with the Governments and LABCs commitment to raising the standards in building control. However there is a potential for an imbalance to be reached whereby the effectiveness of work and study is adversely impacted.

Recruitment and retention of staff is a real issue across most if not all building control services. Key factors have been highlighted in the risk register, which may impact on this, including salary structures, low interest in the profession, increased reactive workload and lack of management communication. Another factor may be the lack of long-term commitment to the partnership, an issue that the team has been waiting on a decision for since September 2019.

It is understood one of the Senior BCO's has handed in his notice (he is leaving to work for a neighbouring LA), this will further impact on the level of resilience within the team. This supports the opinion that there is a high risk, under the current circumstances that staff will be lost to other local authorities or an Approved Inspector.

Recommendations

7. *The Risk Register should be reviewed, updated as necessary and appropriate preventative measures actioned.*
8. *The Service Manager should review the effectiveness of the 'buddy system' with staff.*
9. *Regular 'whole team' meetings should be arranged to improve team working and to discuss and resolve any emerging operational issues.*

10. *A small task group comprising technical support and surveying staff be formed to review how work balance and process could be improved.*
11. *That a resolution be reached on the future of the partnership through a long-term agreement which includes a commitment to its future success.*

H.5 Succession Planning

Succession planning is an important part of any long-term business plan. Unfortunately, many local authorities have not, for one reason or another, created a robust succession plan for their Building Control teams and this had led to many having a disproportionately large gap between the most experienced and least experienced staff. Typically, the reason for this gap has been the lack of investment in Building Control staff development and recruitment over the last 15 – 20 years. This period has also seen a notable reduction in the status of Building Control in many local authorities.

The age profile for the surveying team is around 40 years of age, this is lower than the national average for building control, which currently stands at around 56 years of age, the technical support teams age profile is around 33 years of age.

BCS is in a better position than many local authority building control services. Succession planning is covered within the current business plan (agreed at the BC Board on 21/10/19), and it is noted BCS intends to 'grow our own' surveyors by introducing a trainee scheme. Success has been achieved in this regard with colleagues across the construction industry being offered re-training and attainment of qualifications as a building control surveyor, in addition to this members of the support team have progressed to surveyor posts. At present two colleagues with Housing and Structural Engineering backgrounds are competing their LABC Level 5 diplomas. The approach of BCS is really encouraging and should be commended.

It is understood BCS is currently considering taking a trainee (on a three-year secondment), under the LABC SR21 programme, funded though DLUHC to support the new regulatory regime. This would provide BCS with a valuable additional resource, which would cost virtually nothing (training and salary costs covered by DLUHC funding) and hopefully enable BCS to recruit a new member of staff to the team after the secondment period.

The Service Manager is clearly aware of the need to develop and adapt the establishment to reflect changing demands and to support and improve the service. It is understood a re-structure has been proposed which will see the replacement of the Team Manager and Principal BCS roles with three focussed Principal BCS level posts, this is in addition to the recent creation and appointment of a new Business and Marketing Manager role. The Service Manager is intending to further review staffing, due to the loss of a Senior BCO, in the new year.

All the surveying staff are within a professional body, either RICS, CABE or CIOB, most have full membership, however some have associate or graduate membership.

The Service Manager is professionally qualified, very experienced and unsurprisingly fulfils a key role in the delivery of the building control service – the Interim AD considers him to be very proficient and a 'safe pair of hands'.

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LABC has developed a range of formal qualifications (see Appendix 4) ranging from a Level 3 Certificate for technical support staff through to Level 6 Certificates in a range of specialist areas, together with a BSc Hons Degree in Building Control in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton.

It is encouraging to note that BCS are supporting team members continued learning and development by sponsoring them to undertake a range of qualifications, including LABC's Level 4 or Level 5 diplomas in Building Control and the Public Service Building Control degree, in addition to other important training, in matters such as dealing with dangerous structures.

The training and developing of staff is key to ensuring they feel invested and can undertake their roles as effectively as possible.

This is particularly important since the 'registration' of the building control profession is due to be established under the newly created Building Safety Regulator sometime in 2023.

The registration, as outlined in (H6 - Competencies) will require all building control professionals to validate their competency through a formal assessment approved by the Building Safety Regulator. Building Control is to become a registered profession, unlike any other local authority position, with perhaps the exception of some legal and social work positions.

Anyone who has not validated their competency at the requisite level and is on the 'register' will not be able to practice, which in turn would leave Wokingham and West Berkshire councils unable to fulfil their statutory functions. It should be noted this is not only applicable to those working on Higher Risk Buildings (HRB's) but to all levels of building control surveyor, covering all types of work.

For the building control surveyors to be able to sit and pass the validation assessment, they will need to demonstrate the necessary experience of checking and inspecting the type of work they are looking to gain registration for, and it is critical that management ensure suitable coaching, mentoring and support is given to ensure they can develop their knowledge and experience in a safe environment.

Recommendations

12. ***To put in place a plan to facilitate the registration of all building control staff, to ensure BCS can continue to fulfil its statutory functions, on behalf of Wokingham and West Berkshire councils, following the introduction of building control profession register.***
13. ***Once the new structure is in place, the Service Manager establishes a new regime for engaging with staff to ensure more effective working relations.***

H.6   Competencies

Following on from the tragic events at Grenfell Tower on the 14th June 2017 and the subsequent report by Dame Judith Hackitt (Building a Safer Future – Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety: Final Report) a clear message has been delivered to the construction and fire safety sectors - that all key professionals must demonstrate their competency. It will no longer be acceptable to rely on qualifications (which could have been gained many years earlier) as a way of proving competency. It will require regular validation and on-going requirements for continuous professional development and proof of application of learning. As one of the key professions identified within Dame Judith's report, Building Control will be expected to ensure all staff working on in-scope buildings are competent. In fact, under the new Building Safety Regulator (BSR) – within the HSE - the requirement for proven competency is to be extended to all levels of surveyor, so local authorities will have to ensure the competency of staff matches their work profile.

The BSR has confirmed the registers, for building inspectors (local authority surveyors) and building control approvers (currently known as approved inspectors) will open in October 2023 and the requirements relating to registration will become enforceable, by the BSR in April 2024. Essentially, any surveyor who undertakes restricted activities (plan vetting and site inspections) and/or restricted functions (decision notices, etc.) will have to be on the register, essentially meaning they will be registered and 'licensed to practice'.

LABC, through a newly formed public interest company (the Building Safety Competence Foundation), has developed and rolled out formal validation assessments for domestic, general and specialist surveyors. These validations are available for both public and private sector building control bodies and have been designed to accord with the requirements, as they stand, of the Building Safety Regulator, to enable registration, subject to any other matters still to be determined by the Regulator.

Due to the burden to be place on local authorities, in relation to supporting the Building Safety Regulator on HRB's, government accepted a bid by LABC for New Burdens funding and LABC has established the training requirements of every building control surveyor working in local authorities in terms of learning (formal qualifications) and validations (assessments of competence) – all the associated costs are being covered.

The LABC Board of Directors also agreed to fund learning and validations for local authority building control teams who work in areas where there are no HRB's – supporting local authorities and readying them for the registration of the profession.

The Service Manager has undertaken an informal assessment of the competencies of the team (see Table 1 below). The two surveyors deemed competent at Level 6 have taken the BSCF validation, unfortunately both were unsuccessful, it is hoped they are being provided with suitable support to enable them to re-sit another validation assessment in the coming months.

BCS currently have ten surveyors undertaking formal learning and these will be able to take the appropriate validation assessment when they are ready to do so, with the New Burdens funding.

There is a good mix of abilities within the team which should enable the Service Manager and Area Manager to effectively organise the oversight of the full range of projects.

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The perceived level of competency (which will require validating) within the team is adequate, in terms of the work profile, and resourcing levels appear reasonable (see section H.10), however it is noted vacancies exist on the establishment for a senior building control surveyor and building control surveyor.

Training records were made available as part of the information gathering process, it seems clear staff are provided with access to a range of training, from service specific to mandatory and corporate topics.

It is understood training requirements are generally discussed and agreed as part of the corporate appraisal process, to support corporate objectives and facilitate personal development, all relevant details are saved to the employees personal file within the 'Business World On System' and logged in the training 'tracker'.

Ensuring personal and professional development of staff is a key responsibility of management and will be critical when professional registration is in place. The Service Manager has systems in place to facilitate training and development, however there may be issues regards the support some staff receive to complement their learning. It was also mentioned that training is not encouraged, this seems at odds with the information gathered and it may be communication around training opportunities and support needs to be improved.

Staff also have a responsibility themselves and employers should facilitate this to ensure their employees have demonstrated the ability and competence to deal with the work they undertake, to ensure works within West Berkshire and Wokingham meet regulatory requirements.

All staff will need to undertake a certain amount of training to maintain their competency levels and so team members should be provided with opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD). As has already been noted, many members of the team are currently undertaking formal learning, which will count towards CPD.

When asked whether staff feel qualified and experienced to undertake the role expected of them, most did agree but not all, this may be because of the limited years of experience of some staff, this is something that should be further explored, and appropriate measures put in place to ensure all staff feel able to undertake their job roles.

Many local authorities building control teams regularly arrange and participate in manufacturer's technical seminars, these are now typically delivered virtually which has resulted in greater numbers of attendees.

These sessions are typically focussed on pertinent topics and aligned to the training needs identified during the appraisal process, they can provide extremely useful training, as well as an opportunity for networking, it is understood BCS have not arranged any such events recently, likely due to work pressures.

There is a whole chain of regulatory changes being brought forward as part of the requirements under the Building Safety Act 2022, as already mentioned, this will include the requirement for all building control surveyors to be registered, to practice.

As has already been mentioned, the Building Safety Regulator will have responsibility for the oversight of all building control professionals in terms of their competency, ensuring building control teams have appropriate levels of competency to perform their roles.

In addition to this, there will be a range of operational standards rules, to which all building control bodies will be expected to work within.

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These operational standards will include several broad themes including:

- Systems and controls
- Risk management
- People
- Building Control functions
- Enforcement and intervention activity

A range of key performance indicators (KPI's) will be established to monitor performance against the themes outlined above, with a view to gathering quality data to ensure building control bodies are operating efficiently and effectively and delivering their intended purpose.

The KPI's are likely to focus on broad themes, such as:

- Building Control professional knowledge and expertise
- Systems and controls
- Complaints handling and appeals
- Building Control functions
- LA enforcement
- Risk prioritisation

It should be noted the Building Safety Regulator will have the power to intervene in cases where Building Control Bodies (including local authorities) are failing to meet requisite standards, these are scheduled to 'go live' in April 2023.

The Building Control team at BCS currently have a good level of experience for both domestic and other non-domestic work and has a reasonable level of resilience to cover during periods of absence.

Focus has been given to surveyor competence, which is of course critical, however, it is also important to ensure that those undertaking technical support for Building Control also have sufficient competence, skills, and experience.

BCS has a dedicated support team of five, although at present a technical support officer post is vacant.

The team members have a varied level of experience, and it is encouraging to note two member of the team successfully completed the Level 3 Certificate – Technical Support for Public Standards Building Control, unfortunately one of the officers left the service in April 2022.

The Building Control Manager has undertaken an informal assessment of staff competency levels, see Table 1 below.

It is assumed competencies have been evaluated using the 'model' developed by LABC, this sets out the criteria to be achieved for various 'levels' of surveyor, once assessed and recorded. This should be related to work allocated to each of the surveyors and support staff in the context of:

- Existing work
- Future business planning
- Future team profile

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Domestic applications make up on average around 92% of all applications received by the Building Control team, so it is considered reasonable to assume that the Building Control Surveyors have more than the necessary competency levels to effectively deal with the work being submitted, based on the informal assessment of their competency by the Service Manager.

Based on the above, and to reiterate the point already made, there is capacity and capability in the team, to deal with the range of schemes received, however this may be compromised during periods of staff absence.

Recommendations

14. *The Service Manager should arrange for training, mentoring and support to be discussed with the whole team and take appropriate action to address any concerns raised.*
15. *Whole team training be combined with team meetings.*

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Table 1. Competency Profile – using the LABC model.

