

STAFF COMMITTEE



18 MAY 2017 - 2.00PM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs M Davis(Chairman), Councillor D Mason(Vice-Chairman), Councillor Mrs V M Bucknor, Councillor T R Butcher, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor C J Seaton and Councillor F H Yeulett..

APOLOGIES: Councillor S Tierney.

Carol Pilson (Corporate Director), Nick Harding (Head of Shared Planning), Sam Anthony (Head of HR & OD) and Charlotte Boast (Policy & Communications).

S1/17 APPOINTMENT OF THE CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

Councillor Maureen Davis was appointed as Chairman of the Staff Committee for the Municipal Year.

S2/17 APPOINT A VICE-CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

Councillor David Mason was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Staff Committee for the Municipal Year.

S3/17 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 30 January 2017 were confirmed and signed.

S4/17 INCREASE IN PLANNING SERVICE RESOURCES

Carol Pilson, Corporate Director, presented a request to increase the resources in the Planning Service. She outlined the reasons why additional resource was needed:

- Government have introduced new responsibilities that the Council must take on. These relate to brownfield land registers, permission in principle and custom and self-build housing. The Government has recognised that this will increase workload, and has awarded the Council some funding for the next three years to take on these new responsibilities and burdens.
- the Council is dealing with an increased number of planning applications. Whilst this is positive as it points to continued economic growth of the area, it means that the team are dealing with an increased number of applications.
- the Streets Ahead project and Enforcement work are important priorities for members and the Council. Planning Enforcement is an important service and is receiving an increasing number of requests. We are currently unable to react to these as well as we would like to and have got a backlog. The report outlines a change in resources required to reduce the backlog, as well as keeping on top of day-to-day work.
- our Local Plan has taken a slightly different approach in terms of not having site allocations. A criteria based approach was taken and we have Broad Concept Plan areas around the

main market towns in order to try and bring forward holistic development in larger applications. These areas are all in different ownership, and it is difficult getting land owners to co-operate and bring forward these Concept Plans, which are required before planning applications will be considered on these sites. It is requested to bring in temporary resource to try and work with the land owners to bring forward these sites as quickly as possible.

- Part-time working by senior staff is leaving a residual four day post. Making this up to a five day post would be attractive to potential applicants. We are looking to fund this from the 20% increase in Planning Fees that was agreed by the Portfolio Holder six weeks ago. However, as the General Election has been called since then, the legislation has not been passed which gives the ability to charge the extra 20%. Liaison has been undertaken with colleagues in the Local Government Association who believe it is still intended for this legislation to come forward in Autumn.

Carol Pilson explained that she did not want to fully commence the proposals until there is greater assurance on the increased funding levels. This is why the report recommendations are split into two. Part One outlines what the Council wants to begin now, and Part Two are actions it believes need to wait until there is confirmation of increased planning fees. In summary, the actions to be approved by Staff Committee are:

- the additional day for the Senior Planner (making the role up to a full time equivalent)
- making the Enforcement role more attractive by resetting these roles from two Band 6's to having a Senior and an Assistant. The Senior Officer would deal with more complex cases, an example being our previous Constantine House issue, with an assistant undertaking more general day-to-day administrative work. This would require the reversal of a frozen Enforcement post that happened previously in Staff Committee prior to the shared Planning proposals. This relates to Part 1 B of the proposals.

Carol Pilson explained that there is a reserve set aside for planning matters from our Local Plan. The proposal is that Part 1 of our proposals would be funded from that reserve, pending the agreement of the planning fees later in the year. The recruitment of a Senior Officer and additional hours in the Technical Team would only take place when the increased planning fees have been agreed. Therefore, the proposal is cost neutral. The Planning Fee increase states that the increased income must be invested within the Planning Service and cannot go into the general budget for funding other activities.

This is an initial proposal over how the Council would spend some of that money. It may need to come back in future once the planning application trends are understood that would alter staff requirements.

Carol Pilson invited questions to be asked.

Councillor Seaton said that he understood the proposal would be cost neutral, but there will be a slight deletion of the reserve if used upfront. He asked what possibility or percentage once the fees come through can be put back in that reserve to build it up again. Carol Pilson thought that the reserve could be replenished as it is only being drawn on very minimally in terms of the top 3 issues stated in Part 1 of the report, which is around £20,000 and £21,000. She said that would be pro-rataed, so it would only affect the first three months. She also stated that investigation can be made to replenish that reserve so that it goes back up to full strength.

Councillor Seaton said that he had no problems with the reserves being used, as long as they can

be replenished. Nick Harding added that although receiving some funding from Government, it doesn't go beyond three years. He said that the purpose of the planning reserve was to have a fund available in order to deal with any policy-based issues that arise. He said that looking beyond the immediate horizon, undoubtedly there will be some work that will have to be undertaken to lead to any sort of local plan review. The Government is looking for Council's to review their plans every five years and we are not far away from that at all.

