Background

o A significant backlog in Development management (DM) service in Bristol developed over the last 18 months.

o All LPAs are struggling due to impact of austerity and increasing complexity. BCC backlog is probably greater than average

o At peak in summer '23 this meant 24 weeks' wait times to planning officer allocation for non-major applications.

o The damaging impact of the delays and stress caused by the hold ups have been recognised. A chief planner was brought in late May '23 with a mandate to recover the service.

Key Causes: Resourcing & Productivity

○ Loss of staff during recruitment freeze: reduction of ca. 36% to March '23 ; and substantial further losses since then.

○ Recruitment challenges:
  Were only able to recruit graduates and agency staff from external

→ Heavy reliance on agency and consultant resource:
Immediate capacity but not good VFM & not sustainable medium/long-term

○ Resource pressures among consultees also add to/cause delays

○ Productivity has been at 0.3 decisions per week/officer: low

○ Stems from protracted negotiations & insufficient front-loading

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Actions since May '23 to increase decisions

Focused primarily on recruitment to rebuild capacity and stem loss of staff.
Gradually increased emphasis on shortening time taken per decision:

- Training & good practice standardisation

- Started to develop expectations for 'turnaround guides' and agreed focusing on number of decisions taken including data monitoring.

- Agreed strict 'one-chance for amendments only' (and started gradual implementation)

- Increased number of regular backlog days

- Prioritisation of 'high-impact/risk cases' to stem 'failure demand'

- Streamlining/block-allocation by types of application

- Procured 'planning performance improvement specialists' (Mondrem). Started 13/11: modelling, support action plan optimisation etc

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Starting to see real improvements

- Unallocated cases peaked in August

- Number of cases in hand peaked in October

- Rate of decrease is accelerating

- Too early to judge how far can push this acceleration

BUT – Some big risks also remain:

- Generally LPAs with backlogs or other service pressures and no plan for improvement will run the risk of government Special Measures which can remove local decision making powers

The backlog numbers this financial year

The backlog continued to increase until August, when additional capacity was deployed. From August to October the backlog has reduced by ca 15%. Previously defined backlog as 'unallocated cases':

	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.
Unallocated applications	1250	1443	1608	1689	1705	1633	1466
Decs made (excl trees/preapp)	127	145	150	137	151	147	196
Applications 26+ wks old	500	539	624	772	807	876	933
FTE in DM (excl temp resource)	25.2	23.2	22.2	22.7	23.7	26.8	26.9
FTE in DM (incl temp resource)	26.2	24.2	23.2	24.9	26.3	32	34.2

Note: We will publish an update to this table on 24/11

Overview – As is baseline

Actual all Cases in Hand Jan 2022 to 10/11/23
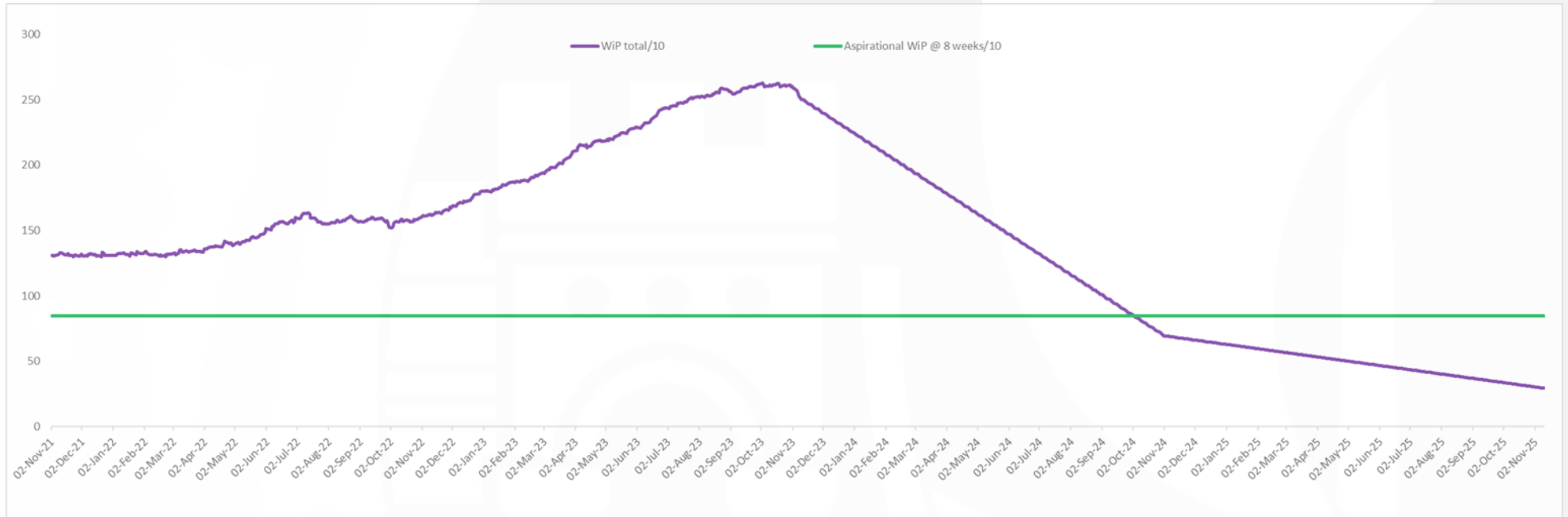Then forecast to Nov '25 at 'baseline productivity' of 0.3 cases (wk/officer)