Competency Level	Name & Job Title	Dangerous Structures call out?
Level 6a Surveyor with specialist skills such as Safety at Sports Grounds, HTM and High-Risk Buildings	Roger Paine (Service Manager)	
Level 6 Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on higher risk/complex buildings	Gareth Sexton (Principle BCS) Sara Hiscox (Team Manager)	Office hours only
Level 5a Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on non-domestic low risk buildings	Warren Woodham (BCS) Charles Bradshaw (BCS)	Office hours only
Level 5 Surveyor with proven capability to work unsupervised on domestic projects and with supervision on non-domestic low-risk buildings	Lorraine Kenny (BCS) Hannah Campbell (BCS)	Office hours only
Level 4a Surveyor with proven capability to work without supervision on domestic projects	Dan Cheeseman (BCS) Rohan Kumar (BCS) Sam Whitlock (BCS) Lokendra Chemjong (BCS)	Office hours only
Level 4 Surveyor working with supervision on domestic projects		
Level 3 Building Control Technical Support Staff	Lisa Allder (Business & Marketing Manager) Natasha Mace (Senior Tech Support) Rebecca Allder (Tech Support) Laura Palmer (Tech Support)	N/A

H.7   Morale within the Building Control team

Based on the results from the confidential staff survey, it appears most people do not consider morale to be good within the building control team, giving reasons such as:

- moving of staff and their working areas
- perception of lack of backing from management and for the shared service generally
- high workloads

One person expressed the view that people were under stress trying to keep up with workloads, which was creating unhappiness and low morale.

During the stakeholder interviews slightly different views were expressed, which could be because group interviews were held (people may have been less likely to be candid) or it could be indicative of an improving situation.

The support team consider themselves able to work well together and confirmed they kept in contact with one another daily, through Microsoft Teams, which they found beneficial.

Some of the surveying staff meet up regularly although this is not consistent and the view was a more structured approach would be beneficial and would likely improve morale, indeed there appears to be an appetite for the whole team to get together, which it is understood occurred pre-COVID.

It would be an interesting exercise to explore why the team do not consider morale to be good, but we know that numerous factors can influence the way the team feel.

Here is a list of factors which could be influencing the team at BCS:

- Lack of understanding and empathy for the service – while it is appreciated the Interim AD is trying hard to be involved there is a perception that no one is really interested above this level.
- There is a perception no one really cares about the service or appreciates it's importance
- There is a belief that the role is not valued corporately
- The fact the team have been waiting for a long-term commitment by both authority's since September 2019.

When asked in the confidential survey about the main improvements that could be made within Building Control, resourcing was an issue, particularly in terms of ensuring consistency of staff working assigned areas. Another theme was office space – it appears some feel this lack of physical presence is impacting on the team in terms of relationship building and adversely affects how the team is 'connected' to the authorities they serve. A lack of identity is an issue raised by senior management, which is covered later in the report.

While most staff feel valued by Building Control management, some do not, and this may be down to a perceived lack of effective communication. It is encouraging to note some staff feel the Service Manager offers them a great deal of support, although others feel a little isolated, no doubt exacerbated because of the COVID pandemic. Most staff do not feel valued corporately, the remainder did not express an opinion either way.

Recommendations

16. *Consideration be given to ways of improving communication, including the potential for regular face-to-face team meetings (see also recommendation 12).*
17. *Management actively engages with the Building Control team, creating a representative task group, to explore the factors affecting morale and works to resolve any issues raised.*

H.8   Public Protection - Dangerous structures

Local authorities (outside London) have a duty, under the provisions of the Building Act 1984, to deal with dangerous structures. Anyone dealing with dangerous structures on behalf of a local authority should be given delegated authority, through the Council's scheme of delegation. It is noted from Wokingham's Scheme of Delegation that these functions are delegated to the Director of Place and Growth, who is then authorised to further delegate to a named officer. It is not clear whether building control functions have been formally delegated to the Service Manager and his staff, as appropriate.

BCS respond to, on average, just over 60 dangerous structure callouts per year, equating to more than one per week. Historically Wokingham provided an out-of-hours response, unfortunately this ceased in 2021 due to lack of contractor support, it is understood West Berkshire did not have a 'duty system' but were keen to see the provision extended.

At present calls/notifications of alleged dangerous structures, received during office hours, are assessed prior to allocation to the area surveyor and should attendance at an incident extend beyond office hours over-time payments are made.

Where incidents are reported out-of-hours, to either authority, it is understood the call would be taken by a duty manager and where necessary highways would fence off or close roads as appropriate and building control would visit the following morning to further assess the situation and arrange any other necessary remedial works.

It is important that a sufficiently robust 'triage' system be in place to ensure an effective response to dangerous structure notifications.

It is understood that the Service Manager is currently engaging with West Berkshire's highways team to better understand the support which is currently available from that service and is planning to undertake a similar piece of work with the highways team in Wokingham.

If a timely response were not provided to reported incidents of dangerous buildings, it is possible unnecessary additional risks could be placed on the public which may lead to injury, damage the reputation of the local authority and the trust residents and businesses have in it.

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It was noted, during the audit, that the record keeping in relation to dangerous structures was very good, with lots of contemporaneous notes, although an Opportunity for Improvement (OFI) was noted in terms of closing files once the danger is removed. This was actioned immediately, with all relevant staff requested to check and update all records.

Recommendation

18. *A review of the BCS dangerous structures service provision be undertaken and presented to Wokingham and West Berkshire councils to determine if it satisfies their statutory duties and corporate objectives*

H.9   Proportion of work undertaken by BCS

In 2021/22, BCS dealt with around 54% of all notifiable building work in the borough (based on application numbers – and excluding works done through Competent Persons Schemes) – this is slightly more than the previous year but significantly less than the 60% achieved in 2019/20. This is lower than the national average of around 67% and similar to the average for neighbouring authorities, which is around 56%. This is likely to be largely down to the loss of experienced staff to local approved inspectors and the presence of national and regional approved inspector offices and headquarters adjacent the area BCS operates.

The overall level of building control activity in Wokingham and West Berkshire between 2019/20 and 2021/22 has been relatively stable, with only a 5% decline in overall application numbers, however BCS has received a smaller proportion of these applications, down by around 15%.

The overall reduction in application numbers has unsurprising led to a corresponding reduction in income, from £1,610,779 in 2019/20 to £1,381,175 in 2021/22.

It should be noted that the withdrawal of the RBMW from the shared service in June 2021 will naturally of impacted on application numbers and subsequently income levels.

Many local authorities have built up professional relationships with their local agents, BCS is no different and they appear to have some good long-standing relationships. Under the LABC Partner Authority Scheme (PAS), local authorities can offer a plan appraisal service for schemes outside their own council boundaries, typically for their local agents. The Service Manager provided a list of their partner clients (30 in total) which are predominantly architects or plan drawers, having checked LABC's records it appears only 28 partners are formally registered through the PAS, it is suggested that contact be made with CC Associates Ltd and Ardgowan Homes Ltd to arrange for formal sign-up to the PAS. It is not known how many of these are active, however it is likely many are not since the partnering arrangement has only generated around £6,000 in additional income over the past three years, indeed last year the income was only £342. The reason for the decline in work through the PAS is not known. It is suggested this is an area that requires some attention and may have the potential to be developed, subject to adequate resourcing.

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The team is aware of the competitive environment in which they operate, and the fact Initial Notices are on the increase. The team certainly do not feel pressured into accepting lesser standards to win work; indeed, their focus is clearly to help ensure regulatory compliance is achieved. The planned restructure will facilitate greater focus on partnering which should no doubt enable the team to better compete with private sector providers.

Commentary has already been provided on projects undertaken by WBDC and the Wokingham Housing Company being dealt with by approved inspectors, this too would have an adverse impact on income levels. It is difficult to appreciate the sense of using an outside contractors for work the council have in-house specialists to deal with. This would not only save both council's money but would give them far more control on the quality of the built environment.

Austerity measures and other factors imposed on local authorities have led many to exert pressure on fee earning services, such as Building Control, to generate surpluses for the general fund. This does not necessarily appear to be the case at BCS, the Service Manager regularly reviews charges, however, there has only been an increase of around 5% over the past three years. It is understood a 7% increase in fees is proposed for 2023/24 (subject to member approval).

It should be noted that, a local authority building control service is only expected to recover the costs associated with undertaking 'chargeable functions' (primarily plan examination and site inspection works) and that any proposal to consistently generate surpluses (which are not intended to be reinvested in the service), are not in accordance with principles of the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 (see section H.11). This position is stated in the BCS Business Plan.

BCS deal with, on average, 8 regularisation applications and 3 cases of notified unauthorised works per month, which is comparable with other authorities of a similar size.

Recommendations

19. *A review and refresh of the existing partner client list be undertaken, and consideration be given to explore ways to increase the number of active partner clients.*
20. *To develop ways to gather feedback from clients who choose to use Approved Inspectors, to help determine any service improvements/changes required to secure future work.*
21. *That all local authorities within the shared service look to procure BCS for any in-house projects.*

H.10 Staff utilisation

The staff at BCS are performing very well when compared to other local authority building control teams, in fact their productivity levels, may suggest they are being pressed a little too hard and this is likely to be a key reason why plan checking support (through an agency consultant surveyor) has been in place since January 2022.

In a recent survey the average number of applications (Full Plans/Building Notice/Regularisation) dealt with by a surveyor each year was around 160, BCS surveyors deal with around 210, this is 30% more than the average. This is likely to be a contributory factor to the perceived concerns in relation to workload and stress.

Obviously there are many factors which could impact on these figures:

Application numbers

- Type and complexity of work
- Other statutory work undertaken by the building control team (dangerous structures, enforcement, scaffolding and hoardings, etc)
- Quality of builders
- Level of service provided

In terms of Full Plans applications, which require technical assessment and a formal decision, BCS receive in the region of 1200 per year. If these were evenly spread between officers, this would equate to around 2.5 plan checks per week, which would be considered reasonable, however the complexity of the project and the fact certain officers undertake other work means this is not the case. As noted in H4 above, BCS have up until recently used the service of a contract surveyor to undertake the large proportion of plan checking, enabling establishment staff to concentrate on site inspections.

A KPI target has been set for checking 70% of submitted plans within 15 days, this target has consistently been met and exceeded, in fact since 2019 around 79% of all Full Plans applications have been checked within this period. It is also noted that the average time to check plans within 10 days is around 38%. These plan turnaround times are considered reasonable and not untypical across the local authority building control network and are at a commercially acceptable level.

It is understood that a decision is made on all full plans applications within the statutory two-month period.

It should be noted that in accordance with the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010, plan checking fees on applications not decided within the statutory period should be returned and the application deemed approved.

From the information provided, it appears BCS undertakes in the region of 12,600 inspection (sites - not plots) per year – this equates to roughly 6.5 inspections per day, the average number (as noted in a recent LABC survey) is around 4.5. This higher figure is likely to have been facilitated by the strain taken off the surveying team in relation to plan checking.

Certain factors will impact on the number of inspections officers are able to undertake:

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Inspections

- Location – urban/suburban/rural
- Geographical area covered
- Complexity of work undertaken
- Quality and experience of builders working in the area
- Extent of mentoring which takes place.
- Distribution of work and management of inspections
- Other duties undertaken by building control staff

The level of work is relatively high (bearing in mind the current training commitments) but manageable, however this does not consider the time taken by the surveyors in dealing with statutory non-chargeable works, such as notified unauthorised works (avg' 27 p/a), regularisation applications (avg' 108 p/a), works of demolition (avg' 65 p/a) and dangerous structure callouts (avg' 60 p/a), as well as non-statutory non-fee earning work such as giving general advice.   It also does not account for annual leave and other absences, which would impact the workload for the surveyor and technical support teams left to manage the workload across the shared service.

Application numbers (Full Plans/Building Notices) have declined since 2019/20, however the number of initial notices received from private sector building control providers has increased, which suggests construction activity is relatively static across the Wokingham and West Berkshire regions.

The Service Manager has overall control of the BCS operation and works with the Business and Marketing Manager, Team Manager and Principal BCO on day-to-day operational functions to ensure service delivery is maintained.

As BCS receives around 54% of all applications, it can be presumed that the private sector market is well established and successful as is the case in other areas, likely to be down to a combination of factors, including geography, professional relationships (including the two ex-BCS senior surveyors now working for local approved inspectors) and the level of service being provided.

