

THE FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF THE PLANNING SERVICE

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following the departure of the Executive Head of Planning and Housing, the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation has undertaken an interim 'caretaker role' in terms of the management of the Planning Service for the last 9 months. It is now considered an opportune time to consider the future management arrangements of the Service.
- 1.2 Earlier this year, the Council proposed a jointly managed Planning Service with the National Park Authority (NPA). Having considered the matter, the NPA declined this approach.
- 1.3 This report recommends a way forward which is to recruit a Chief Planning Officer, with the necessary experience across both planning policy and development management, to lead and manage the Council's Planning Service.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council's Planning Service is an extremely important service. The newly approved Draft Local Plan proposes almost a three-fold increase in house delivery in our planning area (outside the NPA) over the next 20 years. Delivering such a large increase in housing will be a significant challenge in light of the considerable environmental constraints that exist in our District. There is a clear expectation that such development will enhance communities, with particular emphasis on good design and improved delivery of affordable housing.
- 2.2 The delivery of the Council's Planning Service cuts across all aspects of the Corporate Plan. It is crucial that the Council invests in its Planning Service to ensure that the challenges of the future are positively embraced. The Council needs a Planning Service that delivers high quality, sustainable and vibrant communities. Affordable Housing is a particular priority for our area. This requires a clear 'Plan-led' approach as well as ensuring that the leadership of the Planning Service has the necessary drive and robustness to deliver the Council's aspirations.
- 2.3 The Royal Town Planning Institute has long advocated that a Council's most senior planning officer should be in a senior position within an organisation with direct reporting lines to the Chief Executive. In a recent study, the Royal Town Planning Institute found that only 17% of Councils in the UK had a head of planning that was a member of the top management team. The Royal Town Planning Institute has warned against '*diluting the importance of this strategic corporate function that helps Councils tackle social, economic and environmental challenges*'. They consider that '*Planners should be at the heart of the corporate decision making*'. The Royal Town Planning Institute's Chief Executive says:-

“Planning is a powerful lever to deliver almost all areas of focus within an authority’s corporate strategy. We urge more council chief executives and portfolio holders to recognise this and put in the right structure so that leaders can make major decisions – be they about education, health or social care - with full view and proper debate of their spatial dimensions, such as housing, transport, green spaces, energy and waste infrastructure.

“Amid the challenges of Brexit and tight resources, it is all the more important that councils ensure planners are at the heart of corporate decision-making so that their effectiveness to join the dots across complex spending decisions can be maximised.

“Our members tell us that councillors are more likely to respect planning advice from a senior officer from a chief executive’s team. All too often we see a lack of joined-thinking, with investment decisions being made without a holistic perspective that could give good growth outcomes.”

3. PROPOSAL

- 3.1 It is proposed that the Council recruits a Chief Planning Officer at a senior level comparable with the existing Executive Head posts. The new postholder will report directly to the Chief Executive and will manage the complete Planning Service - both planning policy and development management. The postholder will be expected to carry out a review of the whole planning service to ensure a fit for purpose Planning Service for the future. The postholder will operate at both a strategic and senior operational level and will get involved in all aspects of the day to day delivery of the planning service. In addition to working with Portfolio Holders and leading Councillors, the postholder will be required to play an active role in the management of the organisation and work closely with the Chief Executive and Executive Heads.

4. RECRUITMENT PROCESS

- 4.1 In order to recruit a high calibre postholder, the recruitment process will be important. It is proposed that an external recruitment agency is used to bring forward suitable candidates. The Human Resources team will work closely with the Chief Executive to devise a recruitment process in order to select the best applicant.
- 4.2 It is proposed that recruitment starts in early September with an expectation that the role will be filled by January 2019.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The proposed salary band for the new Chief Planning Officer is between £74,725 and £79,157.
- 5.2 Following the departure of the previous Executive Head for Housing and Planning, a restructure took place within Housing, which utilised around 50% of the Executive Head resource budget. A sum of around £50,000 is therefore now required as a temporary increase in staffing budget. The new post holder will be given a clear objective of offsetting this additional cost through a management-led review to be conducted within the planning service.

6. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' COMMENTS

- 6.1 Planning and Transportation Portfolio Holder - While I remain disappointed that the New Forest National Park Authority did not see the potential benefits that would have arisen from a jointly managed Planning Service, bringing together a joint team with a shared ethos for the protection of this unique place against increasing development pressures, this opportunity is now lost for the foreseeable future. Over the last 9 months the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation, supported by the Service Managers and their exceptional teams, has ensured that the Draft Local Plan remains on course for submission for Examination and that the Development Management team begins the restructuring process required for it to manage the predicted significant increase in both volume and complexity of planning applications over the coming years. However, the challenge of meeting the housing and other development needs of the District with the imperative of protecting this unique place, and the benefit highlighted by the RTP1 of having a spatial planner both leading the service and providing strategic advice to the Executive Leadership team, make this an appropriate time to seek to appoint a new Chief Planning Officer. I support the recommendation set out within this report.
- 6.2 Leader of the Council – The Council is recognising the importance of having a robust and pro-active the planning service to meet the needs of the local community. Having carefully examined a range of options to meet the Council's objectives, we are now actively pursuing the recruitment of a dedicated Chief Planning Officer to move us forward as we meet the challenges posed by the developing Local Plan.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That a Chief Planning Officer, as outlined above, is recruited to lead the Council's Planning Service.

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Background Papers:

None