



**South  
Cambridgeshire**  
District Council

**REPORT TO:** Scrutiny and Overview Committee

17 December 2019

**LEAD CABINET  
MEMBER:** Lead Cabinet Member for Planning

**LEAD OFFICER:** Joint Director for Planning and Economic Development

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## **Update on Shared Planning Service**

### **Purpose**

1. The report provides an update on the progress of the shared planning service project, summarises the business plan priorities and considers the activities, performance and key risks facing the service against the Council's corporate plan priorities

### **Recommendation**

2. It is recommended that Scrutiny Committee notes the report.

### **Background**

3. This report comes following a request from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee to receive an update on planning performance. 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 and two Assistant Directors were appointed (Paul Frainer and Sharon Brown) following national recruitment campaigns in 2018. 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 staff transitioned into their new roles.

### **Shared Service Objectives**

4. The agreed Business Plan for the shared service sets out the following key objectives for the service:
  - To create and deliver an effective programme for the creation of a single, unified "Greater Cambridge" planning capability serving the Planning Committees and policy making of each of the participating Councils

- To build a shared capacity and capability within the combined teams (and provide opportunities to support others) in a way that seizes opportunities for efficiency and quality improvements by providing services and products (including additional charged services) that meet the needs of users and the community at the lowest net cost.
- To deliver a service that can be flexible - in deployment and delivery
- To build/retain a reputation for professionalism, staff development, the delivery of high-quality outcomes and competent “business management” amongst peers and partners

## **Scope**

5. The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service is the “Local Planning Authority” for the areas of SCDC and Cambridge City Council. It performs the full range of statutory roles defined in legislation for District Planning Authorities. In addition, the service delivers non statutory services, advice and strategic capacity to the Council which seek to support delivery of the corporate plan aspirations. This includes:
  - The provision of pre-application advice on planning and related matters to residents and businesses
  - The investigation and enforcement of planning regulations
  - Preparation of “non-statutory” planning documents/guidance
  - Providing advice and insight to inform the Councils responses to National, Sub National and regional consultations on infrastructure and economic development related projects.

## **Shared Service Implementation**

6. To deliver these services, through 2018 and 2019 the service has implemented a “whole service” restructure. This focussed upon two service centred teams (led by an Assistant Director) and a central support/enabling team led by an Operations Manager to assist the Senior Management Team in ensuring the efficient operation of the “business.” During the ongoing implementation phase of the project, the service is also being supported by additional implementation capability.
7. Alongside organisational changes, the service management team has also begun implementing a comprehensive implementation programme which comprises a suite of specific projects. Initially focused around 5 themes – People, Legal Finance and Funding, ICT and two Service Delivery programmes (one for each AD), these have recently (December 2019) been revised, following a process of resource planning and prioritisation, into 7 themes with the “working titles” of:
  - Strategic Sites Delivery
  - Service Improvement Programme
  - Workforce Development
  - Business Systems (including ICT)
  - Strategy and Economy
  - Commercialisation/Business Development
  - Built and Natural Environment
8. Programme leads for each of these work streams have been identified and an officer board reporting through the two Chief Executives to a member board was formed in

June. Each board meets monthly to consider progress against the agreed implementation programme. The Shared Planning service also reports monthly, through the Operations Manager to the Council's corporate "transformation" board under the "place" theme – led by Phil Bird. A parallel reporting takes place to the City Council Transformation project.

9. During 2019 the programme has seen progress through the following key outputs:
- Consultation upon and implementation of new service wide structure including new role profiles and career progression scheme for all staff
  - TUPE of all residual staff from City Council to SCDC as part of new structure
  - Procurement and programmed Implementation of ICT solution
  - Re-design of implementation programme and appointment of new programme manager (secondment)
  - A review of governance and creation of a Shared Service Delivery Board including members
  - Staff engagement survey and whole service "launch" day
  - Completion of the Shared Services Agreement covering structure and cost rules for the service
  - Review of all budgets and finance relating to the service
  - Creation of the Service wide Business Operations Team and appointment of manager and key team appointments.
10. The Service is currently engaged in a refresh of each programme priorities – to take account of the refined programme above. This reflects the growing capacity and the improved resource planning now possible within the business operations and project teams and the need to accelerate specific work aimed at addressing performance and customer satisfaction within the planning applications process.