Domestic applications account for around 92% of BCS's work profile. Whilst Approved Inspectors only take a small amount of the market share, proportionally they may generate more income from non-domestic type applications which are often the most interesting (and profitable) schemes.

Under the new regulatory regime, local authority building control will generally provide the building control support to the regulator for in-scope buildings (there are around 10 HRB's in the BCS area), this is likely to lead to increased competition for the domestic building control work from Approved Inspectors having to extend their geographical areas to compensate for the work lost under the new Building Safety Regime.

While the above information gives an indication of workload, the current and on-going social and economic situation, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and economic downturn may lead to a change taking place, although there are differing views on this. Some suggest speculative new housing will slow and commercial schemes will be virtually non-existent, while others believe there will be a strong bounce-back in the coming years.

Existing homeowners may still be reluctant to move, but experience of previous downturns show after a short period those who feel secure in their employment may decide to extend their homes. This will either maintain the typical high levels of domestic work or there could even be an increase (bearing in mind the above in relation to increased competition for this work).

At present it appears the current staffing levels (due to vacancies) are making it difficult for the team to deal effectively with their workloads which is creating stresses, this will be exacerbated with the departure of one of the Senior BCO's. It should be noted that the 'buddying' system was put in place to enable better support for all staff and develop working relationships within the surveying team.

H.11 Financial Management

The Service Manager has responsibility for oversight of building control budgets, and it is understood meetings are held, with the Finance Business Partners, monthly to discuss forecasting, budget setting and monitoring. The Service Manager advised that there had been quite a few changes in personnel supporting building control in recent times and this hasn't helped.

The Service Manager has talked through the requirements of the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 and the CIPFA Accountancy guide with both Business Finance Partners, so it is hoped better understanding and effective working relationships will be developed.

The Finance Business Partner stated the Service Managers opinion was sought on budgets, however the Service Manager feels he has a sub-ordinate relationship with finance, with little in the way of conversation about staffing costs, re-charges, etc taking place.

Building Control fees are reviewed on an annual basis, and it is assumed increases made to various work categories, to achieve the overriding principle of cost recovery under the provisions of the Building (Local Authority) Charges Regulations 2010.

A timesheet-based exercise was undertaken when the shared service increased from a two-way to three-way service. This established a 'split' between chargeable and non-chargeable activities of 83/17 respectively. A further mini-review was undertaken in 2019 which resulted in a similar split being agreed by all partners.

Despite the Service Manager being reasonably happy with the calculation of the 'split' there remains some concern about how costs are apportioned, with the perception that what building control is paying is unreasonable. The apportionment between chargeable and non-chargeable functions (based on employees' salaries) is considered reasonably high, many authorities have a 'split' of around 75/25, however it is assumed this reflects the time spent on statutory non-chargeable activities.

The apportionment of central and support service charges is around 14% of the total expenditure on the chargeable account, which is considered reasonable.

Under the provisions of The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010, (Regulation 6) the local authority should prepare a financial statement and publish this not more than six months after the end of the financial year to which the statement relates.

During research, for the review, it was noted BCS did not produce and publish its own financial statement for the service. Following a review of Wokingham and West Berkshire's published financial statements it appears Wokingham only publish details relating to its element of the building control shared service while West Berkshire do not refer to their building control service at all.

The Service Manager understood the statements (for BCS as a whole) were prepared and published by Finance, although he had never checked, however this does not appear to be the case.

It is understood the Service Manager is checking the situation regards publication of the BCS financial statement with the Business Finance Partner.

Under the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010, the financial statement needs to be signed off by the Chief Finance Officer, under Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, this is indicated on the published statement.

During the stakeholder interviews discussions were held with both Business Finance Managers who support the building control service. Both are reasonably familiar with charges legislation and CIPFA guidance relating to the building control service, although Richard White has only been supporting building control since March 2022.

When asked about any concerns with the building control service, the issue of debt collection was mentioned. Apparently the debt recovery mechanism needs improvement, at present there is a relatively large amount of outstanding debt. Consideration is being given to the best way to resolve this issue, potentially by writing off the debt, although it is not clear if this would come out of the BCS reserve if sufficient funds are available in any case.

It can be seen in Table 2 below, that the central support service charges for BCS have decreased by around 37% between 2019/20 and 2021/22, it is presumed this is due to the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (RBWM) moving out of the shared service. On average the support service charge equates to around 15% of the income. This equates to around £8,300 per staff member (based on 15no FTE), which is considered reasonable. From a recent survey of authorities the average support service charge was around £12,500, the lowest being £2,900 and the highest set at £22,900. This range emphasises how the apportionment of charges can vary massively. It is not possible to comment on the 'fairness' or accuracy of the central support charges, however this should be routinely 'tested'.

Table 2. Building Control Chargeable Fee Earning Account – BC Solutions - Key Facts

Year	Building Reg apps	Initial Notices received	Proportion of applications %	Employee costs £	Central Support Service Charges £	Income £	Total service expenditure £
2019/20	2371	1611	60	1,252,468	244,312	1,611,534	1,622,244
2020/21	1958	1760	53	1,098,715	212,666	1,381,175	1,449,777
2021/22	2006	1721	54	831,469	154,500	1,085,826	1,071,714

* these figures include the charge levied by WBDC which is budgeted for in a separate heading.

While commentary is given in this review on the current financial arrangements, it should be noted that under the new regulatory regime, the Building Safety Regulator (BSR)will have oversight of building control bodies and it may be necessary to review hourly rates, to reflect the additional costs associated with developing and maintaining relevant competencies. The BSR recently asked authorities to confirm the hourly rate they would charge for supporting the new regime on in-scope buildings. This piece of work has been done and the BSR has notified of BCS's hourly rate (£65.56).

(a) Income & Charges

The Building Control service generates an average income of around £1, 534,000 (based on the outturn figures for 2019/2020 – 2021/22) which when considering the resources currently deployed equates to around £153,000 per FTE surveyor, which is considered excellent, based on a recent survey across a range of authority types which indicated an average of £81,000. This may indicate staff are currently very stretched, in terms of workload.

The average price per application at BCS is around £740 (based on the last three years figures), this is not untypical in similar authorities.

Having reviewed the charges schemes for some neighbouring authorities, it appears BCS charges are relatively comparable, for example BCS charge £830.00 for an extension between $10m^2 – 40m^2$ and the average charge from neighbouring authorities is £784.00. It should be noted that charges should be based on accurate information regarding the cost of delivering the chargeable functions.

(b) Setting of Charges

The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 state that a local authority should conduct a review of the level of charges set on an annual basis, to ensure, taking one financial year with another, the income derived by the authority performing chargeable functions and providing chargeable advice, as nearly as possible equates to the costs incurred by the authority in performing the chargeable functions and providing chargeable advice.

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The current chargeable functions, under the Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 are:

- Passing or rejection of plans, deposited in accordance with Section 16 of the Building Act
- Inspection of building work for which plans have been deposited in accordance with the Building Regulations 2010 (as amended) and with Section 16 of the Building Act
- The consideration of a building notice which has been given in accordance with the Building Regulations 2010 (as amended)
- The consideration of work reverting to local authority control under the Building (Approved Inspector etc.) Regulations 2010 (as amended)
- The consideration of an application under Regulation 18 of the Building Regulations 2010 (as amended) and the inspection of any work to which the application relates.

The current Building Control charges were introduced on 1st April 2022.

(c) Budgeting & Accounts

The fee split of 83/17 for the fee earning/non-fee earning accounts has been in place at BCS since 2018. It should be noted that the fee earning/non-fee earning split for any Building Control service may vary and change over time. It is dependent on many factors, including the number of Initial Notices received from Approved Inspectors, the number of reported dangerous structures and enforcement cases actioned, together with the volume of notifications from Competent Persons Scheme providers and whether the authority has responsibilities for Safety at Sports Grounds.

The CIPFA Local Authority Building Control Accounting Guidance for England and Wales 2010, clearly sets out the Principles of The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 2010 and gives guidance on expenditure, charging methodology, monitoring and governance, management information and a fully worked example for allocation and apportionment of costs.

It is understood that the budgeted income figure remained unaltered from 2019/20 through to 2021/22, despite the fact outturn figures did not support this and RBWM left the shared service arrangement in June 2021. Setting unrealistic budgeted income targets for BCS only puts pressure on the service and should be avoided.

BCS operate a 'rolling balance' with a year-on-year surplus/deficit indicated in their outturn reports.

In 2017/18 reserves stood at £170,998, however in subsequent years this reserve has reduced significantly and currently stands at £72,107. It is understood the reserve was reduced in 2017/18 to pay for the service transformation project agreed with the Building Control Board.

While a surplus is helpful, since this enables service improvements to be made, a consistent high level of surplus may suggest the service is not achieve the overriding objective of the Charges Regulations.

Adjustments have had to be made to the financial accounting and budgeting for BCS following RBWM leaving the shared service arrangement, this has led to a proportionate reduction in income and expenditure level, and it is encouraging to note a surplus of just over £14,000 was achieved in 2021/22.

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Recommendations

22. **The Service Manager and Business Finance Partner work collaboratively to ensure accurate budget setting and re-charges apportionment.**
23. **Clarification be sought on the most appropriate method of publishing BCS's financial statement by Wokingham and West Berkshire councils.**
24. **All internal recharges to be reviewed to ensure BCS is only paying for services it receives**
25. **Consider a 'what if' plan should the reserve be exhausted**

H.12 Systems, Infrastructure & Processes

<u>IT System</u>

BCS operate using Tascomi/iDOX Cloud, internet-based software as its single IT system for both its data and document management systems. It is understood that all relevant data has been migrated into this system from West Berkshire and all data, post 2019 from Wokingham. Any historical data, pre 2019, from Wokingham is accessible via a separate IT drive on the existing system at Wokingham, which all staff have access to.

All surveyors now work remotely and are provided with Microsoft Pro tablets and smart phones which enables them to access, view and record details and update records while on site and viewing of 'real-time' inspections booked through Tascomi.

It is understood that many builders use the website to book inspections, which is considered positive. Inspections can be taken over the phone, although this does not appear to be encouraged by the support team, unless the website is down. It would be quite frustrating for a builder who has contacted the support team to be turned away and guided to the website to book an inspection – it is suggested that in these instances the inspection booking is taken.

Anecdotally evidence suggests many calls and messages to the surveying staff are not answered, which may at times mean the support team end up taking the brunt of customers frustrations. It is not clear how unanswered messages contained within the diary are managed.

Mention has already been made about the issues around debt collection, it is understood the Service Manager is working with Tascomi/iDOX, with a view to using their portal for both on-line submissions and payment which will hopefully eliminate these issues and lead to valuable resource savings in relation to data inputting.

Payments can be taken over the phone and while this approach was very popular, it is resource intensive in terms of taking and returning calls and this is one of the reasons BCS has focussed on the on-line approach.

Another reason for on-line application submission and payment is to support the team to work from home since they are not able to take hard copy applications or cheque payments.

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Self-service, when set up and operating well, can bring about resource savings, enabling staff to concentrate on other areas of work and provide customers with the flexibility to transact at a time convenient for them.

Overall the IT set up, for both the surveyors and support team, appears to be working reasonably well, although some comments were received about improvements that could be made, for example:

- the existing phone system to aid with contacting the surveyors and technical support team.
- Teams chat – how better use can be made of this by all staff

Administration

As has already been mentioned, the support team typically work from work. Arrangements were for six desks to be made available on the second floor of the Council offices, to enable the support team to work from there a couple of days a week, however it was recently announced that Wokingham will close the first and second floors at Shute End, to make cost savings. The provision for hot-desking for staff will exist within the ground and lower ground floors. Because of the lack of a defined space for building control, it is likely the support team will primarily work from home and only attend the office when necessary, for example, when scanning of incoming hard copy details is needed.

All applications are registered and validated by the support team, who also undertake sewer checks and all notices from approved inspectors are checked before being validated and the requisite decision is made. All correspondence is saved electronically onto Tascomi, and work is allocated by the support team across the area teams.

The full range of tasks are undertaken by each member of the support team, except for invoicing, which is currently being carried out by the Business & Marketing Manager.

