

Portfolio Holder Decision

Additional Resource for the Planning Service

Executive Portfolio Holder *Angie Singleton, Strategic Planning (Place Making)*
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Purpose of the Report

Authorisation of additional resource for the planning service.

Public Interest

The Planning Service manages sustainable development in South Somerset in accordance with the South Somerset Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.

Decision Taken

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning (Place Making) has agreed to approve additional expenditure to support the planning service for 2019/20 of £232,000 to be met from planning fee income as detailed in the financial implications below.

Reason

To sustain a customer focused planning service to the standard expected of this authority during the introduction of new ways of working and technology.

Background

As part of the Transformation Programme, the new operating model will provide a more efficient means to deliver the planning service using the 12 customer and technology centred principles. However, this will take time to fully implement and realise the benefits as it requires continued training, testing and support for customers to engage with the service in different ways.

The changes to the service place additional demands on staff on top of dealing with customers and applications. This comes at a time when we have experienced significant turnover of experienced staff together with higher demands on the service through for example, a higher number of appeals, and the increase in “two starring” of applications to Regulation Committee.

It is important that the Council has the capacity to maintain service standards during a period of change and higher demand and this requires temporary resource. To date additional resources have been provided to support the service but the cost of these has been met within existing budgets and spending agreed by Council. However, in the new financial year the additional resources will require approval.

The Proposal

The proposal recognises the need to support this key service for the council and invest in support in Case Management and Specialist service areas in the following ways :-

- 1 year temporary contracts at Grade 3 for 2 x Graduates (their contracts run out at the end of March). The Graduates have been a huge success in handling cases. They are now trained and this is the time we yield the benefit of that training and convert it into higher productivity.
- One additional case officer capacity (at validation level) would allow further planning work to be done at case officer level instead of specialist level and ease the case load pressure on specialists and allow a re-focus of work towards case, in line with the model.
- Additional specialist at a grade up to level 7 on a one-year contract to add to the planning team to release time for current staff to work more on council priorities including housing delivery. The one-year contract would enable us to see the technology and new ways of working and the other process changes bed in.
- Extend our agency officer for Enforcement until the end of the year to establish planning enforcement in the new model and close down high profile cases.
- Confirm from income budgets the ongoing use of South West Heritage Trust and Somerset Ecology Services. These are specialist inputs that are a necessity to fulfil statutory obligations.

Benefits

- The move to new ways of working will be better supported and staff will have the capacity to engage in the changes and deliver for our customers.
- There will be more time for planners to support council priorities in particular regeneration and accelerating housing delivery.
- There should not be an additional call on MTFP funds provided income levels are met in accordance with forecasts.
- Supports the development of talent and provides a pipeline for new planners to work for SSDC.

Financial Implications

The Government has recognised that historically the cost of planning services provided by local authorities is not fully recovered through planning fees, resulting in a subsidy to the services through council tax and business rates funding. Planning fees set by Government were subsequently increased by 20% in January 2018 'in order that LPA planning services are adequately funded'.

By virtue of a staff cost reduction through operating model efficiencies delivered under the Council's own transformation programme, and the increased planning fee and pre-application advice income, the financial position for the function has improved. In particular, the income trend has increased substantially as shown below. The Services Director considers that this trend is likely to continue, however this is of course a forecast so this assumption carries a degree of risk.

Average Total Planning Income:

2015/16 – 2016/17	2 Years	Annual Average = £1.345m
2017/18 – 2018/19*	2 Years	Annual Average = £1.726m

*forecast

The 2019/20 Draft Budget includes £1.407m as the estimate for total planning income. If the trend of the previous two years there is a potential surplus in the region of £0.3m against the approved budget.

The request in summary is for additional capacity within the planning function to meet service demand, maintain service standards as the new operating model beds in, and mitigate impacts of the various points highlighted earlier in this report. The intent is to acquire these resources for one year in the first instance, with the estimated costs within the range of £0.216m to £0.232m. The proposal is to increase to the expenditure budget for the function by £0.232m, with an equal increase in the income budget. The total income budget would increase to £1.639m in 2019/20, which is £87k (5%) below the average income of the previous two years. The additional resources are:

Resources	Includes	Cost Range	
		From £k	To £k
2 FTE Graduate Case Officers	Pay, NI, Pension	48	54
1 FTE Case Officer	Pay, NI, Pension	32	37
1 FTE Development Control Specialist	Pay, NI, Pension	44	49
1 FTE Enforcement Specialist	Agency Cost	49	49
South West Heritage Trust and Somerset Ecology Services	Contract cost of purchased services	43	43
Total Costs		216	232

Affordability is based on the estimated income materialising and, whilst this appears feasible, it is not certain so there is an element of risk. This risk will need to be underwritten by reserves in the event the costs are not fully covered by income received. The s151 Officer is supportive whilst noting a risk, and considers reserve balances are adequate to mitigate the risk for one year. Costs, income and factors affecting demand and quality of service will need to be closely monitored, and if income drops sharply then costs will need to be managed accordingly.

Corporate Priority Implications

An efficient planning service underpins the Council Plan ambitions for the Economy, Homes and the Environment

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

None arising from this report

Equality and Diversity Implications

No groups with protected characteristics are expected to be affected by this decision.

Background Papers

None