Councillor Yeulett said that he agreed with the proposals but had a couple of points to make. He said that getting the Broad Concept Plans agreed was difficult when land was in different ownership, and asked that if any had been agreed. Nick Harding said that one is in place at the moment for parts of the Wisbech area, a second is about to go to consultation in Wisbech and there is another one in March that is expected any time soon. He said that in the Chatteris area they are skipping straight to a planning application for the whole of the area, and that continual discussions are being held with West March and South March landowners.

Councillor Yeulett then questioned whether it was two years and then an extension of time for a year. Nick Harding said it is difficult to say as it is up to the landowners to organise themselves and that they can only be assisted so much. He said that there may be the ability to tap into some of the Mayor's funds to undertake some site assessment related work in order to help the landowners to improve their confidence in bringing these sites forward. He also said there needs to be a certain level of momentum by the landowners.

Councillor Yeulett said he had a second point on enforcement. He stated that it reminded him of previous enforcement issues on the Bedlam Bridge, and people are asking him what can be done about the current occupants of this site. He said that he would like to raise awareness of this issue as the public are concerned about it.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor said that she had been 'driving planning enforcement mad' and would fully support additional resource. She asked for clarification on the current existing structure as there was no mention of Peterborough shared services so she assumed that the document was all stand-alone for Fenland. She also asked what the current structure was in current resource numbers. She gave the example of the Section 106 team, wondering how many staff there were, and also said that she had no idea of the overall number in the current Planning Service in Fenland.

Nick Harding replied that it was quite difficult to put a figure on it as there is a number of agency staff in at the moment. Councillor Mrs Bucknor then asked what the full-time equivalent was. Nick Harding replied that the shared Technical Team manager is shared, which is a Fenland employee who is shared 50% with Peterborough City Council. He then said that below that there are the Technical Support officers, of which Sam Anthony said there was 4.65 FTE. Councillor Bucknor asked how many people were in the Conservation Team. Carol Pilson answered that there were two people at a total of 0.9 FTE. Councillor Mrs Bucknor said that she could understand why it can be difficult to get hold of someone and that she was trying to understand current provision against where we will be going forward with the increases. Carol Pilson said that she would be able to get the information to Councillor Mrs Bucknor that detailed figures at pre-austerity levels that could be compared to where the Council is now and where it will be.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked which Planning resources are shared with Peterborough. Nick Harding replied that the only posts that are shared are 50% of him [Head of Planning], 50% of the Technical Team manager and the Section 106 team. He said that Fenland has a fixed number of hours a year that they purchase from Peterborough. Councillor Mrs Bucknor then asked if people registered their hours as she wanted to make sure Fenland got their money's worth. Nick Harding replied that the Peterborough staff record all of the hours they do for Fenland, which is submitted as part of the invoice regime. He then said that the Technical Team Manager's charge to Peterborough is then taken off the Section 106 costs that are invoiced to Fenland, as well as the

50% of the Head of Planning's time. Councillor Mrs Bucknor said that was interesting and good to know.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor questioned whether any of the teams are based in localities (e.g a Fenland person based in March or Wisbech) or if it was shared in a 'desk-hopping' type system. Nick Harding replied the posts that he had previously outlined as shared are the only parts of the shared service arrangement. He said this is because Fenland wanted to make sure that its officers were working on its applications, and did not want Fenland and Peterborough officers working together in one big room and working on different council applications on different days. He said that in effect this means that Fenland has retained its sovereignty. He said that a slight exception was recent recruitment for a junior Planning Officer: Fenland was unable to recruit to the post, but as Peterborough were advertising at the same time they appointed two people and 'rented' the additional officer to Fenland.

Councillor Murphy questioned whether the Part 1D proposal [recruiting a temporary member of staff] would work as the Council has never been able to get anybody temporarily for a year. Nick Harding said that he did not entirely disagree with that point but that the Council was 'stuck between a rock and a hard place' because the long-term workload is unknown for some roles and once a Broad Concept Plan is finalised it is 'job done'. Councillor Murphy said that a fall-back needed to be considered as it is unlikely that the Council will be able to recruit to a year-long post.

Councillor Davis asked what Nick Harding's experience was on recruiting to this type of post. Nick Harding replied that neither Fenland nor Peterborough had been to market for a senior role for quite some time, so was unsure. He said that there was a general shortage anyway of these roles, so as a minimum it should be given a go and see what happens. Sam Anthony said it is a difficult service to recruit to, but after seven years of austerity measures there are more individuals on the market now. Councillor Mrs Bucknor said that this might mean that other people are also recruiting as they are in the same position as us. Councillor Seaton added that just because it hasn't worked in the past, it doesn't mean it won't work now so we have got to at least try.

Councillor Mason asked if there is any sort of payback period to take care of Part B, assuming the Government does introduce its proposals in Autumn. Nick Harding said yes because the amount of money generated would more than adequately cover the proposal. Councillor Mason asked Nick Harding to clarify if this would be the case at the end of the three years. Nick Harding said that the funding is only to cover part of the costs for the Brownfield Register and work around the Custom and Self-Build, and that has only been confirmed for three years. He said that even if you were to pretend you weren't going to get any money, assuming we continued to have the same number of planning applications we could still cover the costs of this proposal.

The report and proposals were AGREED.

2.30pm

Chairman