Inspections requests are predominantly made on-line and processed by the support team. It is understood an automated message is sent back to the client/builder (person making the inspection request) to advise them that an inspection will be made between 8:30am – 3:30pm on the day requested. When an inspection cannot be made on the day required, it is understood the support team will contact the client/builder direct. Contact numbers are provided on the BCS website, should the client/builder need to speak with the surveyors/support team.

Anecdotally, it is understood that abortive inspections occur at times, simply because the builder doesn't know the surveyor will be calling out – this seems at odds with the paragraph above.

The support team consider themselves to be performing well and this is borne out by the recent BSI and LABC audits, where no significant non-conformances were noted regards performance against agreed processes and procedures and the improving trend data on the KPI's they work to.

In 2020 around 94% of all applications were registered within three days of receipt, set against the target of 75%, while the most recent data shows performance levels now at 99%.

The target for issuing of completion certificates within five days is set at 85%, in 2020 performance levels were around 89%, these currently stand at around 98%.

Generally, all aspects of work appear to be being undertaken in accordance with appropriate procedures and within the agreed timeframes. The only area where a backlog exists is invoicing for site inspections, for which the long-term absence of a member of the support team is a contributory factor (the Building and Marketing Manager has had to help with day-to-day activities). It is understood a temporary solution is being explored with Wokingham's IT team, with a view to a long-term solution with Tascomi.

Issues with communication lines have been raised previously in this report, some of the issues may well be down to how the IT is set up and other aspects may well be because of the perceived roles and responsibilities for certain tasks, for example the triaging of calls prior to these being put through to the surveyors for a response. It is suggested that these and other related issues could be dealt with in group discussions with all the BCS team.

Mobile/home working

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 staff were office based, although surveyors did have the capability to work remotely. During the pandemic it is understood that the building control office was taken over by Wokingham's IT team.

During the stakeholder interviews it was noted that staff felt home working was working well, the surveyors consider the equipment they have access to, to be very good and while 'live connectivity' to the back-office system would improve the provision, they generally have no issues.

Telephony System

BCS operate a separate telephony system from those adopted by Wokingham and West Berkshire. It was noted that good links are provided to the BCS website (and contact number) from both council's main web sites.

Unlike most corporate telephony systems which typically have an extensive list of options and commentary on data protection, BCS has a simple automated message when someone calls (0300 790 0580), advising the caller that *"a member of the support team will answer their call as soon as they become available"*.

The experience during the 'secret shopper' exercise was excellent, with calls answered promptly and calls returned, when messages were left, in a timely manner.

The inability to contact building control at times will frustrate clients, it is known from research undertaken by and on behalf of LABC, that the biggest issue clients have with the local authority building control service is the inability to contact staff - it is known many will not be willing to wait and will therefore seek the services of an alternative (private) provider, so having and maintaining such a responsive service is considered a real positive.

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Complaints Handling

Details were provided of the complaints received by the Place & Growth Directorate at Wokingham, together with the corporate Complaint Recording Information form and the Complaints Log Register used by BCS to manage the complaints they receive.

Both councils have a corporate complaints procedure with on-line forms which appear simple and straight forward to complete. An attempt was made to follow the process on West Berkshire's – 'Complain about a Council Service'. It was noted chat bot functionality is provided, which is helpful, however the link to 'Building Control Solutions' page did not work.

The Complaints Log Register lists amongst other things - all the complaints received since 2017, with the complainant details, the root cause and status of the complaint.

On average, BCS receives around 8 complaints per year, although it should be noted only two complaints have been received in 2022. This average is higher than usual, based on the reviews LABC has undertaken, however this may be attributable to various factors, including the fact an effective log register is in place. Most complaints can be attributed to dissatisfaction with the service, in particular a lack of responsiveness.

It was noted several complaints remain open/pending, it is not clear what processes are in place to review and action long-standing complaints.

No mention about Wokingham's and West Berkshire's complaints procedures are included on the BCS website.

Website, Social Media Platforms and Apps

Web sites form an important part of the service offering, with many people browsing sites for information prior to submitting applications. A review of BCS's web site can be found, together with suggested improvements, in Appendix 2, as well as commentary in Section I – Professional Engagement Review.

BCS's does not have any presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter, although it is understood accounts have been set up, these have not been activated due to a lack of marketing resource.

Many local authorities successfully use these and other platforms to promote their service, as well as raise awareness of the critical role they have in relation to consumer and public protection. Establishing a social media presence is something the Building Control team may wish to consider in the future.

LABC have developed an Inspection App that enables clients to request inspections. Notifications are delivered to the building control section enabling appointments to be made. The App has been extremely well received and its use is now widespread throughout the local authority building control network.

Recommendations

26. *The work being currently undertaken by the WBC IT team continues to ensure the perceived lack of responsiveness to calls and emails is resolved*

27. *That work continues to facilitate on-line submissions and payment through the Tascomi online portal*

28. *Exploration of how better use can be made of IT and social media for staff engagement.*

29. *Review of the automated messaging received by clients requesting inspections, to reduce the potential for abortive visits.*

30. *Regular meetings with surveying and technical support staff be arranged to improve working relationships and enhance operational efficiency.*

31. *Complaints procedures to be included on the BCS website*

32. *To consider the use of social media platforms to promote and raise the profile of the building control services for Wokingham and West Berkshire.*

33. *To explore the use of the LABC Inspection App – to enable another communication channel for builders and improve service delivery.*

I. Professional Engagement Review

I.1   Customer Service and Engagement

Local authority building control has a statutory duty to undertake enforcement of the building regulations, but emphasis is given to undertaking pre-contravention inspections, guiding service users to achieve compliance and thereby avoiding the need to pursue formal enforcement action and thus enabling Building Control to develop and maintain professional working relationships.

Delivery of a good service is a key factor in the success of any business and understanding how the service is perceived by its users is also key.

It is understood that up until recently customer feedback was gathered through the Council's communication team using a link to an on-line survey, however it is now received via the Council's website. It is not clear from an initial search of Wokingham's website where positive feedback can be given.

A 'snapshot' of customer feedback gathered between 2019/21 has been provided as part of the information gathering exercise and it is pleasing to note most of the feedback is positive, with comments such as:

"really great service, excellent inspectors, quick response"

"incredibly polite and efficient, nothing was too much trouble"

"excellent service, can't thank you enough for your quick response"

However, a number of customers were clearly not satisfied, and a theme seems to emerge about the perceived lack of response from members of the BCS team, as highlighted by the comments below:

"I have been very unhappy with my experience on this occasion, particularly regarding the speed of response, having had to chase multiple times over a 4 month period".

"Had absolutely no response to any communications at all between August 2020 and May 2021, which was appalling. Both me and my builder sent many, many emails and other requests over this time and neither of us received any reply".

"absolutely disappointed that it took months and months despite constant chasing".

While most respondents (64%) considered the overall service provided by BCS to be either excellent, very good or good, 36% thought the service was either unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory. It should be noted the number of responses received represent an incredibly small proportion of the applications dealt with during 2019 – 2020, even so it would make good business sense for all negative comments to be investigated, it is understood positive comments are fed back to the team and testimonials are included on the website, which is great practice.

The Building Control Manager considers the building control team to be doing as well as can be expected, although pressures due to resourcing and training means performance is not at the level he would want it to be.

It is clear from talking to the staff that they are keen to provide a good service, although they consider their performance to be 'not bad' in terms of KPI's. There is a view that there are too many channels of communication (unfortunately this wasn't clearly defined during the stakeholder interviews) which might explain the lack of responsiveness mentioned above. This is an issue that should be explored further.

BCS has no marketing/engagement plan in place at present. The lack of long-term commitment from both partner authority's is considered a key contributory factor. The Service Manager stated -" the priority to develop one hasn't been there". It is however noted that approval has been obtained for a new role within BCS for a Business and Marketing Manager – one of the main accountabilities of the role will be to - contribute to the preparation, review and delivery of the business plan….and improving market competitiveness and the viability of the business. It is encouraging to see the service develop its structure in this way and it is hoped the development and implementation of a marketing strategy (engagement policy), as part of the overall business plan, will lead to increased market share and revenue, whilst delivering regulatory compliance.

It should be noted that any engagement policy should set out a clear vision, centred around maximising opportunities to protect, as well as potentially increasing workload whilst maintaining a cost effective, user-focussed building control service.

Building Control is firmly embedded in the construction industry, which is based predominantly on face-to-face contact and personal relationships (although the Covid-19 pandemic has and continues to have an impact). Part of the policy objectives should be to continue and improve the engagement with customers (applicants, local builders, architects, and agents, etc.) to ensure they are made aware of the distinct benefits of the service.

BSC has a reasonable market share, so it could be assumed it also has a reasonable relationship with their local agents and builders. These relationships need to be maintained and nurtured.

There are several ways this can be done:

- Creating an engagement plan – using LABC resources, including toolkits, standards letters and templates, communications and data.
- CPD and other learning events – face-to-face activities, etc.

Most applications received by BCS are domestic (typical for similar authorities) and it is therefore important to appreciate homeowner awareness of building control is now essentially through digital engagement. It is encouraging to note the BCS website has a link to the LABC website 'Front Door', which provides simple overview information and onward links, aimed at homeowners.

BCS receive most applications electronically, either via email (40%) or on-line (60%).

Customers can currently make payments through links on the Wokingham council website, as has already been mentioned it is proposed for payment to be taken on the Tascomi portal once development works are complete.

BCS like many local authorities building control services, can take payments over the phone (some authorities take more than 30% of their applications in this way). One benefit of providing this service within the building control section is that it enables the application to be 'banked' at the earliest opportunity, reducing the risk of the agent or builder taking the application to a private sector provider, however it is more resource intensive process.

Business customer retention and gaining new business customers relies on face-to-face opportunities, such as CPD, LABC events, publications, as well as delivering a good service. Events and other promotional work have the potential to enable Building Control to work on more profitable and interesting schemes, however this requires regular planned activities. It is noted that BCS do not undertake any events simply because they do not have the resources to do so, this should be considered a missed opportunity. It is assumed the new Business and Marketing Manager will be able to support such activities in the future.

It is surprising to note that BCS have not submitted an entry into the LABC Regional Awards since before 2018 however there have been four client entries (self-nominations that BCS would have endorsed), this underlines the importance some place on the awards and the recognition they can provide.

The LABC Awards represent a significant opportunity to recognise the excellent work being undertaken within the borough and district and making nominations and recognising the work done by regular customers. Many building control services run their own local awards which filter in to the nominations made at regional level, this is considered a great way to maintain and develop working relationships with local builders and agents.

The Building Control service is considered reasonably resourced in terms of staffing levels at present (both technical and support staff), although work pressure is no doubt being felt because of the vacancies on the establishment, something which is only exacerbated during times of annual leave and sickness. Work volumes (building regulation applications) have declined over the past three years by around 15%, it is therefore extremely important that BCS make every effort to maintain the existing customer-base which, while reasonably good at present, could be impacted if the area is further targeted by private sector providers.

LABC provides a service to members enabling local authority teams to create a 'universe' of existing, 'lost' and potential service users. LABC uses its third-party data agency working under a GDPR compliant arrangement backed by confidentiality and data security contracts and processes.

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Members provide all their user data from the previous 24 months preferably including designers, architects, SME contractors, main contractors and developers including direct clients and property portfolio holders e.g., colleges, universities, schools, health and care, housing associations, etc.

LABC's team reformat and segment the data and this expanded and refreshed data can be used for: engagement, service planning, analysis of competency/staffing levels, options appraisals and transformation projects and revenue forecasting, etc.

Recommendations

34. *Exploration of the reasons some customers have experienced long delays, with a view to setting up suitable processes to improve the situation.*
35. *The creation of an engagement plan (as part of a business plan) that will enable the Building Control service to maintain and develop professional relationships with new and existing customers.*
36. *To encourage staff to support the LABC awards and perhaps consider running a local BCS awards event.*

I.3   Website assessment

A full website assessment was carried out by LABC.

Overall, the website was found to be quite easy to navigate, Building Control is mentioned on the homepage and it easy to access other parts of the website.

Some of the positives included:

Positives

- HTTPS is in place.
- Contact information present and easy to see.
- Map providing surveyor details is considered helpful.
- Resource library – keeping all downloadable items in one place.
- Forms are straightforward and clear.
- Link to Front Door.
- Building Control section links are working fine.