### ICT development



11. Through 2019 the service has been engaged in two key ICT projects. Firstly, the ongoing development and testing of the “integrated” ICT solution for the planning application process, including digitising, upgrading and integrating land charges and the re-design of the development management “workflows” into a wholly digital format. This project, in partnership with 3C ICT was expected to “go live” in November. In the summer it became apparent that implementation of the project for the SCDC area would require a 3 week “downtime” period ahead of a go live date. Given the existing customer experience, this was not considered acceptable and in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, the project team have re-designed the programme to substantially reduce downtime and increase testing ahead of the go live date – now Spring 2020. The revised project remains on track to deliver the system implementation with negligible (2-3 days) downtime and over 780,000 documents have already been successfully migrated onto the shared system.
12. Secondly, the service was the first SCDC service to successfully roll out “Council Anywhere.” With excellent support from the 3C ICT team (resulting in considerable positive feedback from officers) the roll out took place successfully during September enabling multi-site working and inter office collaboration increasingly taking advantage of Microsoft Teams (introducing video conferencing facilities that were not previously available, and thus facilitating a service that operates from two sites). Staff feedback has been positive and ongoing training and familiarisation are expected to continue the culture change consistent with the Corporate Plan aspirations for innovative working and improved accessibility. Building on Council Anywhere, the service is currently engaged in a roll out of mobile phones to staff – allowing officers to “tether” their laptops to access data/emails remotely and to improve contact with colleagues and customers. That roll out is expected to conclude in early 2020 – when a revised contact schedule will then be published.
13. Finally, some members will have noted that the service has implemented a new common email address format. This change enables officers to continue to receive emails written to either Council address but also to utilise a common address book and intranet access. A service specific website [www.greatercambridgeplanning.org](http://www.greatercambridgeplanning.org), Twitter account and Linked in page has also been created as a platform for recruitment and promotion of the planning service via a “neutral” format. Links to the respective Council websites will be maintained.

### **Strategy and Economy team**

14. Within the Strategy and Economy team, work on the new Joint Local Plan has begun, and progression of the North Cambridge Area Action Plan is continuing towards the draft plan stage, whilst making provision for the City Council elections. The Sustainable Design and Construction SPD is expected to be adopted in Spring 2020 whilst the Economic Action Plan, building upon the Local Industrial Strategy and supporting the Council’s commitment to assist businesses in the district, is expected at Cabinet in January.
15. In line with the business plan objective of improved “cost recovery” the project to introduce time recording and the review of staff recharges is also now expected to conclude in time for the new financial year. A new business plan for the consultancy team is also in development which will enable the “Built and Natural Environment” consultancy team to more effectively deploy the specialist knowledge in ecology, sustainability, trees, landscape, building design and heritage protection (and adaption) to support the Councils’ aspirations around climate change and biodiversity gain. The specialist knowledge of the team will also underpin the work of the

“strategic sites” delivery team and officers across the Council involved in shaping new communities so that they can become healthy and inclusive communities for the future.

16. Recruitment to vacant posts within the Strategy and Economy team has continued through 2019 with a range of permanent and fixed term appointments and project specific consultancy commissions. Whilst the key post of Planning Policy Manager remains filled on an interim basis (the recruitment round having proved unsuccessful), this role is to be filled on a temporary basis through an experienced contractor. The two former “policy” teams based in the respective Council offices have been able to operate as a single team from early 2019 – reflecting both the legacy of joint working that pre-dates the shared service and the relatively limited dependency on ICT.

### **Delivery Team**

17. Bringing together the highly systematised, high volume, complex and sensitive decision-making systems for development management in both Council areas was always going to be one of the most challenging projects within the shared service implementation programme. Experience from other Councils who had undertaken the DM process integration highlighted a range of challenges – including those associated with ICT, operational service delivery, differing levels of delegation, committee procedures and staff turnover. SCDC has also been experiencing significant growth pressures associated with its successful economy (and the legacy of five year land supply sites). The programme for strategic sites – and exceptional proposals such as the Agri Tech Appeal and Wellcome Genome Campus expansion - have also required significant additional management commitment at a time when supporting staff and designing and implementing the new organisational structure was ongoing.
18. The service has recently been successful in securing some more senior staff. Since 2016 management within the planning teams (City Planning, Development Management, New Communities and Strategic Sites) has been provided through temporary appointments or, in the case of strategic sites, has been covered by the Assistant Director of Delivery. The vacant Strategic Sites Delivery Manager role has only recently been filled. The retirement of one of the DM team leaders, turnover of planning officers and the disruption associated with the Technical Support Team changes (including having to re-apply for a reduced number of roles as part of the integration of the two technical support teams) has also stretched capacity, staff resilience and management oversight.
19. Against that backdrop, the national recruitment crisis has also meant that regardless of cost (the shared service staff budget is currently underspent) and despite multiple recruitment rounds, the service has not been able to secure additional experienced staff to support the senior management resource in mentoring and managing the complex workloads of the service.
20. For that reason, whilst the headline performance of the service has remained above reported government intervention levels, the “experienced” performance of the service by customer and members declined during the year. In August 2019, the Assistant Director Delivery and Director of Planning accordingly undertook a review of the Development Management Service and initiated a service improvement programme that in its initial phase, sought to “re-set” the agenda and approach of the service. A letter to Members and to agents in the summer outlined a range of measures being implemented. The scrutiny meeting in September commented on

