

SOUTH THAMES GATEWAY BUILDING CONTROL JOINT COMMITTEE

17 JUNE 2021

SOUTH THAMES GATEWAY BUILDING CONTROL PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT

Report from: Janine Weaver, Director, South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership

Summary

The report seeks to inform Members of the performance and financial information for the year 2020/2021.

1) Budget and policy framework

1.1. The Joint Committee requires the preparation of monitoring reports to be reported to the Officer's Steering Group and Joint Committee.

2) Background

2.1. As the draft Business Plan is written in July/August with amendments up to December, Members have requested an annual report to give an overview of the Partnership's progress throughout the year.

3) Director's comments

3.1. Threatening disruption of public service delivery, the pandemic touched a cardinal principle of public service, that of continuity. Our service continued throughout with staff quick to adapt and re-adjust the way in which our services were delivered so as to minimise the negative impact of the pandemic on our customers.

3.2. A positive from the pandemic was the confirmation of the foresight of the partnerships strategy and investment in moving to a cloud-based back-office system and working in an agile environment a number of years ago was right. It placed us in an excellent position, where our service was only slightly impacted and with customer's only experiencing changes due to social distancing requirements.

- 3.3. In July 2020 the government published its draft Building Safety Bill (along with other documents). The proposals include substantial changes to the Building Act required to make the building regulation system safer following the Grenfell tragedy. When enacted these changes will revolutionise the whole building control system and will place significant new duties and risks on all local authorities in England.
- 3.4. The draft Bill sets up a Building Safety Regulator. Three of its main functions will be:
- To oversee the safety and standards of all buildings.
 - To directly regulate the safety of higher-risk buildings during construction and after occupation.
 - To improve the competence of all those involved in the construction and management of higher-risk buildings.

The Regulator will be able to request local authorities to support its work by providing staff or information and if necessary, it will have the power to direct them to do so. Importantly local authorities will be reimbursed for the costs of this support.

4) Resources

- 4.1. The pandemic has highlighted the strategic importance of our staff and, consequently, the need for a more robust policy to manage human resources, both from a relationship and communication perspective.
- 4.2. The concept of the workplace and work tools has changed and, consequently, the concept of safety at work. Staff are asked to perform the same activities and meet the same goals as pre-pandemic, but nothing is the same. They are at times required to make decisions without proper consultation with colleagues because the situation requires that. The concept of place is replaced by the concept of time, and instead of working hours, we refer to meet goals.
- 4.3. We have endeavoured to create a support framework through-out the pandemic to enable the staff to continue working competently and effectively, feeling safe and cared for, and to stay connected to the partnership. Additional to the resources provided by Medway Council, we have adapted to each individuals' situation. In general, we have tried to provide such assistance as extra time off or flexibility in taking care of children or other vulnerable people or who need to make arrangements after a death in the family.
- 4.4. With so many members of the team working remotely, it has been challenging to adjust our management styles to accommodate that. In a virtual environment, it is easy for staff to feel disconnected, and it has been essential for the management team to focus on productivity and performance over attendance. Being more proactive with the team to utilise the tools within our

back-office system to manage their workloads, setting up of more regular team meetings and re-introducing monthly technical meetings.

- 4.5. When staff work virtually or are social distancing onsite, they can find it hard to sustain working relationships. Throughout the year we have held Zoom quizzes and raised over £677.00 for MacMillan and the Royal British Legion through virtual games and raffles.
- 4.6. In September 2020, the partnership was approached by Thanet District Council (TDC) to consider their building control service joining as a fifth partner. Following an options appraisal Members agreed to not approve this decision. In February 2021, the director of the partnership attended a meeting with TDC to provide guidance with the development of their staff and service to potentially be in a position in the future to re-approach the partnership.

5) IT

- 5.1. We feel that the redirection of resources by IDOX since acquiring Tascomi, provider of our back-office system, together with the pandemic have contributed to the delays in the delivery of the customer enhancements to our online portal. Despite resuming development in October 2020 and further testing in January 2021, completion of a module suitable to 'go live' is now not scheduled until June 2021.
- 5.2. Our websites 'drop-box' facility continues to flourish with over 30% of the registered architects/developers choosing to submit information regularly via this route on current developments. Thus, providing a less problematic solution to file sizes, formats, and restrictions.
- 5.3. The partnership has been operating on the cloud-based back-office system Tascomi for over 7 years, enabling instant access to our partnership's data anywhere with an internet connection. Adoption in other understandably risk-averse local authority building control services has been relatively slow. The coronavirus pandemic, however, has quickly revealed the farsightedness of the partnership and its partner authorities how working in the cloud can allow a service to respond and change. The partnership has continued to operate moving to risk-based inspection regime and adapting in line with Government guidelines.