Some suggested changes and content:

1. Header menu order change.
2. Search needs improvement. Doesn't give consistent results.
3. Padding on 'Testimonials', 'Working with our partners' and 'In this section' to be decreased. Holds too much space.
4. Consider adding breadcrumbs. There are currently none.

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5. Copy explaining the difference between planning and building control. See LABC link suggestions point 2.
6. How to book a site inspection – the LABC app could be mentioned).
7. Consider side menu for content hierarchy.
8. No social media links on footer. Consider adding them.

LABC link suggestions

1) The LABC App is available for builders and homeowners to book site inspections while out on site – Visit https://labc.co.uk/homeowners/book-site-inspection for details.

2) A link to a popular page on LABC about the difference between building control and planning. https://www.labc.co.uk/homeowners/homeowners-guide-building-regulations/whats-difference-between-planning-permission-and-building-regulations

3) Perhaps a mention of LABC's services, e.g. air pressure tests, acoustic services etc https://www.labc.co.uk/professionals/labc-services

4) A link to the Approved Documents pages on the LABC website which have additional guidance that will be useful to users as well as the Approved Documents themselves. Our link is: https://labc.co.uk/professionals/building-regulations-guidance/approved-documents-and-technical-guidance-england

Full details of the website assessment can be found in Appendix 2

J. Key Questions

J.1   Is the BC Service compliant in terms of regulations, processes and standards?

BCS operate a Quality Management System, under BSI (certificate number FS 31971) across both partner authorities, a remote audit was conducted on the 16th June 2022 which concluded the requirements of ISO 9001:2015 had been met for the activities undertaken by the Building Control team within Place and Growth services.

A minor non-conformance was raised by BSI during the audit, relating to the internal audit process, this will be reviewed at the next scheduled audit.

It is understood plans were in place to undertake further work to enable the transfer to LABC's ISO Quality Management System, however works have been stalled until such times the future of the shared service has been determined. There is no requirement to effect this change, however it would make sense from a financial point of view (it's free to members) and from a network consistency point of view.

As part of this review, LABC undertook its own audit, against the LABC ISO 9001:2015, on the 13th October 2022. This reinforced the position stated by the BSI audit. No Non-conformances were raised and only four Opportunities for Improvement (OFI's) were highlighted (see K.1).

Financial management appears to generally be in accordance with The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulation 2010 and current CIPFA Local Authority - Building Control Accounting Guidance (2010), however there appears to be an issue with the legal requirement for the local authority to publish financial statements. Having reviewed the outturn figures for BCS against the financial statement produced by Wokingham Borough Council, it appears the statement only includes details for the Wokingham element of the shared service and does not include the costs and income derived from West Berkshire. A review of the West Berkshire financial statements shows the building control account not featured at all.

It should be noted that there will be radical changes to the regulatory system, including registration, competency levels, work allocation and audit against new operational standard rules. As secondary legislation is issued, these changes will need to be embedded into new processes and practices.

LABC's ISO and Quality Management System will alter and adapt to suit any requirements introduced by the Building Safety Regulator, no doubt the BSI Quality Management System will too.

J.2   Does the BC Service exercise their judgement correctly in respect of alternative routes to reaching compliance under the Building Regulations?

BCS's Building Control team generally believe competition does not influence how they operate; however they are certainly aware of the competitive nature of private sector providers.

The team always strive to deliver a good service and do not demonstrate any tendency to compromise standards to win work.

Because of the functional nature of the regulations, it is common for Building Control surveyors to be asked to consider alternative ways of achieving compliance and during the 'secret shopper' exercise this was tested, and the response received was positive. It is assumed a similar level of response would have been received from the other surveyors within the team. One team member considered competition led them to 'think outside the box' in achieving compliance, this is a good approach, however a clear statement in terms of achieving compliance with the functional requirements should be made when deviations from traditional guidance occur.

A 'buddy' system has been implemented which enables experienced and less experienced staff to work together. It is understood the workload of the less experienced surveyors is checked by either the Team Manager, Principal or Senior Building Control surveyors. As far as site inspections are concerned, during periods of absence surveyors are likely to inspect works checked by others and this is considered to provide a reasonable level of oversight. However measures should be put in place to ensure adequate mentoring and oversight of the less experienced members of the team, bearing in mind surveyors will not be able to undertake 'restricted functions' or 'restricted activities' unless they are registered, as part of the new regime under the Building Safety Act 2022.

J.3   To what degree does operating within a competitive environment affect the service's approach?

Competition has existed within Building Control since the mid 1980's: at present there are around 90 firms of Approved Inspectors operating across England and Wales exerting varying degrees of pressure on the Building Control market (note there is no competition within Scotland and Northern Ireland).

BCS currently receives around 56% of all work (by volume of applications) which is lower than the national average (67%) and similar to that of neighbouring authorities which, from the latest details available, stands at around 56%, this is likely to be largely down to the loss of experienced staff to local approved inspectors and the presence of national and regional approved inspector offices and headquarters adjacent the area BCS operates.

We know some customers want a service route which presents the 'path of least resistance', and some will look for the cheapest provider, others will base their decision on the relationships they have built up over time and the quality of service.

Building Control charges are reviewed on an annual basis, since 2020 the standard fee for a typical extension has risen from £787.00 to £830.00, an approximate increase of 5% and the service has also dealt with a consistent level of unauthorised works; therefore there is no indication that BCS have kept their charges unaltered, knowingly accepted non-compliant work or reduced service standards below the regulatory minimum to secure work.

K. Summary

K.1 Recommendations, opportunities for improvement, areas of risk and good practice.

Recommendations

1. Discussions to take place with Wokingham and West Berkshire to gain a better understanding of how a lack of physical presence impacts on the standing of the service and engagement with other council services.

2. Discussions to take place with Wokingham and West Berkshire to determine how best to 'frame' the partnership as a public service.

3. Briefings undertaken, to raise the awareness of the Building Control service to members, staff, and management.

4. Building Control Board meetings and management briefings be reinstated as a matter of urgency, to re-build relationships across the shared service.

5. Consideration be given to identifying the best and most appropriate ways to facilitate better working relationships between BCS, the planning teams at Wokingham and West Berkshire and other relevant council sections. This may include a structured approach to ensure Building Control is actively involved in all relevant pre-application meetings.

6. Discussions be held by senior management and elected members with responsibility for building control across both authority's about using BCS for all in-house and council funded schemes.

7. The Risk Register should be reviewed, updated as necessary and appropriate preventative measures actioned.

8. The Service Manager should review the effectiveness of the 'buddy system' with staff.

9. Regular 'whole team' meetings should be arranged to improve team working and to discuss and resolve any emerging operational issues.

10. A small task group comprising technical support and surveying staff be formed to review how work balance and process could be improved.

11. That a resolution be reached on the future of the partnership through a long-term agreement which includes a commitment to its future success.

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12. *To put in place a plan to facilitate the registration of all building control staff, to ensure BCS can continue to fulfil its statutory functions, on behalf of Wokingham and West Berkshire councils, following the introduction of building control profession register.*

13. Once the new structure is in place, the Service Manager establishes a new regime for engaging with staff to ensure more effective working relations.

14. The Service Manager should arrange for training, mentoring and support to be discussed with the whole team and take appropriate action to address any concerns raised.

15. Whole team training be combined with team meetings.

16. Consideration be given to ways of improving communication, including the potential for regular face-to-face team meetings (see also recommendation 12).

17. Management actively engages with the Building Control team, creating a representative task group, to explore the factors affecting morale and works to resolve any issues raised.

18. A review of the BCS dangerous structures service provision be undertaken and presented to Wokingham and West Berkshire councils to determine if it satisfies their statutory duties and corporate objectives.

19. A review and refresh of the existing partner client list be undertaken, and consideration be given to explore ways to increase the number of active partner clients.

20. To develop ways to gather feedback from clients who choose to use Approved Inspectors, to help determine any service improvements/changes required to secure future work.

21. That all local authorities within the shared service look to procure BCS for any in-house projects.

22. The Service Manager and Business Finance Partner work collaboratively to ensure accurate budget setting and re-charges apportionment.

23. Clarification be sought on the most appropriate method of publishing BCS's financial statement by Wokingham and West Berkshire councils.

24. All internal recharges to be reviewed to ensure BCS is only paying for services it receives.

25. Consider a 'what if' plan should the reserve be exhausted.

26. The work being currently undertaken by the WBC IT team continues to ensure the perceived lack of responsiveness to calls and emails is resolved.

27. That work continues to facilitate on-line submissions and payment through the Tascomi online portal.

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28. *Exploration of how better use can be made of IT and social media for staff engagement.*

29. *Review of the automated messaging received by clients requesting inspections, to reduce the potential for abortive visits.*

30. *Regular meetings with surveying and technical support staff be arranged to improve working relationships and enhance operational efficiency.*

31. *Complaints procedures to be included on the BCS website.*

32. *To consider the use of social media platforms to promote and raise the profile of the building control services for Wokingham and West Berkshire.*

33. *To explore the use of the LABC Inspection App – to enable another communication channel for builders' and improve service delivery.*

34. *Exploration of the reasons some customers have experienced long delays, with a view to setting up suitable processes to improve the situation.*

35. *The creation of an engagement plan (as part of a business plan) that will enable the Building Control service to maintain and develop professional relationships with new and existing customers.*

36. *To encourage staff to support the LABC awards and perhaps consider running a local BCS awards event.*

Opportunities for Improvement

OFI 1. *Review potential during validation process to record and/or address any potential 'Conflicts of Interest'.*

OFI 2. *Documenting plan check activity. It would be beneficial to establish a formal procedural method for recording the detail of plan assessments.*

OFI 4. *Counter Notice served on the Demolition Contractor and copies sent to statutory consultees and adjoining owners – as per BA 1984 Section 81 (5) and Section 81 (6).*

Note. OFI 3 was actioned and closed at the time of the audit

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Risk Areas

While there are a number of risk areas, relating to matters such as:

- Resourcing
- Financial management
- Readying the service for the new building control regime

It is considered that the Service Manager has a 'good handle' on things and simply requires the support of senior management and those on the shared service board to effect the necessary changes to secure the future success of the service.

Good Practice

GP 1 - E*xcellent access to the full range of performance data.*

GP2 - *Comprehensive training plans*

Overall BCS operates effectively, this is testament to the dedication of all staff.

L. Closing Remarks

BCS is generally delivering a good service to the residents and businesses across Wokingham and West Berkshire, however improvements could be made, which are included within the report and summarised in Section K.

The Service Manager is acutely aware that current staffing levels and recruitment issues means the team are under pressure (particularly during periods of sickness and annual leave), despite this they are performing extremely well compared to many local authority building control services, this is a credit to the whole team. He appreciates the training and development being undertaken by members of the team only exacerbates the situation, however he realises the importance of supporting training and development and is proactive in reviewing the staffing structure, to reflect changing needs and to improve the day-to-day operation of the service.

The Building Control team will be losing an experienced member of staff shortly, this will further impact on the pressures felt by the team, the Service Manager has plans in place which he intends to implement in the new year.

Resourcing within the technical support team is considered reasonable and they appear to be managing their workloads effectively.

The impending introduction of the Building Safety Act will lead to significant changes for the building control profession. Local authorities need to ready themselves for the new regime which will require the following:

- All surveyors will have to be registered to practice, which will include validation of their competency on a regular basis.
- All local authorities will be required to operate under newly defined operational standards.
- All local authorities will be required to report on a range of key performance indicators (KPI's), which seek to verify the efficient and effective delivery of the service for its intended purpose.

The Building Safety Regulator will be responsible for the oversight of both public and private sector building control and will be provided with powers to intervene where it is considered a building control body (whether public or private) is not performing at an appropriate level.

BCS operate under an ISO Quality Management System (QMS), and it is clear from the BSI and LABC audits that processes and practices are very effective, although as is always the case there is room for improvement. LABC would encourage BCS to join the LABC ISO and QMS which will align itself to the operational standards and KPI's mentioned above, as these are introduced and developed.

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Covid and the resulting move towards home working has meant the whole team has to adapt and while there are no significant problems, all team members seem to be coping relatively well, there does appears to be some tension across the surveying and technical support teams, and it is felt more could be done to improve communication.

