

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Rob Walker - Executive Director Place

To: Performance Monitoring Panel – 1 December 2015

(Author: Paul Jackson – Place Manager

Subject: Resourcing within the Planning Department

Purpose: To provide the Panel with an update on staffing levels, Development Management performance standards and Local Plan timetabling.

Recommendation:

- 1) That the contents of the report be noted.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 The former Planning Manager attended PMP on 25 November 2014 and thereafter on 3 March 2015.

1.2 At the 25 November 2014 meeting the former Planning Manager gave an update on timescales for delivery of the emerging Joint South East Lincolnshire Local Plan. He also gave Members an update on a piece of work being then undertaken to address performance standards and service delivery within the Planning Service generally. Members noted the updates, expressing support for then emerging proposals to address timeliness and performance. They requested that a report be presented to PMP by April 2015 on the outcomes.

1.3 On 3 March 2015 the former Planning Manager again attended PMP. He advised Members that a comprehensive report had been presented to Strategy Board in December 2014. This report had detailed the then situation regarding staffing levels within the Planning Service and the risks that this posed to both the department and the Council as Local Planning Authority in relation to overall service delivery. In essence, and in order to address these matters, the provision of a £235,000 resource within the departmental budget had been sought to recruit to the following three temporary posts:

- a Senior Planning Officer (2 years) within the Development Management Team;
- a part-time Conservation officer (3 years) within the same; and
- a Local Plan Project Officer (18 months) within the Joint Local Plans Team

1.4 Strategy Board had been entirely supportive of these proposals and agreed to provide funding for all three posts. The former Planning Manager immediately and successfully recruited to all three of posts as follows:

- The additional Senior Planning Officer commenced work on 5 January 2015;
- The Conservation Officer role was also filled on 5 January 2015; and
- Local Plan Project Management resource was sourced and began working with the Joint Policy Unit Manager on 5 January 2015 (this was a supportive role that, whilst on-going, had been added to provide focus and project management skills to complement the existing resource).

- 1.5 In addition, the two (previously) vacant Policy Officer posts had both been filled in December 2014, leaving only one full-time vacancy within the DM arm of Planning Service, that of Senior Planning Officer. This has since been filled temporarily through the use of consultancy. A part-time Compliance Officer post remains vacant.
- 1.6 At PMP held in March it was reported that a marked improvement in statistical performance within the DM team had been evidenced in January and February 2015. It was additionally reported that longer-term benefits were rather harder to predict as income and application numbers remained high and there still remained (at that time) a single full-time vacancy.
- 1.7 In relation to Local Plan work, it was noted that the introduction of dedicated project management had enabled a thorough review of workload, work streams and project timescales to be undertaken. This had highlighted that the 6 month gap in staff resource had had an adverse effect upon work associated with the production of the Local Plan. Whilst existing work streams were being maintained with the assistance of Boston colleagues, the consequence had been further down the line. Tandem work on other policy areas could not be begun and, as a consequence, there had been some slippage in the earlier anticipated timescales. In addition, the Council's viability consultants had expressed the clear view that the next iteration of the Local Plan should be subject to the process of 'whole plan viability assessment'. This was a matter that, nationally, had caused delays in Local Plan production and impacted upon the evidence base and the likelihood of site delivery. These issues would be considered when the South East Lincolnshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee next met on 6 March 2015. The report would set out the issues and seek agreement to a revised Local Development Scheme.
- 1.8 Members noted and endorsed the positive actions taken. They additionally noted the performance improvements. They requested that a further update report on the position regarding resourcing and performance within the Planning Department be provided in 8 months' time, this timescale taking into account then impending elections.
- 1.9 **Present Situation:**
- 1.10 In December 2014 it was reported that performance within the Development Management Team has steadily declined since 2011-12 as a consequence of increasing workload and a decreased staff complement. This had been exacerbated by a number of departures from key posts and a failure to effectively recruit permanent replacements in a difficult market. The table below was used to illustrate the decline in overall performance.

2007-08	88%	87%	94%	84%
2008-09	83%	80%	89%	76%
2009-10	77%	76%	82%	68%
2010-11	79%	75%	94%	77%
2011-12	74%	69%	84%	71%
2012-13	72%	62%	85%	64%
2013-14	61%	55%	71%	35%
Dec 2014	49%	44%	57%	47%

- 1.11 The recruitment of a range of permanent and temporary staff has facilitated an improvement in performance. Current statistical turnaround is shown below.

Year	All within 8 weeks	Minors in 8 weeks	Others within 8 weeks	Majors within 13 weeks
2014-15	55%	53%	64%	80%
2015-date	64%	59%	74%	78%

