

PLANNING DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT – RESOURCES

Head of Service:	Clare Lawrence, Director of Environment, Housing and Regeneration
Wards affected:	(All Wards);
Urgent Decision?(yes/no)	Yes
If yes, reason urgent decision required:	Urgent need to procure additional resources in the Planning Development Management Service
Appendices (attached):	None

Summary

The report seeks approval for additional resources to enable the Planning Development Management Service to procure consultancy support to clear the current backlog in planning and related applications. In addition, to employ an officer to train staff in compliance and to undertake an independent review of the service by the Planning Officer's Society.

Recommendation (s)

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) To agree to an independent Planning Officers Society review of the Development Management Service.**
- (2) To agree to procure consultancy support to clear the backlog of planning applications**
- (3) To agree to retain existing senior agency staff pending permanent recruitment to roles**
- (4) To agree to appoint an enforcement trainer to work with and train planning officers in planning enforcement**
- (5) To approve the allocation of up to £190,000 to the Development Management Service budget to enable the additional resource and for the review to be undertaken.**
- (6) Member Task and Finish Group to oversee the review and progress against implementation of an action plan.**

Strategy and Resources Committee

27 July 2021

1. Reason for Recommendation

- 1.1. With significant increases in workload (25% increase in applications and 20% increase in enforcement complaints) in recent months combined with resourcing a number of major appeals, demand for the development management service has exceeded beyond capacity.
- 1.2. To reduce the current backlog and ensure the council provides the service that our residents expect, this report seeks approval for additional resources of up to £190,000 to assist with clearing the current backlog and providing specialist enforcement training.
- 1.3. The report also seeks approval for an independent review and training to enable the planning service to adapt processes and allocate its resources as efficiently as possible to meet workload challenges going forward.
- 1.4. The proposal is to undertake a review of planning processes after the backlog is cleared in order to ensure that the service is as efficient as possible and that it allocates its resources effectively.

2. Background

- 2.1. The development management service for the borough deals with all applications for planning permission, advertisement consent, listed building and conservation area consent, the felling of trees protected by tree preservation orders and prior notifications for telecommunication masts, and changes of use under the permitted development regime as well as the enforcement of breaches of planning control.
- 2.2. It is a statutory function operating under primary and secondary legislation and guided by government guidance, case law and the locally adopted statutory Development Plan.
- 2.3. It is one of the key public-facing services provided by the Borough Council.

3. Capacity issues

- 3.1. There have been capacity issues in the service over recent months due to a significant increase in workload (25% increase in applications and a 20% increase in enforcement complaints). In addition, there have been a number of officer recommendations overturned at planning committee, which has resulted in planning appeals with the associated resource requirements.
- 3.2. Whilst interim cover has been provided to cover the vacancies, there is a significant shortage of planners nationally, especially in the South East of England, which has led to a delay in filling vacancies even on a temporary basis. The result has been a significant backlog of applications building up, which the service is unable to reduce with the current level of resource.

Strategy and Resources Committee

27 July 2021

- 3.3. This backlog has resulted in significant delays when handling planning and related applications which is leading to complaints from customers.
- 3.4. The increase in enforcement service requests has also resulted in delays investigating enforcement cases. The situation is now critical and it is recommended that additional resource is necessary to clear the backlog.

4. Agency Staffing Costs

- 4.1. As previously outlined, there is a national shortage of qualified planners especially at a senior level and previous attempts to recruit to posts, including the Head of Service, have been unsuccessful. The three vacant senior posts are currently being covered by temporary staff, but the cost is significantly greater than the salary of permanent staff.
- 4.2. Recruitment to the permanent posts has already commenced and if successful, it is hoped that staff will be in place by the end of the calendar year.
- 4.3. Given the current stage of the local plan preparation and the high levels of development management and enforcement casework, it is essential that the current temporary agency staff are retained until posts are permanently recruited to.
- 4.4. The additional cost associated for this is set out below in Table 1 and has been budgeted until the end of the financial year in case the Council is unsuccessful appointing to the posts. However, it is hoped that the cost will be reduced if permanent staff are successfully recruited earlier within this period.

5. Review of the service

- 5.1. In 2017 the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) undertook a review of the development management service including the operation of the Planning Committee as a result of designation by central government. While a number of service improvements were implemented following this review, the past year has brought new challenges for all Council services due to the Coronavirus pandemic which has required different ways of working and delivering of services. This, coupled with the continuing changes/proposals to the planning system announced by central Government in the past year, has been significant.
- 5.2. It has been four years since the last review and it is considered that the time is right for a fresh, independent review of the development management service. This is to ensure that our processes are efficient as possible to address increased workloads as well as to ensure that resource is sufficient and deployed appropriately to provide the maximum level of cost efficiency and effectiveness.