Communication was mentioned a few times during stakeholder interviews, and this is likely to be a contributory factor to evidence of low morale and staff feeling under-valued corporately.

The strategic importance of building control across Wokingham and West Berkshire, in terms of public and consumer protection should not be overlooked, indeed the Public Protection Manager at West Berkshire feels this should be an area of specific focus and would like to see a greater emphasis placed on this by BCS, this is something that needs to be explored.

It is critical for the success of BCS that a decision be made on the long-term commitment of both authority's, since this would potentially help improve recruitment, retention and market share and just as importantly staff morale.

It is suggested the Service Manager reviews the range of recommendations and issues highlighted in Section K of this report, which are aimed at improving the building control service.

LABC would like to thank all those who contributed to the stakeholder interviews and in particular the Service Manager for his support in providing all the necessary information to complete the review of BCS.

LABC hopes you find this review useful and will be ready and willing to help and support BCS wherever possible.

Appendix 1 – Process and Controls Audit

Internal Audit for Building Control Function

QMS Process Management Audit	
Local Authority OR Building Control Trading Name	BC Solutions
Date of Audit	13/10/22
Auditor Name & Job Title	Sara Hiscox - Building Control Team Manager
Auditor Name & Job Title	
Auditor Name & Job Title	

1. Role of Internal Audit

The LABC QMS internal audit is planned and conducted to evaluate Building Control functions conformity to the international standards ISO 9001:2015 and the LABC Quality Management System (QMS) demonstrating effective risk management, control and governance processes.

The role of the internal audit can be defined as an independent, objective activity intended to add value and improve Building Control operations to provide a useful backdrop for the setting and achieving of objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach.

Building Control Management Teams are responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate risk management processes and control systems. The internal audit plays a vital role in advising the Management Team about the suitability and effectiveness of current arrangements.

The Management Team's response to internal audit activity should lead to the strengthening of process controls and, therefore, contribute to the establishment and achievement of objectives.

2. Definition of Internal Auditing

An audit is an evidence gathering process. Audit evidence is used to evaluate how well specific criteria are being met. Audits must be objective, impartial, and independent, and the audit process must be both systematic and documented.

Internal or first party audits are used to confirm or improve the effectiveness of management systems. They're also used to establish level of conformity with an ISO standard.

3. Scope of Audit

The scope of an audit is a statement that specifies the focus, extent and boundary of a particular audit. The scope can be specified by defining the physical location of the audit, the organisational units that will be examined, the processes and activities that will be included, and the time that will be covered.

The scope of this internal audit is all Building Control functions that are covered by LABC QMS processes and the requirements of ISO 9001:2015.

Scope Wording

The provision of public sector building control and public protection services.

Processes included:

- Building Notice Application
- Full Plans
- Regularisation
- Initial Notice
- Reversion
- Site Inspection
- Enforcement
- Dangerous Structures
- Demolition Notice
- Document Management
- Customer Complaints and feedback
- Audit

Aspects considered and audited across all functions include:

- Information security and data controls
- Record control
- Process controls and interaction of processes
- Risk management
- Training and development
- Resource management
- Management commitment

4. Audit Criteria

The LABC QMS

Building Control Teams' adoption of the LABC QMS to achieve UKAS Accredited Certification under the scheme. The QMS comprises of a number of interlinking parts, all focused on demonstrating competency, consistency and quality of public service building control.

BC Solutions have a Quality Management System (ISO 9001) which is externally audited and certificated (UKAS Accredited) by BSI. The QMS is well embedded within all activities and processes. Recertification completed on 15 Feb 2022 demonstrating that the QMS continues to be well managed and maintained.

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Wokingham Borough Council-Building Control Solutions

Certificate number		FS 31971	
Scope		The activities undertaken by the Building Control team within place and growth services.	
Original registration date	Effective date	Last revision date	Expiry date
19/7/1995	15/2/2022	29/6/22	14/2/2025

Using regular team meetings, briefing, training sessions and email, the Building Control Management Teams ensure that all members of the team and others within its control are aware of:

- The quality policy
- Relevant quality objectives
- Their contribution to the effectiveness of the Quality Management System, including the benefits of improved performance
- The implications of not conforming with the Quality Management System requirements

5. Raising Non-Conformance (NCR) or Opportunity for Improvement

Opportunities for improvement (OFI) represent wide range of findings. You may identify gaps or process control weakness or minor issues, such as an uncaptured record that could amount to a non-conformance if not addressed. Each OFI should be considered for potential improvement and to further investigate any system weaknesses for possible inclusion in the corrective action process. When a process is not entirely followed as per the LABC QMS or as to the standards (ISO 9001) requirements.

Other OFI's are observations that cannot be directly recorded as an NCR against the LABC QMS or the International Standard. This observation cannot be directly referenced to the non-conformance of a requirement; however, these should be treated as non-conformances for they might amount to non-conformances if not treated accordingly. OFI's generally address two types of incidents – Negative situations which are visible to the auditor, or activities observed by the auditor during an audit that could, if reported, enhance an operating efficiency. OFI's in some cases come from an auditor's experience. Each auditor brings a unique perspective on your internal processes

Non-Conformances are based on the objective evidence gathered during the audit, the absence of, or a significant failure to implement and/or maintain conformance to the requirements. A situation which would raise significant doubt as to our capability to achieve the stated policy and objectives of the QMS. Or any potential legal non-compliance is always to be recorded as an NCR.

Training and Competency

The Detailed Competency Matrix identifies surveyor competencies against type(s) of work. The Management Team should continually use this matrix to ensure that the team has the correct knowledge and competency for their work profile.

The Building Control Management Team must ensure that resources are appropriate for the level of work and service provision required; for example, ensuring the appropriate number of people, their appropriate competency and continued development relative to the work profile for their authority and work.

Should applications be deposited for work outside the team's resources, knowledge or competency, the Management Team should identify this and bring in resources, knowledge, updates and experience from another source such as the LABC network.

Such competency may be based on education, experience, training and skills.

The Detailed Competency Matrix is used to assess the capability of individual personnel to perform specific work tasks and the appropriate level of responsibility.

On an on-going basis, the Building Control Management Team is aware of, and will react to, the training requirements of all personnel whose work has a direct or indirect effect on any aspect of quality and service delivery.

Where it is found to be necessary, the Management Team will take action to acquire the necessary competence through training or will provide the mentoring or the reassignment of staff.

All staff training must go through a process of evaluation which <u>must be recorded</u> as evidence of competence.

All new members of staff should receive appropriate induction training during their probationary period. This includes an introduction to the LABC Quality Policy and their individual role in the operation of the Quality Management System.

Staff training and competence is assessed by considering everyone's education, skills and experience.

Requirements for further training are identified as part of day-to-day management, staff appraisals and as part of the Management Review process.

Staff appraisals are undertaken by management, in line with the Council performance and appraisal systems, to identify the performance of staff, training needs and to encourage continuous development. It is used as an opportunity for staff to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Continuous professional development schemes are initiated where appropriate and special skills are centrally listed to assist deployment to tasks; providing staff with sufficient training and professional guidance to execute their duties satisfactorily.

Training and Competency		
Recruitment	**Current Practice**	**Improvement**
How do you ensure that an individual recruited is suitable for the role?	**Role is defined and determines the responsibilities, what qualifications and experience from a candidate, list qualifications and skills** **Process includes** **Qualification – Training spreadsheet** **Face to face interview (by panel) implementing a point system based on the Person specification.** **Plan check test / knowledge test.** **Application for Principal Surveyor role will also carry out a presentation.**	
How are individual roles and responsibilities established and defined?	**All job specifications include roles and responsibilities.** **Individuals undergo Skills analysis at least annually.**	
What is included in the induction process for new members of staff? Is there a training plan in place?	**Any relevant and required training is identified and provided.** **New employees and trainees are buddied for training purpose.** **Trainees are always supervised with senior sign off for decisions.**	
Training and Competence	**Current Practice**	**Improvement**
Based on the results of the competency assessment (utilising the 'LABC Competency Matrix'), what Learning & Development strategy has been put in place?	**Skills and knowledge assessment form using traffic light system (Apprenticeship hub doc.)** **Skills review includes- OHS, Building Regulations, sustainability, enforcement diplomacy** **Skills and knowledge are divided into commercial and domestic.**	
How is training, specifically for 'skills transfer' activities (e.g., shadowing, peer review), recorded?	**Via skills review**	

How has Succession Planning been addressed? Does it provide a plan for developing skills and knowledge of existing team?	**Any training identified as required by senior team members is cascaded to wider team to ensure knowledge and skills are shared across the whole team.** **Current trainees include 2 that are going through the BC surveying degree course, 1 trainee with construction background completing LABC level 5 course and another (more experienced) trainee currently shadowing.**	
Do all personnel have access to the LABC VLE?	**Yes – all have access and is regularly referred to.**	
How do you retain appropriate documented information to evidence competence?	**Various documentation reviewed during audit. Evidence includes current assessment of competence and desired level with plan to achieve.**	
How do you determine and record competency deficiencies? Does each member of staff have a training plan for the current year?	**Training plans in place and soundly adhered to**	

Building Regulation Procedures	
Validation and Plan Checking	**Full Plans Application**
What was the project number or reference number?	**Back-office System: TASCOMI** **Ref Number: 22/1810/DLCFP**
Record Dates	
Application Received	**23/06/22**
Payment Received	**27/06/22**
Acknowledged	**27/06/22**
Validated	**27/06/22**
Plan check Target (10 days)	**06/07/22 – KPI to Board.**
Plan check Statutory (5 Weeks)	**27/07/22**
Extended time? Plan Check Statutory (8 Weeks)	
Plan check completed	**26/07/22**

Validation Process Must include:	Activity	Included in process	Performed by (TSO, BCO)
	Application is entered into the BC computer system with unique reference number	✔	**TSO**
	All accompanying documents and generated correspondence are stored in the case file and appropriately referenced against the case number – (Hard copy or electronic)	✔	**TSO**
	Deposited fee is recorded and receipted.	✔	**TSO**
	Assess the application and determine the charge to be invoiced	✔	**TSO**
	Check that the deposited fees and documentation are correct	✔	**TSO**
	Application is plotted on GIS (or similar) System	✔ (UPRN)	**TSO**
	Acknowledgement letter is sent to the applicant / agent OR letter is sent to the applicant requesting additional information and / or payment	✔	**TSO**
	Determine if the application is affected by a sewer and consultation with water authority	✔	**TSO-BN BCO-FP**
	Does the validation process record &/or address any potential 'Conflicts of Interest'	✘	**OFI1**

What was included in the Validation process? Record evidence on file or BC Computer system demonstrating conformance.	**Application received via email or portal** **Saved to folder in date order** **Front sheet (validation proforma) is completed** **Fee are checked against the description of works and any drawings** **Standard fee schedule – checked against plan.** **Application id then added to TASCOMI and is either acknowledged or fee letter is issued (to applicant or agent).** **Payments received are checked daily and application is validated (and acknowledged)** **UPRN identified** **TSO will check sewer map for Building Notice and surveyor to check for Full Plans as part of the Plan check activity.** **Val = dates (valid date which generates plan target check date)** **Acknowledgement includes guidance and inspection regime (generic)** **Upload docs (**internal Comms and file attachments). **Allocated to surveyor by area – or specified plan checker.** Front screen – fees screen Commence sheet BCO is 1st point of contact for Inspection bookings
Were all necessary consultations carried out at the appropriate times and is there evidence of any feedback being communicated to the client?	**Use of external registered Structural Engineer** **Approval received**
What criteria was used to allocate a case officer? Was a review of competency and resource availability undertaken before the project was allocated to the surveyor?	**Dedicated plan checker** **Partner of trainee and experienced BCO by area** **5 areas – 2 people each** **(Senior and junior)** **Comm to trainee with sign off Principal.** **Workload is also considered.** **Good use of buddy system (Good Practice)**
Record competency level for plan checking	**Agency (level 5)**
Was a plan check carried out and communicated to the client? Was this to a good standard? What evidence of plan check is available on file? Pro-forma or any supporting documentation? **NOTE** Full Approval of plans without documentation should be recorded as a non-conformance	**Good evidence of plan checks in form of conditional approval.** **OFI2 – It would be beneficial to consider how plan check activity and areas considered by Plan Checker can be better evidenced**