- 1.12 In short, performance across the board has improved since January 2015 and continues to do so in line with a managed approach to meeting with the increasing range of performance targets set by government. This includes the need to determine all applications within 26 weeks, or longer by agreement, in order to minimise the risk of repaying the associated fee. It also includes the need to now focus on ensuring that at least 50% of both 'Majors' and 'Minors/Others' are dealt with within the prescribed timescale in order to obviate against the risk of being placed in 'special measures'; and losing local control over planning decisions.
- 1.13 Members were also informed that appeal performance is now monitored nationally and that there is a need to ensure that at least 80% of decisions on all 'Majors' are successfully defended at appeal. Performance at appeal has traditionally been a significant strength of the department and is regularly and routinely reported to Planning Committee. There has been a decline recently. At Planning Committee held on 27 October 2015 it was reported that since 1 April 2015, 15 appeals had been determined of which 9 had been dismissed and 6 had been allowed. This equates to a success rate of 60%. This downturn in performance is largely down to both a reduced number of appeals being received and, more pertinently, a number of recently over-turned decisions. It is worth noting that two of these related to 'Major' schemes, these being a scheme for 14 dwellings at Little London, Spalding and a conversion scheme at Halmer Grange, Spalding. These decisions highlight the emphasis government is placing on housing delivery and the need to be able to demonstrate significant harm when refusing permission. The department will continue to advise Members accordingly when presenting schemes to Planning Committee as this element of performance remains a risk.
- 1.14 In relation to the emerging Local Plan, a revised Local Development Scheme was agreed by Members of the Joint Planning Committee on 6 March as highlighted above. This established the current delivery timetable. The timetable anticipates public consultation on the Draft Local Plan and consideration of the subsequent representations being concluded by February 2016. The preparation of the formal 'submission' document is thereafter scheduled to conclude by the end of May 2016. Further public consultation is timetabled for June/July 2016 with further consideration and formal submission to the Planning Inspectorate in August 2016. Thereafter the timetable for Examination in Public is largely a matter for the Inspectorate themselves. It is presently hoped that this will take place in November/December 2016. If this timetable is adhered to and the EiA concluded successfully it is presently anticipated that consideration of the Inspectors report would take place in February 2017 with adoption soon thereafter.
- 1.15 The current timetable is effectively being maintained. The Draft Joint Local Plan was presented to the South East Lincolnshire Local Plan Steering Group on 30 October 2015. It is being presented to the formal Joint Committee on 27 November 2015 for final approval. Members will be advised of the outcome verbally at PMP as the preparation of this report pre-dates Joint Committee. It is presently intended that, following the above meeting, the Draft Local Plan will be subject to a 6 week long public consultation exercise. This will begin on Friday 8 January 2016. It will include, in addition to widespread publicity, a series of public consultation events to be held throughout January and February and a permanent exhibition at both South Holland District and Boston Borough Councils' main offices during normal opening hours. The public consultation events are presently scheduled to take

place in Pinchbeck, Sutton Bridge, Long Sutton, Kirton, Donington, Sutterton, Gedney Hill, Holbeach, Surfleet, Cowbit, Crowland, Butterwick, Old Leake, Swineshead and Wyberton.

- 1.16 Finally, it needs to be highlighted that the Planning Service has been re-organised as a result of the recent senior management restructure. Development Management, together with Building Control and Land Charges, now sits with the Place Directorate. The newly introduced post of Planning and Building Control Manager remains to be filled. The Local Plans team now sits with the Growth and Prosperity arm of the Commercialisation Directorate. As the team, jointly with colleagues from Boston, is almost entirely focused on delivery of the emerging Local Plan their work has largely been unaffected given ongoing project officer support.

2.0 **OPTIONS**

- 2.1 That Members note the contents of the report and make comments as appropriate. The 'Do Nothing' option is not in this instance appropriate.

3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 This is a factual update report that does not require Members to make a formal decision.

4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 4.1 The benefits of managed performance, maintained staffing levels and adherence to the Local Plan timetable are self-evident and include robust and legally compliant reporting procedures, minimisation of financial and reputational risk, and the delivery of a statutory Local Plan to enable the Council as LPA to better deliver substantial and managed growth within the District.

5.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 **Corporate Priorities**

- 5.1.1 The delivery of a sound Local Plan meshes with each of the Councils key Corporate priorities of developing safer, stronger and more independent communities whilst protecting the most vulnerable; having pride in South Holland by supporting the district and residents to develop and thrive; providing the right services, at the right time and in the right way; and encouraging the local economy to be vibrant with continued growth. The delivery of a Planning Service which meets with the Councils statutory duties as local planning authority, and which additionally meshes with the need to ensure performance and service resilience, meets with our Corporate ambitions to provide the right services at the right time in the right way; particularly so in relation to ensuring our regulatory services are effective and legally compliant. These ambitions meets with the Councils stated aim to implement a planning and development structure that achieves substantial growth, particularly so in relation to the identification and maintenance of a 5 year housing land supply through successful delivery of a sound Local Plan.

5.2 **Financial**

- 5.2.1 It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications other than referred to in the report set out above.

5.3 **Health & Wellbeing**

- 5.3.1 It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no direct implications arising from this

report although it needs to be recognised that the timely delivery of a sound statutory Local Plan places the Council in a better position to meet with the Districts wider health, care and wellbeing agendas.

5.4 **Risk Management**

5.4.1 It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications other than referred to in the report set out above.

5.5 **Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales**

5.5.1 It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications other than those referred to in the report set out above, particularly in relation to the wider consultative issues arising from the delivery of a sound Local Plan.

6.0 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

6.1 All Wards affected.

7.0 **ACRONYMS**

7.1 PMP – Performance Monitoring Panel
DM – Development Management
EiP – Examination in Public (public inquiry)
DCLG – Department for Communities and Local Government
LPA – Local Planning Authority

Background papers:- Statistical Returns to DCLG

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Key Decision: No

Exempt Decision: No

This report refers to a Mandatory Service

Appendices attached to this report: None