If continue at current capacity & productivity it would
take to October '25 to reach sustainable productivity

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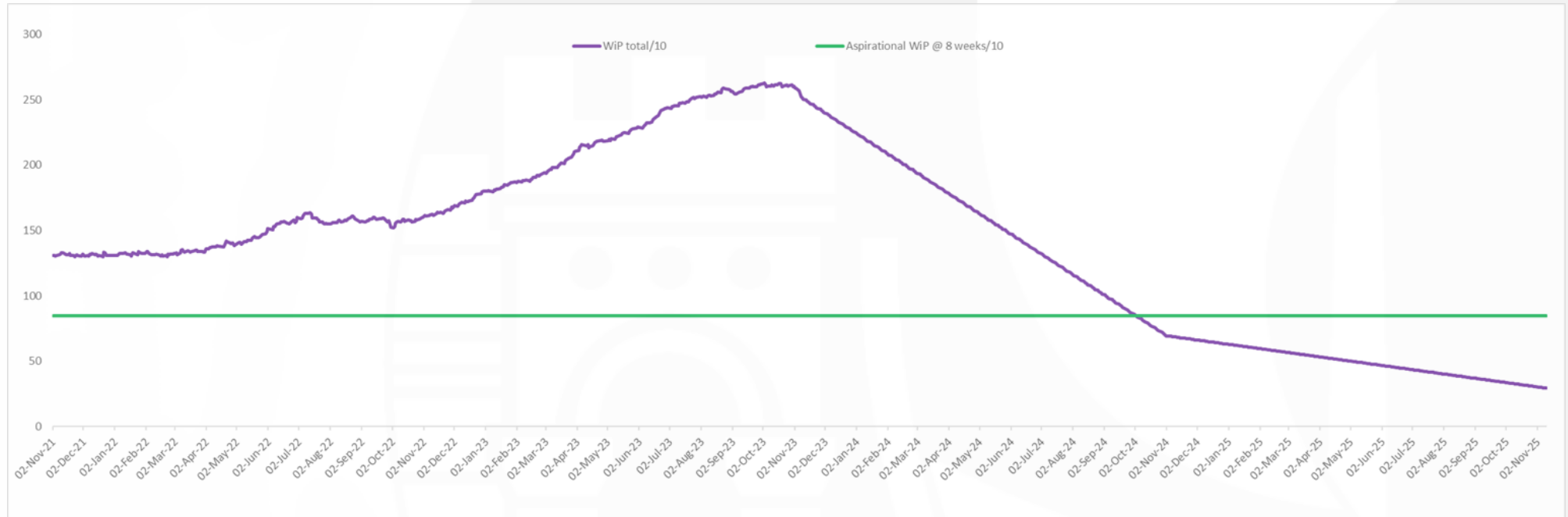# Modelling of route to sustainable productivity by 10/24

This would require maintaining capacity and increasing productivity by one third (to 0.4, or further increasing capacity with proportionately reduced increase in productivity)