How was the inspection plan determined? How was this communicated to the client?	Generic inspection is issued with acknowledgement – applicant to contact prior to each stage. Further arrangements are agreed on site – following commencement and subsequent visits.
Where contraventions were identified, were these adequately communicated and followed up on? Were there any plan amendments made as a result of the Plan Check process?	Numerous conditions were identified as a result of plan checking and were communicated in clear concise language within the 'Condition Approval Notice'
Full or Conditional Approval?	Conditional

Site Inspections *(Can be continuation of Validation and Plans Assessment Audit)*

Record dates	
Notification of Commencement	28/6/22
Number of Inspections (Total)	3
Date of Completion Inspection	24/08/22
Did completed site inspections match service plan / inspection framework established at Plan Check? If no, how was this communicated to the client (owner / person carrying out the work)? Was this monitored and reviewed against delivery?	3 inspections completed which is appropriate for the type of work (loft conversion) and for fee charged.
Were Conditions (if any) considered / referenced during inspections?	All conditions cleared with evidence on site. Discharge &/or clearing of conditions is included within the completion check list (Good Practice)
Were any interventions identified and recorded in inspection notes?	Yes – specifically relating to fire safety
Are site inspection notes appropriately detailed? NOTE: Inspection Notes are the output of the Inspection Process, as such they should provide a record of what the inspection included and the outcome.	Good use of notes – all salient information included in all records (incl. interventions)
Are inspection records suitable to be provided to the owner of the building if requested?	yes
Are any relevant Certificates (e.g., Electrical) on file &/or referenced (as seen) in Inspection Notes?	Gas and electric certificated and held on file

Were any issues that reached stage 2 enforcement notified to the owner and / or person carrying t the work? *(If yes, see Enforcement Audit Template)*	**N/A**
Completion Certificates *(Can be a continuation of above)*	
Were any Conditions of Approval discharged (if appropriate)?	**All conditions discharged** **Completes file with completion check list – 5-day target** **TSO team receive checklist and file before sending completion certificate (Good Practice)**
Has a completion certificate been issued?	**Yes**
Is the file complete? (If continued from above, review Plan Check and Inspection audit)	**Well managed file.**

Document and Record Control
Control of internal template documents used by Building Control at any point in the above Process (e.g., Pro-formas, Approval Notices, Completion Certificates)
Describe method of control
All controllable documents and identified and recorded. Current Templates are available to users via TASCOMI system.
Are Controlled Documents defined? (Do we know what they are / where they are stored?)
Defined by naming conventions and are easily identifiable by users.
Are Controlled Documents version controlled? (Do we know what the current version is / what happens to outdated versions?)
Previous templates are archived and only current available to user. Version is identifiable on template.
Record control of live and completed files relating to specific applications, Dangerous Structures, Demolitions etc.
What is the method for storing and maintaining records?
Electronic filing system with records accessible via TASCOMI system.
Are files audited complete? Were required records easily identifiable, retrievable and legible?
Files are well managed and maintained

Dangerous Structures		
Number of reported Dangerous Structures in 12-month period.		Circa 80 YTD
	Dangerous Structure 1	**Dangerous Structure 2**
What was the project number/ reference number?	**1058/DST**	**2642/DST**
From evidence in the file, was the appropriate action taken to <u>assess</u> the potential danger?	**Phone call report of DS. Allocated to surveyor. Car impact structure single storey Surveyor attended onsite.**	**Phone call report of DS. Allocated to surveyor. Loose chimney – Surveyor attended onsite.**
What was the result of the initial assessment? Are the surveyor's findings recorded?	**Assessed as dangerous Telephone call to owner of the property.**	**BCO attended site to Inspect and assess danger. Report includes photo evidence.**
From evidence in the file, was the appropriate action taken to remove danger or inform owner / occupier of potential danger?	**The site was fenced off from the public.** **Lots of contemporaneous notes.**	**Recorded as not dangerous**
Were efforts made to establish ownership before carrying out any works?	**Surveyor established ownership whilst on site.**	
Was the correct notice served in the appropriate manner? OR if appropriate, 'Defective Letter' sent to owner of the property.	**Actions agreed with property owner.**	**N/A**
Were case notes appropriately thorough?	**Yes**	**Yes**
Was further monitoring required? From evidence in the file, was the appropriate monitoring activity recorded?	**Additional visits recorded (fencing erected)**	**None**
Has the Dangerous Structure Report been closed?	**No – OFI3**	**Closed**
Were invoicing procedures followed?	**N/A**	**N/A**
Was a charge put on the property for any unpaid debt?	**N/A**	**N/A**

Demolitions	
	Demolition 1
What was the project number/ reference number?	**2904**
Was the Counter Notice served on the Demolition Contractor and copies sent to statutory consultees and adjoining owners?	**Counter Notice (Section 81) served to contractor only. Statutory undertakers are not issued copies (in line with current BCS procedure)- OFI4**
Were inspections made during and after Demolition Process and Inspection Notes recorded?	**Post demolition checks are performed by BCO (Good Practice)**
Were any issues reported to the Demolition Contractor / Owner, HSE or other statutory bodies as appropriate?	**None**

Initial Notices	
	Initial Notice 1
What has been included as part of the application process for Initial Notices? GIS Plotted?	**Initial Notices are recorded on TASCOMI (with UPRN). Ground for rejection and non-acceptance are known and understood by TSO's.**
Has work commenced?	**Checks on commencement only if practicable.**
Have all grounds for rejection been checked as part of the acceptance process?	**Where no grounds for rejection are identified IN's are accepted within 5-day period.**
Were plans accepted within the 5-day period?	
Were any grounds to reject identified?	

Management Responsibility		
	Observations	Compliance Accepted (Yes/No)
Is there an annual Management Review meeting?	**Yes – conducted under the requirements of ISO 9001:2015**	
Does this meeting cover the main QMS issues? • Customer Focus • Quality Policy & Objectives • Responsibility & Authority	**Follows ISO 9001:2015 conforming agenda including all QM inputs and QM outputs.**	

Do the Management Review meetings adequately show Management Commitment	**Yes**	
Has the Management Team: • Reviewed internal audits • Reviewed non-conformances • Reviewed changes in practice, process & procedures	**Internal audits conducted on a 2-year rolling programme. Divided into processes e.g., Examination of Plans, Site inspection, Dangerous Structures, Competence.** **Also, employ the use of Corrective monitoring spreadsheet to track improvements, trends analysis.**	

Customer Complaints		
	Observations	Compliance Accepted (Yes/No)
Is there a documented process for dealing with complaints?	**Customer Charter inviting Customers air complaints directly.** *If you are not satisfied* *• We will tell you exactly how to complain.* *• We will deal with the problem fairly and openly.* *• We will give you a written reply.* **Formal complaints procedure is in place with lots of online information.** **Complaints are recorded in the Log register**	
How many complaints have been received in the past 12 months?	**2**	
Is there a pattern to the complaints? If so, please provide examples.	**Non identified – reviewed as part of annual MR**	
Are there any complaints outstanding and, if so, are these being addressed?	**No**	
What feedback mechanisms are in place to avoid a repetition of the issue?	**Corrective monitoring spreadsheet**	

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6. Audit Conclusion

	Record of Opportunities for Improvement (OFI)			
	OFI identified	Details of improvement	Target date	Date closed
OFI 1	Review potential during validation process to record &/or address any potential 'Conflicts of Interest'			
OFI 2	Documenting plan check activity. It would be beneficial to establish a formal procedural method for recording the detail of plan assessments.			
OFI 3	Dangerous Structure Report are not always closed once established as safe.	All BCO's have since been notified (by email) to review all open DS reports and to close any that do not require further monitoring &/or invoice.	Actioned prior to audit	Closed
OFI 4	Counter Notice served on the Demolition Contractor and copies sent to statutory consultees and adjoining owners – as per BA 1984 Section 81 (5) and Section 81 (6).			

	Record of Non-Conformance Reports (NCR)			
	Reason for raising an NCR	Investigation or evaluation results	Corrective or preventative action	Target date	Date closed
NCR 1					
NCR 2					
NCR 3					
NCR 4					
NCR 5					

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Appendix 2 – BC Solutions - Website Review

General impression – home page

https://www.bcsolutions.org.uk/

Building control is mentioned on the homepage and therefore quite easy to access from there.

Overall, the homepage looks good with easy access to other parts of the website.

Header menu items can be changed. Suggestion would be to change the placing of the 'Contact BCS' tab to show last.

Positives

- HTTPS is in place.
- Contact information present and easy to see.
- Resource library – keeping all downloadable in one place.
- Font sizes and colours are good.
- Variety of information.
- It is responsive for all sizes of screen and mobile friendly.
- Download links for different types of applications are working.
- Forms are straightforward and clear.
- Link to Front Door.
  Building Control section links are working fine.

Suggested changes and content:

9. Header menu order change.
10. Search needs improvement. Doesn't give consistent results.
11. Padding on 'Testimonials', 'Working with our partners' and 'In this section' to be decreased. Holds too much space.
12. There are double spacings within content. No consistencies with spacings.
13. Consider adding breadcrumbs. There are currently none.
14. CTA could be added for 'Apply for building regulations approval' on related pages.
15. URLs to include keywords.
16. Copy explaining the difference between planning and building control. See LABC link suggestions point 2.
17. How to book a site inspection. (You could mention the LABC app).
18. News & Events page could have filters.
19. Consider side menu for content hierarchy.
20. No social media links on footer. Consider adding them.

LABC link suggestions

5) The LABC App is available for builders and homeowners to book site inspections while out on site – Visit https://labc.co.uk/homeowners/book-site-inspection for details.

6) A link to a popular page on LABC about the difference between building control and planning. https://www.labc.co.uk/homeowners/homeowners-guide-building-regulations/whats-difference-between-planning-permission-and-building-regulations

7) Perhaps a mention of LABC's services, e.g. air pressure tests, acoustic services etc https://www.labc.co.uk/professionals/labc-services

8) A link to the Approved Documents pages on the LABC website which have additional guidance that will be useful to users as well as the Approved Documents themselves. Our link is: https://labc.co.uk/professionals/building-regulations-guidance/approved-documents-and-technical-guidance-england

Summary

Overall, there is good and easy to follow information regarding building control on the website but could be more user-friendly. There are some suggested improvements that would elevate the look and feel of the website.

Appendix 3 – 'Secret Shopper' Exercises

Secret shopper #1 – request for fee quote

Notes from call

Called at 15.47 16/9/22 using the number from the website 03007900580. The call was answered by a recorded message asking me to hold – I only waited 23 seconds before the call was answered by a member of the technical support team.

I explained that I was replacing all the windows and doors on my property at 30 Rectory Road, Wokingham. I said we were thinking about using an installer who wanted to use building control and I needed a fee quote.

The member of technical support stated that the fee would be £206 including VAT. She offered to email me a form. She explained that 3 days after submitting the form I would be asked for payment via a link and that once paid I could book inspections through the website. She said I would receive a certificate once the work was all completed and inspected.

She again offered to email a form, but I said I wasn't sure if we'd be using that installer and might be using a Competent Person.

I then asked if I could speak to a surveyor as I had a technical query about trickle vents. After checking the location she said she would put me through to the relevant surveyor.

The member of technical support was extremely prompt, helpful, professional, and informative. She explained the process and even looked up the postcode for me to make sure I was put through to the right surveyors.

Secret shopper #2 – technical query

I went through to a friendly answerphone message from the surveyor asking me to leave a message. I did so at 15.53 on 16/9/22

The surveyor called back at 11.21 on Tuesday 20th (after the bank holiday) and left a message

I called him back at 13.35 and he answered immediately giving his name.

The questions and responses are outlined below.

1.1 Do I need Building Regulations approval for replacing all my windows and external doors?

Expected response

Replacement windows and doors are frequently installed by a person who is a member of a suitable 'Competent Person Scheme' as detailed in Schedule 3 of the Building Regulations 2010, such as FENSA. In this instance, the installer self-certifies that the works comply with the Building Regulations and notifies your Local Authority Building Control Department that the works have been undertaken. It is important that the installer provides you with a 'Building Regulation Compliance Certificate' upon completion for your records.

