

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Executive Director Place (S151)
To: Performance Monitoring Panel – 3 March 2015
(Author: Paul Jackson - Planning Manager)
Subject: Resourcing within the Planning Service
Purpose: To update the Performance Monitoring Panel on resourcing within the Planning Service

Recommendation:

- 1) That the Performance Monitoring Panel notes the contents of the report and makes a recommendation, or recommendations, based on any of the options set out below.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 At PMP held on 16 September 2014 the Panel raised concerns regarding completion of the South East Lincolnshire Local Plan and delivery of the Planning Service. Consequently, the Planning Manager attended PMP on 25 November 2014 in order to discuss the following issues:

- Concerns regarding whether the timescale for the delivery of the South East Lincolnshire Local Plan was achievable and any consequences for the Council if it was not; and
- A piece of work being undertaken on the delivery of the planning service.

1.2 The Planning Manager reported that:

- He believed the timetable for producing the SEL Local Plan remained achievable although this was dependent upon resource remaining within the team and the input of dedicated resource management; and
- He was seeking to resolve resourcing issues within the Planning Service that were impacting adversely upon performance.

1.3 In relation to the both matters, the Planning Manager further reported that he was intending to put forward proposals to Strategy Board in December 2014 in order to address concerns relating to both resource and delivery.

2.0 2013-14 RESOURCING AND DELIVERY

2.1 The Planning Manager presented a detailed report to Strategy Board on 16 December 2014 relating to the Planning Service's performance and resource. The purpose of the report was twofold:

- (1) To consider the existing staff structure and performance, service capacity, and future resource provision within the Development Management and Local Plan Teams; and

(2) To agree additional temporary resource to ensure future operational resilience.

- 2.2 The report focussed on performance, operational capacity and service demands.
- 2.3 It made clear that the Planning Service had last been restructured in 2011, at which time there was a decline in workloads and associated income streams. The 2011 restructure was also reflective of the then intention to formalise joint-working arrangements with Boston Borough Council (BBC) in connection with the production of a conjoined Local Plan. These shared arrangements with BBC are in place and are on-going.
- 2.4 The report clarified that, in simple terms, the professional FTE staff complement up until 2011 comprised 20 professional and technical staff. The professional complement since that time had comprised 11.5 FTE led by a shared Planning Manager supported by a Deputy. Given the shared management role, the 2014 staff complement effectively comprised 12.5 FTE. Overall, this represented a reduction of 5.5 FTE when compared to 2011.
- 2.5 In addition, the Planning Manager highlighted that 2013-4 had seen a significant increase in staff turnover and that the department was holding a number of vacancies. In short, the report evidenced that after a fairly lengthy period of relative staff stability the Planning Service had seen much recent change and the existing staff complement was significantly undermined by continuing vacancies.
- 2.6 At the time of writing the report, the then staff structure of 12.5 FTE was, as a consequence of continuing vacancies, reduced to 9.
- 2.7 The Planning Manager further reported that;
- income streams were rising and had done so since 2013-4;
 - the number of applications received and their complexity had also risen;
 - performance in DM was consequently poor across the board (other than in relation to appeal success rates);
 - the government had introduced additional targets aimed at speeding up delivery; and that,
 - in the context of Local Plans work, the South Holland element of the joint Local Plans Team had by then been operating without two of its three full time staff complement for over six months. He clarified that this reduced capacity had contributed in no small measure to slowing down production of the local plan evidence base. He did, however, state that on the positive side, and with the assistance of colleagues shared with Boston Borough Council, Local Plan Steering Groups had continued to meet regularly to discuss output on work relating to settlement hierarchy and policy formulation.
- 2.8 The report concluded that:
- a) There were presently insufficient resources within both the DM Team and the South Holland element of the conjoined Policy Team to deliver either an effective operational service or a Local Plan to timetable.
 - b) Even at capacity the DM Team was under-resourced given current workload demands. Fee income had risen and continued to do so. Workload had increased and the department could not presently reduce its backlog as individual officers were carrying caseloads of in excess of 40 applications each. This was unsustainable. As a direct consequence, performance continued to fall. Conservation as a specialism was absent.

- c) At an operational level, this situation placed the Council at significant risk of falling into special measures, thereby losing an element of local control.
- d) At capacity, the South Holland element of the conjoined Policy Team comprised 3 planners. Of these posts, two had been vacant for over six months although both posts were due to be filled shortly. Presently, the only officer in-post was the Joint Planning Unit Manager and his role is one that spans both Councils.
- e) In the context of strategic planning, there was a considerable risk of the Local Plan timetable falling behind schedule as project management could not be facilitated in the absence of resource. This represented a significant gap.
- f) There were insufficient resources and skills within the combined Policy teams to deliver the new Local Plan to the timetable currently set out in the agreed framework. There was, however, agreement in principle with BBC to engage dedicated project management support to the JPU to deliver the conjoined South East Lincolnshire Local Plan.
- g) Overall, there was an immediate and pressing need to recruit and retain both permanent staff and additional temporary staff. Failure to do so would result in the performance of the DM Team reducing to levels likely to impact adversely on income retention or local control. Failure to recruit to and effectively project manage work of the conjoined Policy Team would inevitably slow down production of the Local Plan. This would result in the failure to deliver an up-to-date local plan framework. This would put the Council at increased risk of developers promoting spatially unacceptable speculative schemes incapable of delivering the necessary infrastructure.

