

Committee: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 4 July 2018

Subject:	Planning Resources
Lead Officer:	Head of Planning Services
Portfolio Holder:	Portfolio Holder for Planning Services
Link to Council Priorities:	P1 and P3
Exempt information:	None
Delegated status:	For recommendation to Council to 18 July 2018
Key Decision:	N/A

Executive Summary:

The Head of Planning Services has recently undertaken a review of the planning service and identified a number of operational changes required to improve the service.

To maintain the current performance level of determining planning applications and providing pre-application advice the planning service relies upon the constant employment of at least three temporary case officers. Temporary contractors are an expensive way to populate a planning service. The turnover of temporary officers affects the quality of the work carried out by the planning service and the level of customer service provided to residents.

The existing policy planning assistant post is a 2-year fixed term post that is funded from the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant (HPDG). This fixed term post has been agreed on 3 previous occasions over the last 7 years. There is now only funding available for 2018/19. It is proposed that this post be made permanent and funded from the 5% CIL admin pot from 2019/20 onwards.

Recommended: that

the findings of the review of the Planning Service be noted and the addition of officer posts (3x Senior Planning Officer and 1x Planning Assistant) to the permanent establishment with the budgetary provision identified in the report be agreed.

Report:

1. **Background**

- 1.1 The Head of Planning Services has recently undertaken a review of the planning service and identified a number of operational changes required to improve the service. The proposed changes will ensure the Council's Planning Service provides both excellent customer service and outstanding planning professionalism.

The review also identified the need for four additional planning posts.

2. Development Management

- 2.1 To maintain the current performance level of determining planning applications and providing pre-application advice the planning service relies upon the constant employment of at least three temporary case officers. Temporary contractors are an expensive way to populate a planning service. In 2017/18 the planning service spent £262,000 on agency staff to meet the current level of planning applications and pre-application requests. In contrast three permanent members of staff would have cost £149,546 (including oncosts).
- 2.2 The impact of the three temporary workers on the service output can be seen in the quarter four performance indicators for 2017/18, when the turnover of temporary contract officers resulted in a dip in the percentage of applications determined within the statutory timeframes.
- 2.3 The reliance of temporary contract workers also affects the quality of the work carried out by the planning service and the level of customer service provided to residents. The constant turnover of temporary officers creates problems with caseloads and consistency for members, residents and applicants. It also means that cases are parked when an officer leaves (until a replacement is found) as the existing staff do not have capacity to take additional cases. As such permission is sought for three additional permanent senior planning officer posts – one for each sub area team.
- 2.4 One of the operational changes proposed by the Head of Planning Services is to realign the work flow for case officers, team leaders and planning managers. At present team leaders have a significant case load of over 40 cases which prevents them from effectively managing planning officers. Team leaders should focus on managing the case officers and their cases providing technical advice, supporting officers, developing their knowledge and ultimately fact checking their work before the application is passed to the managers for signing. Team leaders should clear all case and pre-application reports before they are sent to the planning managers for final sign off. This will ensure the identification of issues or problems with applications early in the application process.
- 2.5 Planning managers would continue to sign off applications but will focus on the planning recommendation rather than the administration of the decision-making process. This will enable planning managers to focus on other management duties, such as reviewing the pre-application service and the validation checklist, which will also improve the efficiency and level of service provided.
- 2.6 At present team leaders have a case load of approximately 40 cases and case officers approximately 70 cases. To create capacity for the team leaders, permission is sought to retain the existing three temporary contract workers until December 2018. This will create the capacity necessary to realign the work and reduce the existing backlog of overdue cases. It will also help cover the current two vacant posts in the department (1x team leader, 1x senior) and the appointment of the three permanent posts detailed above.

3. Planning Policy

- 3.1 The existing policy planning assistant post is a 2-year fixed term post that is funded from the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant (HPDG). There is now only funding available for 2018/19. This fixed term post has been agreed on 3 previous occasions over the last 7 years. This has made staff retention difficult as the position cannot be guaranteed. The policy team has effectively trained and lost 3 successive officers. At present the post is being covered by a temporary contract officer as the fixed term post could not be filled after two rounds of advertisement. The role of the planning assistant is to support the preparation of the Local Plan and to work with the CIL/Obligations and Monitoring Officer to create resilience within the service. As such it is proposed that this post be made permanent and funded from the 5% CIL admin pot from 2019/20 onwards.
- 3.2 It is also proposed to secure a transport consultant/consultancy to work on the evidence base studies for the Local Plan with Surrey County Council, TfL, and Highways England. The consultant/consultancy would also support the Infrastructure Delivery Coordinator with the preparation of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and infrastructure projects in the Borough and those which could have an implication for Elmbridge. For example, the proposed improvements to Junction 10 of the M25.. A similar approach has been taken by Woking, Guildford and Waverly Councils. This resource will be funded from the CIL 5% administration fund. Considering existing commitments on this fund together with previous years income officers are comfortable that sufficient funds will be in place to support both the transport consultant and the planning assistant post.
- 3.3 The Head of Service has also identified the need to extend the existing policy temporary contract working until December 2018 to complete several key pieces of evidence for the Local Plan.

Financial implications:

A summary of the financial implications of the proposal is as follows:

EXPENDITURE	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
3 x permanent Senior Planning Officers from October 2018	74,773	149,546
3 x agency staff for 6 months until December 2018	131,000	
1 x permanent Planning Assistant		31,265
1 x Transport Consultant	80,000	
1 x temporary Policy contractor until December 2018	33,060	
Total Expenditure	321,833	180,811

FUNDING SOURCE	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
Vacancies	38,000	38,000
CIL Admin Budget	80,000	31,265
Growth		111,546
Unfunded	213,833	
Total	331,833	180,811

In 2018/19, there will be unbudgeted expenditure of £77,773 (including oncosts) for 3 permanent Senior Planning Officers.

In 2018/19, we will incur unbudgeted agency staff expenditure of approximately £164,060 (based on 17/18 actual spend). This will be partly offset by savings from vacant posts in the team including the conservation officer post (£38,000) plus any general staff turnover.

The Planning Assistant is currently funded from HPDG. However, this source of funding is not budgeted to last beyond 2018/19. It is proposed that as a large element of the Planning Assistant post relates to CIL administration, that the CIL administration budget is used to fund this post on an ongoing basis after 2018/19.

It is proposed that in 2018/19 the estimated £80,000 transport consultant costs be met from the CIL administration budget.

Please note that whilst the existing CIL administration budget could cover these costs, if in any year the CIL administration budget falls, any surplus expenditure will have to be met from other sources.

It is anticipated that some of the costs above can be met from the additional PPA income which Planning may generate. It is difficult to forecast how much income may be generated but a conservative estimate of 5 major applications per year could generate income of approximately £200,000 per annum. The number of large scale applications will increase as the Local Plan progresses.

Environmental/Sustainability Implications:

None for this report.

Legal implications:

There are no direct legal implications arising although the addition of planning officer posts to the permanent establishment will support the discharge of the Council's statutory planning functions.

Equality Implications:

This report has been prepared taking into account equality issues.

Risk Implications:

There is a risk that if the number of planning applications decline the need for the additional senior planning officers will reduce, as will funds available to spend in the CIL 5% administration pot. However, our records show that the number of planning applications received by the Council increases each year. It is also anticipated that the number of applications will significantly increase as the Local Plan progresses.

Community Safety Implications:

None for this report.

Principal Consultees:

Finance and Legal Services.

Background papers:

None.

Enclosures/Appendices:

None.

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