those initial measures and in particular the appointment of a third party contractor, Terraquest to underpin the existing staffing resource.

21. Since then, that programme has been formed into a more complete “plan” and work by the team has started to reverse the downwards trajectory of the service. The improvement plan focuses on:
1. Re-building confidence and re-engaging the DM team’s commitment to customer service.
  2. Improving communication within the service (and across officers) to promote a sense of joint endeavour (DM teams in both offices are facing similar challenges)
  3. Improving consistency of performance (and absolute performance) in relation to government targets and a suite of local performance indicators.
  4. Changing the current way of working to enable the existing staff levels to more effectively meet customer expectations and be more responsive.
  5. Engaging with members and users of the service to explain the service challenges and outline actions taken.
  6. Engaging with delivery “partners” – those whose behaviour is having a direct impact upon service delivery in a discussion on the need to change.

### **Improving the customer experience in Delivery**

The work by the management team to bring together a more focused performance management regime is ongoing. A service wide performance officer joined the Shared Planning Service on 4<sup>th</sup> December to complement the work of a number of staff across the team and enable more complete reporting of management “data” as requested by members. A renewed focus on the needs of users of the service and the customer and user experience forms a central thread in the approved and draft updated Shared Service Business Plan and remains a key short term priority.

22. Key elements of current performance are highlighted below:
1. Performance on householder applications has remained consistent in recent years (83% within time) but the percentage of applications that have the time period extended to deliver that performance has reduced (from 25% in 2016 to 16% in 2019).
  2. 85 % of all householder applications submitted to the Council are approved – which is unchanged from 2016.
  3. 84% of planning applications submitted by businesses in 2019 have been approved with 68% determined within agreed timescales (compared with 66% in 2016).
  4. The delays earlier in the year surrounding application validation (with 43%/60% of applications acknowledged within 2/5 days in April) has now been addressed, and the performance of the new, single technical support team had improved to 58%/81% validated in 2/5 days by October.
  5. There are currently 23 “live” applications by businesses that have been with the planning service for more than 8 weeks. Of these 10 relate to minor or small-scale developments and a programme to target these applications is underway.
  6. The demand for pre-application advice remains strong – but performance of the service is an area of weakness. There is a dedicated programme for reviewing and improving pre-application advice services within the Improvement Plan.

7. Recent work to improve responsiveness to complaints means that the service is now responding to all formal complaints within corporate timelines.

### **Performance Management**

23. The Shared Service Board considers performance each month against the shared service business plan against a range of indicators relating to the processing performance (acknowledgement, validation, decision making) and broader corporate plan objectives such as approval rates, applications and comments submitted online and number of homes delivered.
24. The refinement through 2019 of the service workstreams (above) and recent appointment of interim management capacity within the DM service, to support decision making, case clear up, and tighter officer management/support is focused upon improving the service's ability to manage existing workloads but also to develop further the management information and monitoring systems through which performance in future can be tracked. This will include considering how an appropriate measure of customer satisfaction can be reliably captured and reported. The ICT programme has however highlighted a number of legacy applications that will need to be addressed prior to the transfer of the application management onto the new shared software. This will impact reported performance for the shared service in Q3.

### **Recruitment**

25. During the last 12 months, the Planning Service has undertaken 7 rounds of recruitment in an attempt to fill vacant posts. Lessons learnt from a review of recruitment and retention, and benchmarking SCDC against other Councils has resulted in a number of changes to the recruitment practice over the last 18 months including changes to the process and application requirements, creation of a dedicated website, revisions to all roles to promote flexible deployment and staff development opportunities, introduction of a career progression scheme and securing a Home Office licence to allow for overseas recruitment. The recent "advert" in the Council magazine also reflects the service's growing emphasis on succession planning and "growing our own" professional staff. Some 20% of the planning service now work on part time contracts (up from 5% 5 years ago).