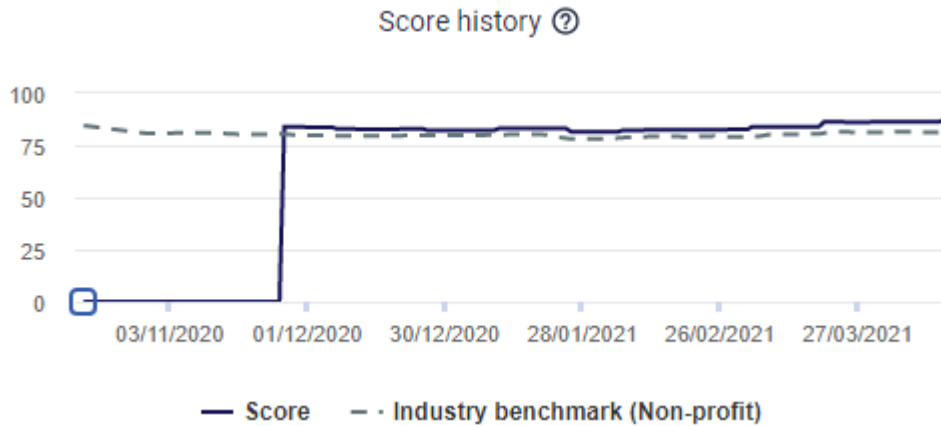
6) Performance

- 6.1. The Local Authority Partner Authority Scheme (LABC) is shared by all local authority building control teams in England and Wales. A developer can choose to work with any local authority building control surveyor to undertake all plan checking work, regardless of the developments' geographical location.
- 6.2. This scheme is important as it cultivates the rapport between surveyor and developer to keep work within local authorities. Last year, the number of fee-earning applications submitted by our partners accounted for around 22% of the applications received each quarter.

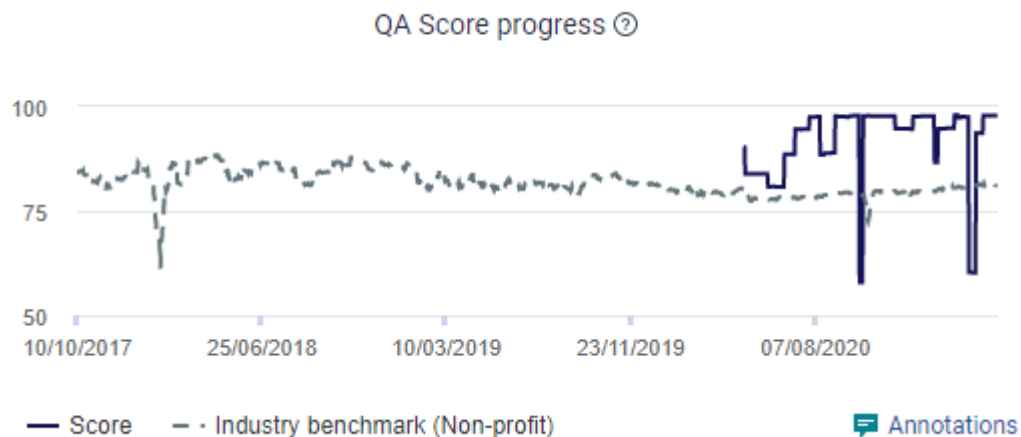
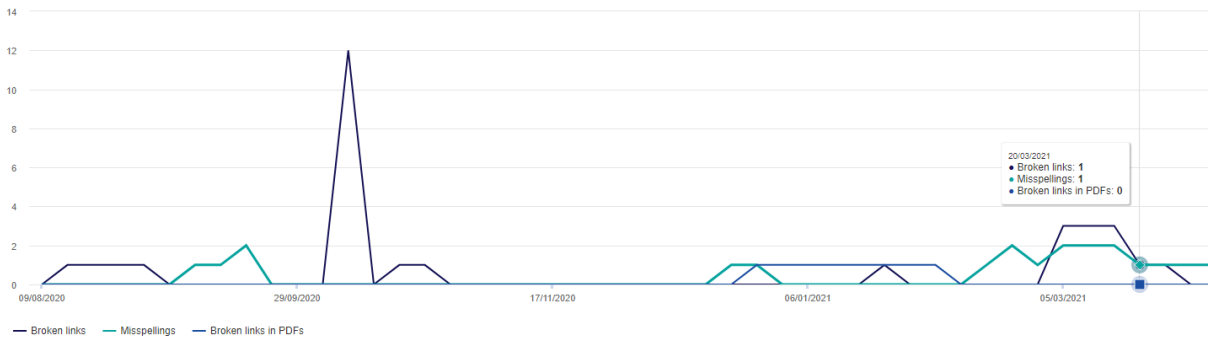
- 6.3. The submission of fee-earning applications and therefore income generation, was severely impacted by the pandemic and lockdown. Throughout the year and with government restrictions easing this has gradually been improving. March has seen a surge in applications being deposited with Q4 achieving 55.3% more fee-earning applications submitted than in the same period last year.
- 6.4. In line with the increased activity on application submissions, the number of inspection requests also saw a significant rise in March with a 26% increase in site inspections. This naturally had an impact on plan checking and application processing performance as the team dealt with the sudden increase in work.

