

Highways Officer Report

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1. Purpose of the Report

This report proposes to supplement the current level of Highway and Transport advice provided to South Somerset District Council via the statutory highway authority, Somerset County Council.

2. Public Interest

Highways advice and expertise in the planning process is an important consideration in determining applications. The aim of this report is to enable the Council to secure a greater level of highways advice available to members, officers and the public in discharging their planning duty.

3. Recommendation

The District Executive is recommended to agree:

To approve funding of £141,300 (£47,100 per annum) from the Infrastructure Fund to enable either a three year fixed term appointment for the procurement of highways advice or consultancy advice.

4. Forward Plan

This report was not on the forward plan and has come at this time in view of an opportunity to work with a neighbouring council who are also advertising for a similar post and share costs.

5. Background

Planning decisions require sound highway's opinions, in order that the traffic impact of proposals is fully understood fully. On larger schemes the assessment of the highways impact is often possible only after several iterations of schemes. The availability of staff to maintain these discussions and to then make final comments is currently constrained by the availability of Highways Officers. This resource is provided by Somerset County Council as part of their statutory highways function. The processes within County for the determination of planning applications can also be restricted by the need to go through internal consultation on, for instance, Travel Planning, Safety Auditing and then the Adoption process. This can take some time, and can frustrate the bringing forward of sites for development leading to delays in the provision of homes and jobs.

Recently SCC, have issued standing advice that applies generically to applications to minimise the input and allow concentration on major schemes. This should assist in the longer term, but often members want to ask questions of a scheme at committee and without a highway presence then this can cause difficulties. Furthermore, the

interpretation/robustness of this standing advice has resulted in several planning appeals being allowed and it is considered that the ability to discuss the smaller schemes directly with a highway officer would result in more robust decisions being made.

Members will be aware of the requirement for local authorities to provide timely decisions. Analysis of large-scale applications over the last 12 months clearly shows that there has been an increase in the time taken by the County Council to provide conclusive highway comments. This has had a significant impact upon the speed at which the district council can provide a firm recommendation to members and this has implications.

Recently Government has introduced the opportunity for developers to have their planning application directly determined by the Planning Inspectorate if the council consistently exceeds the statutory period to determine planning applications. Members will also be aware that a developer has the right to appeal against 'non-determination' upon the expiry of the expected period of determination.

The impact of this is that the ability to make a formal decision is taken away from the elected members and given directly to the Planning Inspectorate. Whilst it is possible for the local authority to present their case at the subsequent appeal it is perceived poorly by the local community and can have an adverse impact upon the reputation of the council.

6. Report

The proposal is for SSDC to pay for a senior highways surveyor to provide professional and technical advice specifically for SSDC applications to supplement the resource currently available. At present it is envisaged an officer would be employed by SSDC and that officer would be seconded to SCC Highways and would seek to integrate into their teams, but work exclusively for South Somerset. There is a difficulty in recruiting and appointing highways officers at present and if the appointment proved difficult to make, the recommendation allows us to procure specialist advice from a dedicated highway consultancy up to the value of the post. The work would include the areas of technical design guidance and standards, the supervision of privately owned development sites, and both major and minor highway improvement projects, essential highway projects, and policy development.

Negotiations are taking place between the district and county as to who will ultimately be responsible for the management of the post and where it will be based. It is recognised that the funding of this post is being justified on the basis that SSDC requires a dedicated resource and this will be reflected in the final agreement. In the unlikely event that it is not possible to reach an agreement with the County Council then the opportunity remains to employ an external consultant to provide highways advice.

The desired outputs are:

- Greater availability of Highways Officer guidance to Area Committees
- Pre-application guidance more widely available to discuss and improve planning applications
- Faster determination of planning applications
- More support at key planning appeals

- More time for pre-application work resulting in better outcomes for the built environment

7. Risks

It is important that members recognise that the role will not replace the processes in county hall that contribute to highways advice, such as the safety audit, the signals input, travel planning, and the legal team drawing up section 106 documentation and the adoption processes. All these factors contribute to overall time taken in bringing forward development. It is therefore very much ‘front end’ advice to an existing process, and cannot therefore be guaranteed to speed up the time taken from receipt of a planning application to delivery on the ground.

8. Financial Implications

The cost of the post at the top of Scale 7 is £44,100 plus £3,000 per annum for travel and other costs. If members approve funding for 3 years the overall cost is £141,300. This can be funded from the Infrastructure Reserve which currently stands at £1 million. If member approve the recommendations in this report it will reduce to £858,700.

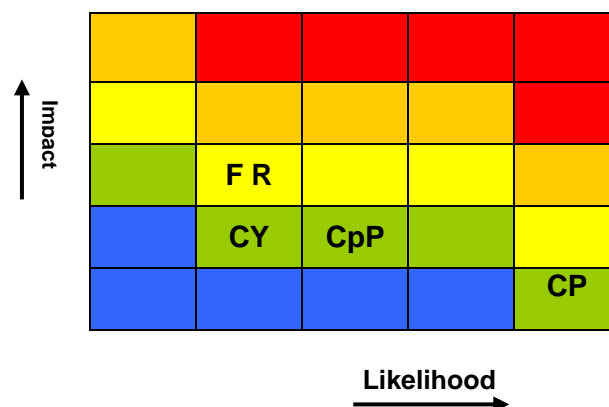
(Note there is a further report in this agenda requesting funding of £100,000 from the fund if both are approved £758,700 will remain in the reserve).

SSDC will continue to negotiate with SCC to share the funding of the post possibly along a 20/80 (SCC/SSDC) split.

There is a risk that at the end of the three year secondment that there are redundancy costs that will be borne by SSDC and these costs could include employment compensation that predates this post.

9. Risk Matrix

The following risk matrix identifies and summarises the risks associated with taking the decision as set out in the report as the recommendation(s). Should there be any proposal to amend the recommendation(s) by either members or officers at the meeting then the impact on the matrix and the risks it identifies must be considered prior to the vote on the recommendation(s) taking place.



Key

Categories	Colours <i>(for further detail please refer to Risk management strategy)</i>
R = Reputation	Red = High impact and high probability
CpP = Corporate Plan	Orange = Major impact and major probability
Priorities	Yellow = Moderate impact and moderate probability
CP = Community Priorities	Green = Minor impact and minor probability
CY = Capacity	Blue = Insignificant impact and insignificant probability
F = Financial	

10. Corporate Priority Implications

This report will enable the District Council to meet several of the aims outlined in Focus One: Jobs and Focus 2: Homes within the SSDC Council Plan 2012-15.

It will also enable the Council to meet specific objectives within the SSDC Economic Development Strategy 2012-15

11. Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

There are no current implications associated with this report

12. Equality and Diversity Implications

There are none directly associated with this report

13. Background Papers

SSDC Council Plan 2012-2015