26. Consistent with the aspiration to ensure that staff are appropriately developed, the service has appointed a workforce development officer who will support staff development, retention and management as the service seeks to expand its recruitment offer around the opportunities for career development. The service is also taking steps to improve workforce engagement - on the back of low ratings in the staff survey. A whole service development day in November, included work on the business plan but also discussion around service and team development. Volunteers from across the service are currently working together on staff engagement to build a more positive working environment.

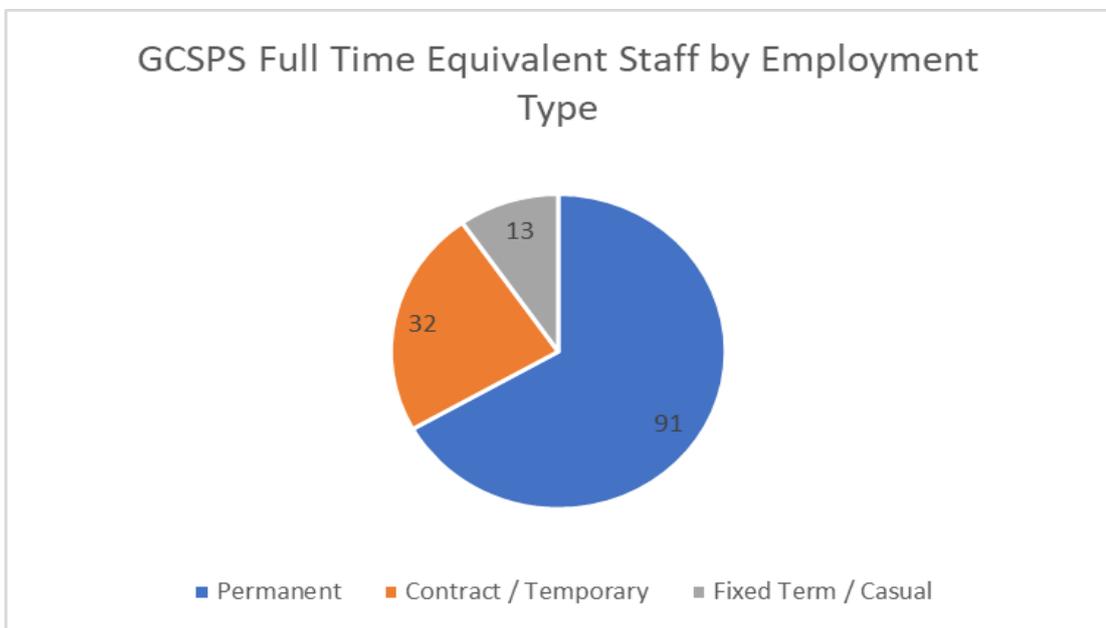


Notwithstanding all of the measures taken to date, there remain a number of vacancies across the service, although many of these are temporarily filled by contractors, agency workers or people on casual contracts.

There are 136 FTEs in the service, only 91 of these are permanent employees. Of the remaining 45 FTEs on shorter term arrangements, 10 are paid for from the non-staff budget, rather than staffing, as a more cost effective alternative than procuring from an external source.

There are currently 25 identified permanent or fixed term vacancies across the service, although a number of these are being filled temporarily by the contract or agency resource that we have in place.

Of the people we have on non-permanent arrangements, 16 of these have contracts that end on or before the end of March 2020.



Following ongoing recruitment challenges, and high personal caseloads in some parts of the service, in summer 2019, the service undertook a procurement exercise to seek a contractor to undertake application validation and assessment services. The successful bidder, Terraquest (who own and operate the Planning Portal) have subsequently been engaging with the service to design the delivery process for that

contract and to plan effectively for its implementation. The restructure of the ICT programme has meant that the initial plan to begin support to the service in the Autumn, has been delayed until the Spring – utilising the new ICT system that will apply to SCDC applications.