	% plans checked within 15 days	% plans checked within 15-18 days	% determined within 5 weeks /or 2 months	% completion certificates sent within 5 days of completion	% validating applications within 3 working days	% validating applications within 5 working days	% property searches - within 10 working days
2020-21	Target 75%	Target 77%	Target 100%	Target 80%	Target 80%	Target 85%	Target 80%
Apr	98.75	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
May	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	99.39	100.00	100.00
Jun	91.18	98.04	100.00	100.00	92.42	99.05	100.00
Jul	95.69	98.28	100.00	100.00	95.45	98.76	100.00
Aug	95.06	98.77	100.00	100.00	90.83	100.00	96.00
Sep	91.49	95.74	100.00	100.00	73.50	94.44	100.00
Oct	98.02	100.00	100.00	100.00	82.06	99.55	100.00
Nov	84.40	97.25	100.00	100.00	97.84	99.57	100.00
Dec	95.69	99.14	100.00	100.00	98.00	99.33	100.00
Jan	94.20	94.20	100.00	100.00	98.40	100.00	100.00
Feb	92.63	95.79	100.00	100.00	95.24	99.21	100.00
Mar	90.30	94.55	100.00	100.00	82.30	99.34	100.00
Average	93.95	97.65	100.00	100.00	92.12	99.10	99.67

- 6.5. The partnership provides out-of-hours dangerous structure cover and at the end of May 2020 dealt with their largest major incident to date. Together with Kent Fire & Rescue, Swale Borough Councils major incident team and other emergency services, attended where a cliff had collapsed leaving a house hanging over the cliff edge in Eastchurch.
- 6.6. To assist in achieving and continuing to assess compliance of our website under The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No2) Accessibility Regulations 2018, the partnership subscribes to SiteImprove which monitors the website and flags up any accessibility and technical issues.
- 6.7. The graph below shows how our site is performing with regards to accessibility compared to the industry benchmark.



6.8. The Quality Assurance module enables the partnership to monitor and fix issues with content quality, content freshness, security, and user experience. The graphs below illustrate this monitoring and demonstrates how our site is performing compared to the industry benchmark.



6.9. The LABC Building Excellence Awards identify and reward builders and developers who achieve the very highest standards in building construction across a full range of building sectors. The partnership submitted three sites for the South East region which were all shortlisted as finalists in a number of categories. Whilst the sites were not successful in winning their categories,

one of our developers was in winning the LABC Construction Professional of the Year.

7) Consultancy

- 7.1. During the pandemic, the consultancy has continued to carry out the surveys on Medway Council's fire risk assessment and decent homes programmes, though at a greatly reduced level. Despite having to reschedule surveys due to COVID-19, the delivery of 181 fire risk assessments for the communal areas of blocks of flats were only delayed by one month, concluding in January 2021.
- 7.2. Our in-house energy assessor has carried out energy reviews of a number of planning applications for Swale Borough Council. These reviews are to check compliance with their climate change planning condition to reduce operational carbon of dwellings by 50%.

8) Finance and Legal Implications

- 8.1. The end of year monitoring statement is included in the exempt Appendix 1. Through a number of mitigation measures and a surge of fee-earning applications in the final quarter of the year, we achieved a surplus of £125,436.
- 8.2. In 2019 due to reduced income and bad debt on a large commercial site we were forced to use our reserve as part of the mitigation measures. This surplus will enable us to restore our bad debt and IT reserves whilst still enabling us to achieve a surplus of £35,436.

9) Risk Management

- 9.1. There are no risks within this report.

10) Recommendation

- 10.1. Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

11) Suggested reasons for decision(s)

- 11.1. The Constitution requires the Joint Committee to maintain a monitoring role on the progress of the partnership.

Lead officer contact

Janine Weaver, Director, South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership,
Foord Annexe, Eastgate House, High Street, Rochester, ME1 1EW

Tel: 01634 331600

Email: janine.weaver@stgbc.org.uk

Appendices

Exempt Appendix 1 – Year End Budget Monitoring Report

Background papers

None