Strategy and Resources Committee

27 July 2021

6. The proposal

- 6.1. In order to address the backlog in applications and service requests and review the service, the following is proposed:
- 6.1.1. Secure a planning consultant to assess planning and related applications and reports for Council officers to determine and issue decisions
 - 6.1.2. Retain our existing temporary senior staff pending recruitment to permanent posts; to which they are welcome to apply for. These posts are a challenge to recruit to and as such, the funding requested below enables these posts to be covered until March 2022. The total cost may be reduced if the Council is successful in appointing to the posts before the end of the financial year.
 - 6.1.3. Current planning compliance resource is a single and part time member of staff. This is insufficient especially given the increase in enforcement workload and lacks resilience. To address this through the staffing restructure, planning compliance will be transferred to all planning officers to undertake. To enable this, training for planning officers is required. It is therefore proposed to appoint a temporary trainer to provide this training to staff over a period of 6 months to embed relevant skills and knowledge across the team.
 - 6.1.4. The Council has been in discussion with the Planning Officers Society (POS) to undertake a review to focus on operational issues - processes/systems including the committee process and supporting processes external to the planning service such as ICT and legal. It is intended that the review will take place in late Autumn 2021 when there is increased capacity in the team from a reduced backlog. The outcome of the independent review is likely to result in a number of recommendations for change and a plan for action. These will be reported to Planning Committee, but should future funding be required for implementation, this will come back to Strategy and Resources Committee for consideration or be addressed through the Council's normal budget setting process.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1. On 16 March 2021, S&R Committee approved an updated budget of £741,540 for producing the Local Plan, which is a separate and independent workstream to the issues identified in this report.
- 7.2. As such, a separate budget of up to £190,000 is required for the work set-out in this report, broken down as follows in Table 1.

Strategy and Resources Committee

27 July 2021

Table 1

Resource Requested	Estimated Cost
Planning consultant to clear backlog	£50k
Retention of temporary senior staff pending recruitment to permanent posts (assuming worst case scenario until the end of March 2022)	£64k
Retain Head of Place for x2 days per week, from April to September 2022	£22k
Planning Compliance trainer 6 months (from date of appointment)	£40k
POS review	£14k
Total	£190k

- 7.3. **Section 151 Officer's comments:** The planning service is an essential, statutory function for the Borough. As outlined in the report, increased caseloads and recruitment challenges are having a significant, adverse impact on the level of service delivery. As such, the service has requested a budget of up to £190,000 to restore the level of service delivery. If approved by members, the requested budget could be funded from the Corporate Projects Reserve, which holds an unallocated balance of £3.140m. Allocating up to £190,000 would reduce the reserve's balance available for other projects to £2.950m.
- 7.4. Once the POS review has been delivered, a report should be brought back to the appropriate Committee to explain the improvements made to the service and how it will deliver value for money for residents going forward. It is also recommended that permanent recruitment to vacant posts should be progressed as soon as practicable, so the service can return to delivering within its routine budget envelope as soon as possible and minimise expenditure on more costly interim solutions.

Legal Implications

These are broadly contained within the body of the report. The Service is required to operate within a legal framework which is driven by meeting set timelines.

Strategy and Resources Committee

27 July 2021

Monitoring Officer's comments: The workload of a small team has not been sustainable for some time. To meet the requirements of the demands placed on the Service by the statutory framework within which the Service operates, needs to be addressed.

Policies, Plans & Partnerships

Council's Key Priorities: The following Key Priorities are engaged:

The development management service will contribute towards delivering the Council's Visions and objectives identified in its Four Year Plan.

Service Plans:

Development Management is a matter included within the current Service Delivery Plan.

Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:

The development management service itself has a key role in implementing a number of key objectives that are set out in our Climate Change Action Plan.

Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:

The development management service has a key role in implementing a number of key Sustainability objectives. In order to comply with Government safety guidance due to COVID-19, consultation procedures are being reviewed. Consultation procedures are outlined in a separate document, the Statement of Community Involvement. The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) was published in 14 November 2019. A further report was taken to the 10 September 2020 Licencing and Planning Policy Committee meeting seeking approval of an Addendum to the SCI in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. The Addendum was approved for the purpose of public consultation. The public consultation on the Addendum has not yet been undertaken.

Appendices

None