

To:

Planning and Transport Scrutiny Committee 14 January 2020

Report by:

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Wards affected:

All

1. Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the staffing position within the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service.

2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended to:

- A Note the content of the report and ongoing work to secure appropriate staffing to support the work of the team.

3. Background

- 3.1 The shared planning service project has grown from the commitment in 2015 by the then administration of SCDC to develop a number of shared services, including planning. The planning project commenced with the appointment of a Jointly funded Director of Planning and Economic Development role which was filled in June 2016. A joint management structure for the service was agreed by members alongside a preliminary management structure in 2017. Two Assistant Directors were appointed (Paul Frainer and Sharon Brown) following national recruitment campaigns in 2018. Through 2018 and 2019 the service has implemented a “whole service” restructure. This focussed upon two service centred teams (led by

the Assistant Director's) and a central support/enabling team led by a Business Manager (Steven Winsor) to assist the Senior Management Team in ensuring the efficient operation of the service.

- 3.2 In April 2018, the majority of City Council staff working for or within the planning function, were transferred into SCDC. In September 2019, following significant staff engagement a new organisational structure was implemented and all staff have transitioned into their new roles. The implementation phase of the project also benefits from additional implementation capacity through the part time secondment of the Strategic lead for Building Control (Heather Jones) – allowing the development and “acting up” of staff within the 3C Building Control Service.

Current staffing

- 3.3 There are currently 136 FTE staff working within the shared planning service. Of these 91 are permanent members of staff, 13 are employed on fixed term contracts and 32 posts are either filled by agency workers or are employed through specific project based work contracts – on the Local Plan for example. At the present time 13% of posts across the shared service are “unfilled.”
- 3.4 Across the service as a whole, patterns of staffing – and use of agency/contract staff varies. Whilst in some areas, the use of temporary and contract staff reflects the specific objective of the service (such as with time specific policy work for example) in other areas such as DM, the service continues to strive to improve the number of permanent staff.
- 3.5 Within the Development Management and Strategic Sites teams the scale and complexity of the planning proposals being considered by the service, coupled with the national shortage of experienced development management officers has meant that through 2019 a number of factors – including staff vacancies and the associated high workloads of officers - have adversely impacted the customer experience of the planning application process. The service has sought to use the greater flexibility provided by its larger size to deploy officers across the shared service area, but within the development management service there are still 9 planning officer vacancies (from 29 posts) comprising 3 principal planning officers, 3 senior planning officers and 3 planners. There are also 2 senior planning officer roles covered by contract staff. Recent recruitment means that the service expects to fill three planning officer

roles in the new year. Within the strategic sites team, there are currently 11 vacancies (within a team of 17 officers) comprising 5 principal planning officers, 3 senior planning officers and 3 planning officer posts. A some of these vacant posts are currently filled with contract staff.

- 3.6 Over 2019 the shared planning service has undertaken recruitment activity 31 times, and successfully appointed 29 staff in addition to the recruitment of 29 agency workers and 3 casual administrative staff to support service implementation. During the same period 22 people have also left the service. Reasons that staff have given in exit interviews for leaving have included a range of matters – though workloads, career progression and the cost of living issues are a feature of a number of respondents. Whilst agency/contract staff can provide partial cover for these vacant posts, the turnover of such staff and their scarcity has contributed significantly to the time managers have had to devote to this issue. In addition to the recruitment and engagement exercises arising from the shared service implementation, the impact of vacancies on the management team has therefore also been significant.

Support Services

- 3.7 In autumn 2019 the Shared Planning Service, faced with very high officer workloads in the development management team sought to pilot a support model using resources from a third party provider to undertake the initial registration and the initial assessment and review of householder planning applications. Terraquest, a provider of such services (and operators of the national planning portal”) were successful in bidding to provide this service and subject to the successful conclusion of a training/induction programme for their officers, the service expects to be able to utilise Terraquests additional capacity in the Spring. The project is a fixed term pilot – through which the service intends to test the merits of retaining “call-off” capacity to deal with peaks in workloads as well as to explore how successful such arrangements might be, for example in helping to manage the cost pressures facing the service with a currently uncertain development environment.

Recruitment

- 3.8 The shared service continues to develop its recruitment proposition – building on the comprehensive review of SCDC’s recruitment offer that was undertaken in 2018 which led to changes in process and the

introduction of “enhanced” benefits including the payment of professional fees and a “golden hello” for key posts. The new role profiles seek to address concerns about personal development expressed in exit interviews and have already provided opportunities for existing staff to move within the service.

- 3.9 The service has also recently appointed a “workforce development officer” into the business support team. Alongside the monitoring of personal development reviews, that officer will be proactively developing the recruitment and retention offer through 2020, building upon the 2019 staff survey feedback and improving the limited online recruitment information plus coordinating planned recruitment campaigns with national publications to raise awareness of the Shared Planning Service nationally.
- 3.10 Alongside the enhanced “workforce management” the service was also the first large shared service to roll out “Council Anywhere” to staff and is in the process of issuing mobile phones to all professional officers to enable fully flexible working. Agile management and a progressive approach to delivering work outcomes also means that some specialist staff have been enabled to work remotely – thereby retaining their skills when personal commitments would have otherwise prompted them to leave. Currently 20% (up from 5% 5 years ago) of the permanent staff within the service work on flexible/reduced hours.

4. Implications

a) Financial Implications

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- 4.1 The current vacancies within the service mean that across the shared service, a significant underspend in staff cost is forecast for 2019/20. In the City Council this underspend is balanced by a reduction in fee income so that the net effect of the current vacancies for the City is that the service is not forecasting an over or underspend for this financial year.

b) Staffing Implications

- 4.2 The report above highlights the significant challenges facing the services in recruiting staff. The measures being undertaken above are seeking to respond to the staffing impacts arising.

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

4.3 None. This report is not proposing or seeking approval for any actions which would prompt an EIA.

d) Environmental Implications

4.4 None

e) Procurement Implications

4.5 None. The shared Planning Service is a shared service with SCDC. Procurement of the third party support detailed above was undertaken in accordance with SCDC procurement guidelines.

f) Community Safety Implications

4.6 None

5. Consultation and communication considerations

5.1 None. The shared planning service undertakes an annual business planning process that includes reports to and consideration by both Councils and Scrutiny Committees.

6. Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

7. Appendices

None