3.0 PROPOSED RESOURCING

- 3.1 The Planning Manager outlined that it was critical to immediate and future operational capacity and the delivery of the new Local Plan that vacant posts were filled in the short-term. He outlined that the recruitment exercise was proving difficult in the current market. He stated that reliance had needed to be placed on agency cover at an operational level but such was much more difficult and, in the longer-term, problematic in the context of local plan delivery.
- 3.2 In tandem with the above, the Planning Manager highlighted that there was an equally critical need to build capacity and skills. There were significant gaps in service provision, even if the department was operating at capacity. The added risk was that unanticipated medium-to-long-term sickness, given the low staff complement, could significantly and adversely affect performance and/or Local Plan delivery.
- 3.3 The Planning Manager expressed the view that, coupled with the need to fill vacancies, the critical gaps in staff resource accorded to the following:
 - a Senior Planning Officer role within the DM Team
 - a part-time Conservation/Heritage role within the DM Team; and
 - a Project Management role within the conjoined Planning Policy Team.

3.4 He concluded there was a need for additional resource and sought agreement to the following:

- the provision of a £235,000 resource within the departmental budget to recruit to the following three temporary posts: Senior Planning Officer (2 years) and Conservation Officer (part-time) (3 years) within the DM Team and a Local Plans Project Management Officer (18 months).

3.5 Strategy Board were entirely supportive of these proposals and clearly recognised the impact vacancies were having on service delivery. As a consequence, the Board agreed to immediately provide funds for all three posts for the temporary periods outlined above.

4.0 THE PRESENT SITUATION

4.1 Consequent on all of the above, the Planning Service acted without delay. They immediately and successfully recruited to all three of the new temporary posts. Briefly;

- 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. It is important to note that this is a supportive role that, whilst on-going, has been added to provide focus and project management skills to complement the existing resource.

4.2 In addition to the above, the two vacant Policy Officers posts were both filled in December 2014, both officers commencing work just before Christmas.

4.3 As of today, there is only one full-time vacancy within the Planning Service. This is a senior officer role within Development Management. This role will be re-advertised shortly but the introduction of the additional senior officer role covers this gap and had added immediate capacity as the officer employed has significant and extensive DM experience.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

5.1 The introduction of additional capacity within the Planning Service, to enable it to flex to meet with current demand, is wholly welcomed. It has had an immediate and positive effect upon existing departmental staff and, more importantly, performance.

5.2 In the context of the DM Team, January and February saw a marked improvement in statistical performance. The longer-term benefits are harder to predict as income and application numbers remain high and there remains a single full-time vacancy. However, this post will be re-advertised shortly and this should, when filled, deliver greater resilience to meet with future demand.

5.3 In the context of the Local Plans team, the introduction of dedicated project management has enabled a thorough review of workload, workstreams and project timescales to be undertaken. This has highlighted that the 6 months plus gap in staff resource has had an adverse effect upon work associated with the production of the Local Plan. In essence, whilst existing workstreams were maintained with the assistance of our Boston colleagues, the consequence has been farther down the line. Tandem work on other policy areas could not be begun and, as a consequence, there has been some slippage in the anticipated timescales. In addition, the Council's viability consultants have expressed the clear view that the next iteration of the Local Plan should be subject to the process of 'whole plan viability assessment (WVPA)'. This is a matter that, nationally, has caused delays in Local Plan production and impacts upon the evidence base; and, more importantly, the likelihood of site

delivery. These issues will be considered in the round when the South East Lincolnshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee next meets on 6 March 2015. The report to that Committee will set out the issues and seek agreement to a revised Local Development Scheme (LDS). This is a matter for the Joint Committee to agree, with or without revisions, and the outcomes cannot here be pre-determined.

6.0 **OPTIONS**

6.1 PMP is invited to:

1. Consider and note the contents of this report and, if satisfied, request that no further update reports be received;
2. Consider and note the contents of this report and request that a further update be received within a specified timeframe; or
3. Do nothing.

7.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

7.1 This is an update report and contains no specific recommendations.

8.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

8.1 The production of a sound Local Plan.

9.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 **Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues**

9.1.1 Carbon Footprint/Environmental Issues implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.2 **Constitution & Legal**

9.2.1 Constitution and Legal implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.3 **Contracts**

9.3.1 Contracts implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.4 **Corporate Priorities**

9.4.1 Corporate Priorities implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.5 **Crime and Disorder**

9.5.1 Crime and Disorder implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.6 **Equality and Diversity / Human Rights**

9.6.1 There are no direct equality and diversity implications arising from this this report. However, it is a requirement of the Local Plan process, LDS, and indeed all Local Plan documents,

that equality and diversity issues are fully considered and taken on board. This equally applies to all of the processes undertaken by the DM Team. The Statement of Community Involvement ensures that all Local Plan documents involve widespread consultation and the full participation of residents and businesses within South Holland District (and Boston Borough). The views, needs and aspirations of each district's diverse population will in this manner be reflected in subsequent plans and policies aimed at meeting the various needs of all societal groupings.

9.7 **Financial**

9.7.1 Financial implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.8 **Health & Wellbeing**

9.8.1 Health and Wellbeing implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.9 **Risk Management**

9.9.1 Risk Management implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.10 **Staffing**

9.10.1 Staffing implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

9.11 **Stakeholders/Consultation/Timescales**

9.11.1 Financial implications have been considered, and in the opinion of the report author, there are none.

10.00 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

10.1 All wards/communities are affected.

11.0 **ACRONYMS**

11.1 BBC – Boston Borough Council
DM – Development Management
FTE – Full Time Equivalent
LDS – Local Development Scheme
JPU – Joint Planning Unit
SEL – South East Lincolnshire
WPVA – Whole Plan Viability Assessment

Background papers:- None

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Key Decision: No

Exempt Decision: No

This report refers to a Mandatory Service