

Report to: **Strategic Planning Committee**



Date of Meeting: 5 December 2023

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Employment of agency staff in the Planning Policy team

Report summary:

Members will be aware of the extensive work to be undertaken in preparing the Local Plan and that we have been unable to fill a vacant post in the Planning Policy team despite a number of attempts through advertisements and interviews. A staffing deficit comes at a time when a realistic but tight and challenging new timetable for local plan production has been agreed. The long term preference is to appoint a new staff member into the team. However, to overcome a shorter term need it is proposed that we seek to appoint an agency planner for an interim period, suggested to be for a six to twelve month period. Agreement is sought for funding with a recommendation of this committee to be made to Cabinet to agree this expenditure.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That Strategic Planning Committee agree to recommend to Cabinet that funding of £55,000 be committed to appointing an agency planning officer on an interim basis to work in the Planning Policy team to support Local Plan production and cover the vacant Planning Officer post in the team.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure that the Planning Policy team has a sufficient staff resource to produce the local plan in accordance with agreed timetables.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning

- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk;

Links to background information [local plan timetable and LDS.pdf \(eastdevon.gov.uk\)](#)

Link to Council Plan

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
 - A greener East Devon
 - A resilient economy
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1. Local Plan timetable and staffing in the Planning Policy team

- 1.1 At Strategic Planning Committee on 31 October 2023 members agreed to a revised local plan making timetable. This timetable was informed by two critical dates, noting that the government are proposing a new local plan making system and that plans to be made under the current system have to meet deadlines that state:
- Plans have to be submitted for Examination by the end of June 2025, at the latest; and
 - Plans have to be Adopted before the end of December 2026, at the latest.
- 1.2 Meeting these deadlines is realistic, but it is not without challenges and amongst other matters will require an appropriate staffing resource in the Planning Policy team. For most of 2023 the Planning Policy team was running with the absence of a Planning Policy Officer. The previous post holder resigned and despite placing adverts and holding interviews we have been unable to appoint a suitably qualified and experienced replacement staff member. The report on the Local Plan timetable highlighted this issue and stated that we were considering options around whether to appoint an agency planner to the team or send work out to consultants. We have reviewed these options and favour keeping work in-house as much as possible since our experience with consultants has been mixed in terms of the quality of work and the amount of our officer time that has been involved in managing the commission. The use of consultants is also very expensive and should be limited to work where we do not have the expertise in-house whereas the issue here is capacity rather than capability.
- 1.3 Based on previous poor/limited responses to past advertisements there is seen to be little merit in re-advertising again now directly for this post. The post has In

respect of securing a permanent position we would see greater merit in looking in the future at appealing to both qualified planners and non-planners (for example geography graduates) in any future job advert. This would be with a programme of offering career progression and training (through the apprenticeship route/day release at university) to a non-qualified planner, if appointed. This 'grow-your-own' approach to securing staff has been running effectively in the planning service for some time now and is proving to be a successful model.

- 1.4 To overcome a shorter term recruitment challenge, however, it is seen as appropriate to go down an agency route to get an appropriately qualified staff member in post to assist with local plan work.

2. Current Planning Policy budgets

- 2.1 Planning Policy budgets show a current reserve, coded against consultancy fees, of just under £128,000 and this financial year (2023/24) we have a net remaining budget (discounting around £40,000 spent so far) of around £80,000 for consultancy fees. Added to this a proposed (suggested) budget for 2025/26 of £122,400 gives a grand total consultancy fees budget of around £330,400 that will take us through to the end of the 2026 financial year.

- 2.2 We do, however, have existing outstanding consultancy spend commitments, with work underway on various studies and also future local plan essential commissions being paid for through planning policy budgets. This work includes:

- Strategic flood risk assessment
- Water cycle study
- Housing needs assessment update
- Gypsy and traveller accommodation needs assessment
- Plan assessment under the Habitat regulations, and
- Local plan viability assessment.

It should be noted that this list is not a definitive final list and is likely to be added to. There is, and will also be, other external Council commissions that will not be covered through Planning Policy budgets but that will provide evidence for use in supporting the local plan.

- 2.3 Although final costs are an unknown it will be prudent to set aside an estimated £200,000 to cover the above and any future external commissions that are needed. Deducting this figure from the £330,400 leaves a net figure of around £130,400 for the period up to financial year end of 2026. However, this does not take into account the fees charged by the Planning Inspectorate for undertaking local plan Examination, nor any other associated costs related to the Examination. Extra costs will include appointment of a Programme Officer, who works variable hours providing essential administrative support for the efficient running of the Examination process. Examination costs will come from the consultancy budget.

- 2.4 The Planning Inspector and other Examination costs are an unknown, they depend hugely on how complex and lengthy an Examination may end up being. But with

high housing numbers proposed in East Devon, a complex new town to plan for through the local plan and high levels of interest from local communities and from developers it is reasonable to assume it will be a more complex, rather than less complex, plan Examination.

- 2.5 It is suggested that the figure of £130,400 should be looked upon as a reasonable estimate of plan Examination costs, hopefully an upper estimate, though reiterating the unknowns and real potential for final costs to be higher.
- 2.6 It is also highlighted that the plan Examination is likely to extend beyond the end of the 2026 financial year and so some Examination costs might be met through budgeting in the 2026/27 financial year. But that is a long way off.
- 2.7 Based on the above assessment it can be seen that there is likely to be an appropriate sum of money, all-be-it with significant unknowns attached, to cover production costs of the local plan. But that is only applicable assuming that additional costs are not incurred. With appointment of an agency planner there would be additional costs and therefore agreement is sought to secure additional funding.

3. Employment of an agency planner

- 3.1 An agency planner, someone with relevant experience in planning policy work (though not necessarily at higher senior or management level) might cost the Council up to £100,000 for a year. We currently have budget for the vacant Planning Officer post which equates to approximately £45,000 per annum based on a mid-point on the pay scale and including on-costs leaving a budget shortfall of up to £55,000 per annum to cover the post through agency staff. At this stage it would be prudent to consider having an agency planner in position for at least six months, but given the importance of progressing the Local Plan and pressing timescales to do this under the current plan making system it is considered prudent to budget for 12 months so that the arrangement can be readily extended if required.
- 3.2 An agency planner would pick up on specific and dedicated work streams and areas required to support local plan production as well as more overarching general work areas. For example, with further (Regulation 18) consultation planned in Spring 2024, there will be considerable work to be undertaken in preparation of consultation and assessing feedback received in the first half of 2024.
- 3.3 Subject to this committee agreeing to the appropriateness of employment of an agency planner it would form a recommendation, supported by this Committee paper, that would go on to and seek Cabinet approval for identifying and agreeing to funding.
- 3.4 We would want to work to a timetable of gaining Cabinet approval in January 2024 and then moving swiftly on to appointment with a start date ideally in February 2024.

Financial implications:

The current budget figures have been supplied by finance and all financial considerations are considered within the recommendation and body of the report.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications requiring comment.