However, if you're employing someone who isn't registered on a suitable 'Competent Person Scheme', you'll need to make a Building Regulations application before commencing works.

Actual response

Yes, for both windows and doors. Any new exterior window needs to comply. If you went ahead without the certification or getting it signed off, it would delay the sale if you tried to sell in the future. You can use a FENSA registered installer or make an application to us.

1.1. My current rear door is fully glazed. For privacy purposes I would like to change it to a solid door. Am I allowed to do this under Building Regulations?

Expected response

Yes, and if the amount of glazing is less than 50% of the new door and frame, this particular door would not require a Building Regulations application to be deposited as detailed in paragraph 1(h), Schedule 4 of the Building Regulations 2010.

Actual response

Yes, you are allowed, and you'd still need to make a building regs application for this door. I clarified this twice emphasising an unglazed door.

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1.2. My current windows do not have trickle vents. Would the replacement windows be OK without trickle vents too?

Expected response

Replacing the windows is likely to increase the airtightness of the dwelling. If ventilation is not provided via a mechanical ventilation with heat recovery system, then increasing the airtightness of the building may reduce beneficial ventilation in the building. In these circumstances, it is necessary to ensure that the ventilation provision in the dwelling is no worse than it was before the work was carried out.

This may be demonstrated in a number of ways as detailed in paragraph 3.15 of Approved Document F (2021 edition). However, the easiest way to comply may be to ensure trickle vents are provided in the replacement windows equivalent to the following:

- Habitable rooms – minimum 8000mm^2 equivalent area.
- Kitchen – minimum 8000mm^2 equivalent area.
- Bathroom (with or without a toilet) – minimum 4000mm^2 equivalent area.

Actual response

No, you'll need trickle vents now, the regulations changed on the 15th of June.

Ask your supplier if they are fitting the right sized trickle vents.

You can Google Approved Document and trickle vents to check the sizes

1.3. What U-values must the replacement windows and external doors achieve?

Expected response

Windows and doors need to achieve a U-value of 1.4 W/(m^{2}K) or better, as per Table 4.2 of Approved Document L Volume 1 (2021 edition).

Actual response

U-values area basically thermal calculations for how to keep heat in (I liked this!). They should meet 1.4

1.4. My property currently has timber windows and doors. I would prefer the replacement windows and doors to also be timber to maintain a similar appearance. Are there any relaxations for the thermal performance of replacement timber windows and doors in the Building Regulations?

Expected response

For timber windows, a maximum U-value of 1.6 W/(m²K) is permissible until 14 June 2023 as detailed in Table 4.2 of Approved Document L Volume 1 (2021 edition).

For timber doors, a maximum U-value of 1.8 W/(m²K) is permissible until 14 June 2023 as detailed in Table 4.2 of Approved Document L Volume 1 (2021 edition).

From 15 June 2023 the full standard of 1.4 W/(m²K) applies.

Actual response

**You can use timber, but they would have to meet the new thermal requirements.**

Once you've made your application, you can send us the specification and we'll check it.

The surveyor was friendly, professional, and polite. He answered all my questions and gave extra information that I hadn't asked for.

The explanation from the surveyor was not terribly technical or in-depth, this is similar to other mystery shopper exercises undertaken.

Based on this call and my previous call to technical support, as a homeowner, I would definitely want to use BC Solutions for my project.

Appendix 4 – LABC Qualifications/Validations
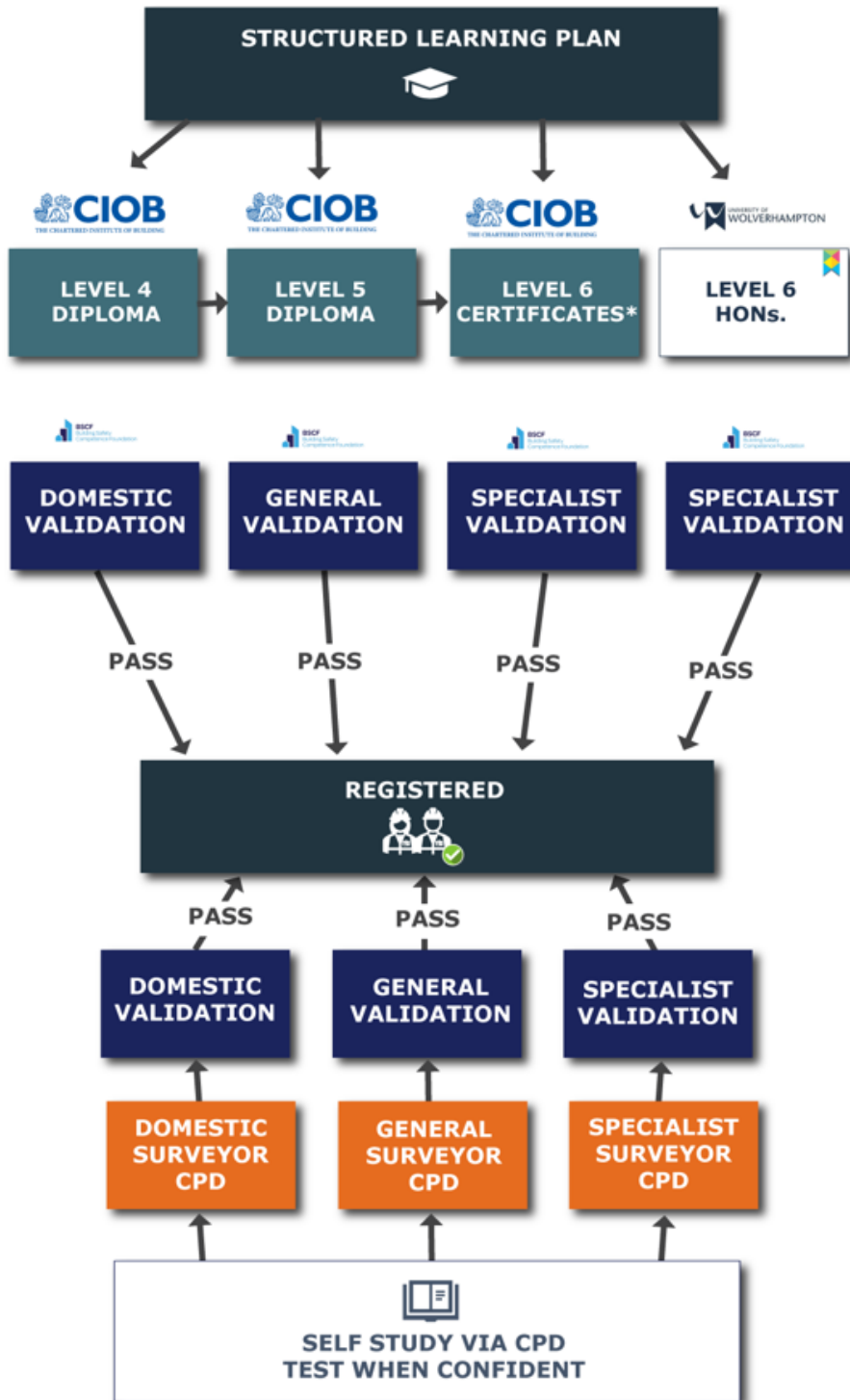
*Fire Safety in Complex Buildings, Managing Legislative Compliance, SASG and other Public Events and Management of Public Service Building Control.

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Append ix 5 – Presentation slides

Confidential staff survey – do staff feel valued?

3. I feel my role is valued corporately
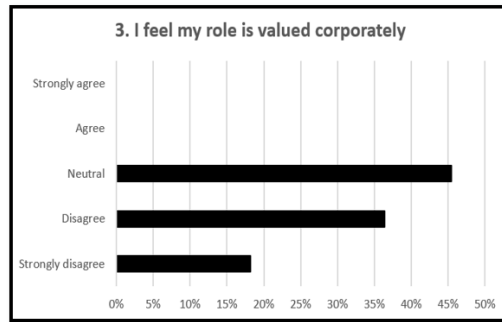
Confidential staff survey – team morale
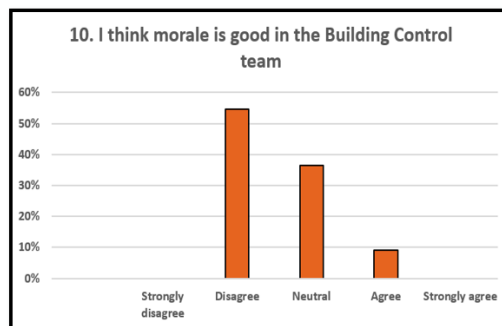
10. I think morale is good in the Building Control team

Confidential staff survey – team performance

11. I think the Building Control team performs well

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Confidential staff survey – team performance

8. My salary and terms and conditions are fair for my role

Open ended questions

Weaknesses	Strengths
Resourcing levels	Team work by surveyors
Communication within the team	United management team
Recruitment	Management
Team work	Team members – who go above
How communication occurs	and beyond
Resilience – due to resourcing	
Recruitment	

Secret shopper

Snapshot surveys – check on:

- Telephony system
- Initial response
- Core knowledge
- Flexibility of approach
- Customer service

Review

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BCS in context

West Berkshire Borough Council

Wokingham District Council

Every authority is different

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Building Control in context

87% White

58% 15-25 Years+ Length of Service

81% Male

64% Aged 45+

Best Thing
- Feeling valued
- Job autonomy
- Level of support
- Work/life balance
- Management

Biggest Challenges
- Lack of resources
- Training/development
- Volume of work
- Staff retention
- Cost of living

Extract from LGA Survey

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Building Control in context

Employee Contribution	Desire To Stay
1) I feel secure in my job	1) I would recommend my employer to a friend
2) Overall, I am satisfied with what my employer provides for me and what I am expected to provide in return	2) Overall, I am satisfied with what my employer provides for me and what I am expected to provide in return
3) There is a 'no blame' culture - mistakes are talked about freely so we can learn from them	3) My employer provides me with good prospects for career progression
4) My employer invests in building my capabilities through learning and development	4) My employer demonstrates a genuine concern for my wellbeing
5) My employer values my accomplishments at work	5) I feel secure in my job

LABC

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Building Safety Regulator

- The BSR, headed up by the Chief Inspector of Buildings, is the new building control authority for all in-scope buildings

- The BSR will oversee the safety and standard of ALL buildings

- The BSR will oversee the registration of the building control profession – key dates Oct' 23 and Apr' 24

- All which will have significant implications for local authorities

- It will also have significant implications for individuals too

LABC

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What's happening in practice

- Staff are struggling to cope with the workload, partly down to the training many are undertaking to support their future registration/validation

- The team is becoming frustrated and tensions exist

- Communication appears to be an issue

- The Service Manager is steering the 'ship' through very turbulent waters

LABC

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Audit against the LABC ISO

bsi.

ISO 9001:2015

Quality Management System – ISO 9001:2015

LABC

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Performance

Income per surveyor

Maximum	Average	Minimum
£153,449	£80,385	£48,505

Applications per surveyor

Maximum	Average	Minimum
211	162	80

Inspections per surveyor

Maximum	Average	Minimum
6.5	4.65	2.9

4.5

Ratio – tech support per surveyor

Maximum	Average	Minimum
1 : 1.16	1 : 3.2	1 : 7

1: 2.5

Applications registered with 3 days of receipt — **99%**

Completion certificates issued within five days of satisfactory inspection — **98%**

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Key question

Is the BC Service compliant in terms of regulations, processes and standards?

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Finance

- Income/Expenditure
- Charges Regulations
- Fee-earning/Non-fee-earning work
- Cost recovery

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Key question

Does the BC service exercise their judgement correctly in respect of alternative routes to reaching compliance?

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Key issues

- Clear commitment needed for the shared service
- The Building Control Board isn't functioning as it should
- Staff validation and registration
- Communication
- There appears to be a 'disconnect' - how to frame the service?

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Governance

LABC is currently in the process of obtaining legal advice on service delivery models and their governance, as soon as this is available a further short report will be issued with recommendations to consider

23

Reading

- New Head of Service has had a positive impact and with the support of a relatively new member of technical support, is starting to turn things around – debt recovery still an issue

- Little if any resilience in terms of surveying staff (all agency)

- Management Accounts – require attention

- Having an experienced BC manager would prove beneficial

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Thanks for listening

Any questions?

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