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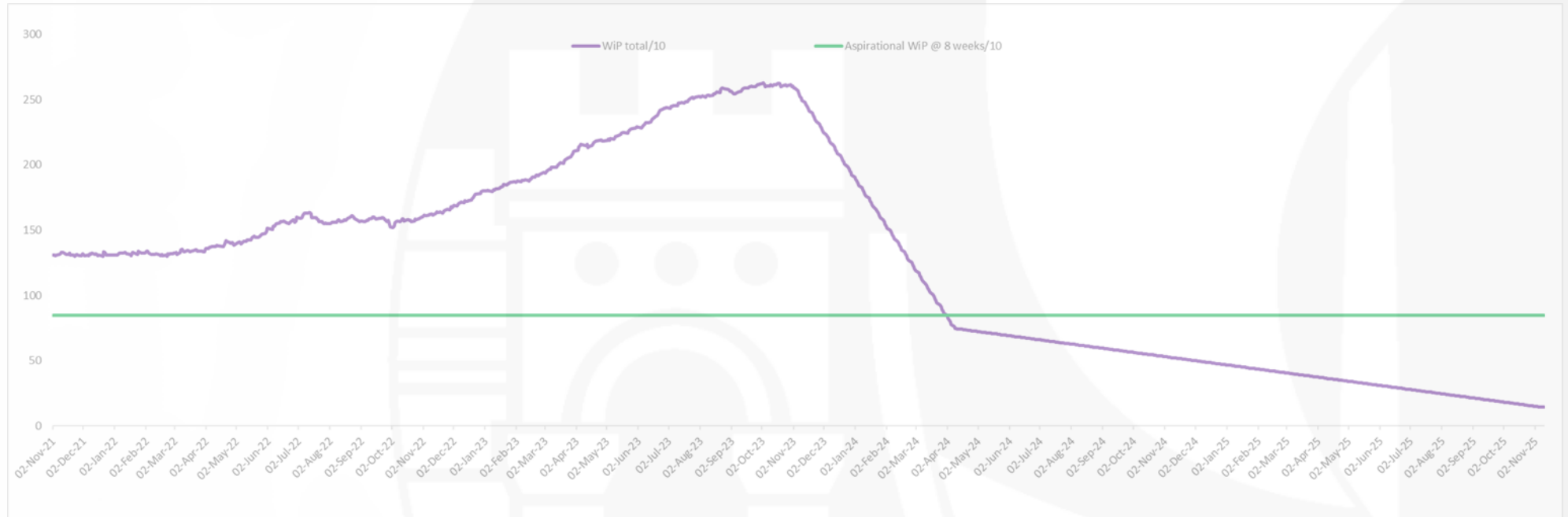# Modelling of route to sustainable productivity by 06/24

This would require maintaining capacity and increasing productivity by two thirds (to 0.49, or further increasing capacity with proportionately reduced increase in productivity)

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Modelling of route to sustainable productivity by 03/24

This would require maintaining current capacity and doubling productivity (to 0.62, or further increasing capacity with proportionately reduced increase in productivity)

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What we are doing by December '23

Capacity:

- Additional consultancy support starting 27/11
- Redesign team structure for consultation to improve morale/retention
- Re-run senior DM recruitment with improved campaign material
- Start working with Public Practice on filling hard to fill posts (30/11 deadline)
- Bring in student resource & start over-time scheme
- Freeing up officers via better external comms & enabling customer self-serve

Increasing productivity by building on activity to date plus:

- Identify 'clean service' start date per application types & implement some
- Expand utilisation of templates, shorter reports & 'block allocation approach'
- Enable speedier consultee responses & enact case officer is 'king/queen'
- Clarify & tighten 'one improvement chance only' approach
- Apply to DLUHC digital planning programme (closing 05/12)
- Start case officer sign off for low-risk types & 'graduated' officers

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What we are planning to do by March '24

Ensure sustainability of resource:

- Progress restructure & implement defined role expectations
- Recruit permanent staff via improved campaigns
- Recruit sandwich year students and apprentices to start ca July '24
- Onboard graduates from national graduate pilot scheme (expect 2)
- (Implement central government 'super squad' support - awaiting details)

Maintain speedy, pragmatic decision making, building on earlier activity plus:

- Implement 'clean service' start date for remaining application types
- Allocate & start technical consult. on all new cases 2 weeks from validation
- In new services operate 'no time extension' unless justified by pre-app/PPA
- Revise committee reporting to make committee cases less onerous
- Continuously monitor & improve performance via good practice sharing (including from other authorities)

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What we are planning to do from April '24

Maintain required capacity:

- Public Practice recruits (01/04) and apprentices & students (summer) start
- Focus on continuous improvement, training and nurturing talent
- Put resilient succession plans in place

Maintain speedy, pragmatic decision making, building on earlier activity plus

- Optimise working with new members and revisit committee format/set up
- Continuously review options for bringing forward 'backlog end date'
- Explore further digital innovations to improve efficiencies

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