The contract provides for the Council to allocate applications to the provider for validation (if required) or assessment (or both). Named officers from the provider will then prepare reports for the Team Leader to review and then determine in line with the provisions within the scheme of delegation. A process of training on SCDC policies and systems will take place before the “go live” date and experienced managers will be responsible for monitoring the contract performance. The contract is a pilot, initially for a period of 3 months. The contract is structured on the basis of a fixed price per case – broken into validation and assessment. The cost of the contract can accordingly be managed against the service’s available budget – although current vacancy levels mean that the “unit” cost is not expected to be significantly different to the alternative costs of employing agency/contract staff. What the contract does however provide, once it is live, is the ability to manage individual officer caseloads effectively to ensure that the workloads of individual planning officers are not excessive.

### **Progress against Business Plan 2019/20**

27. The previous year’s business plan committed to a number of outcomes for both Councils and through the year the service has made significant progress. Highlights include:
28. Strategy and Economy
  - Local Plan Issues and Options Consultation has been prepared.
  - Cambridge North Area Action Plan Draft Plan prepared (pending democratic processes)
  - Economic Action Plan (part of the Local Industrial Strategy) developed
  - Making Space for People SPD consultation undertaken (for City)
  - Update of Sustainable Development SPD concluded
  - Continued support for Neighbourhood planning (one plan adopted)
  - Preparation of Village design statements
  - Work with Combined Authority to support LIS, Local Transport Plan and Non-Statutory Spatial Framework
29. Business Development
  - Recruitment of Business Development Manager, Workforce Development Officer and Performance officer
  - Creation and management of Programme Implementation Board
  - Development of a single service budget and completion of a shared service agreement
  - Creation of new staff charging regime to underpin future service delivery in 2020
  - Development of a new centralised recruitment process/capability
  - Initiating a staff training/development programme (initially for new service managers within the new structure)
  - Delivery of the Council Anywhere project across the service to make the most effective use of officers and premises and to allow improved customer contact and responsiveness

- Introduction of new email addresses and conclude roll out of mobile phones to improve officer accessibility (due to complete Jan 2020)
- Engagement across Council Management Teams on development of inter service SLA's (performance and re-charging)
- Coordinate staff engagement and a staff conference
- Development of a single, integrated customer complaint process (ongoing)
- Member engagement survey

### 30. Delivery

- Recruitment of Strategic Sites Delivery Manager
- Recruitment of Delivery Manager (Head of DM)
- Completed the recruitment and assimilation process to deliver a single integrated Technical Support Team
- Procured a pilot support services contract with Terraquest to underpin a programme building service resilience
- Determined 931 planning householder applications (Jan – November). 787 of which were approved
- Served 34 enforcement notices
- Defended the Council case at the Agri tech Appeal
- Progressed the determination of major site strategic planning applications for:
  - Wellcome
  - Waterbeach
  - Bourn Airfield
  - West Cambridge
  - Darwin Green
  - Eddington
  - Land North of Cherry Hinton
  - Northstowe Phases 2 and 3
  - Cambourne West
- Develop a new single service wide ICT back office solution providing digital “paper free” application process capabilities to meet all statutory decision timeframes

### **Implications**

31. The Shared Planning Service has wide ranging relationships with both internal and external users and partners. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered.

### **Legal**

32. The service began with a Shared Services Agreement from 2015. A completed Shared Planning Service Agreement was completed in November 2019 covering the operational and financial relationship between SCDC and City Council.

### **Staffing**

33. This report gives rise to no specific staffing issues. A comprehensive programme of staff engagement has been undertaken (and continues) within the service to support the transition to a single, integrated shared service.

## Consultation responses

34. No consultation has taken place on the content of this report.

### Effect on Council Priority Areas

35. SCDC adopted its current corporate plan in Summer 2018. This contains four key themes, to which a series of actions are associated. The Shared Planning Services' activities mean that its officers and the outcomes have an important part to play in delivering the outcomes of the corporate plan.
36. Notably, the forthcoming Issues and options consultation on the Local Plan focuses on four key themes:
- Climate Change
  - Biodiversity and Green space
  - Wellbeing and social inclusion
  - Creation of Great Places
37. These themes and the focus on policy and hence planning decisions in the future, will play a key part in delivering the Corporate Plan objectives. Meanwhile following the disruption of 2019 and the implementation of the new structure, the management team are now able to focus on using the capabilities and growing capacity of the shared service to underpin decisions on strategic sites, new efficient pre-application processes, support for ongoing neighbourhood plans, the development of improved business systems which will incorporate measures to improve information and responsiveness to customers/users. In addition, through the business development team, new capacity around recruitment and workforce development, performance management and reporting, programme management and customer and member communications should see the service more effectively address areas of historical weakness alongside the wider transformation of the Council.

## Background Papers

Where [the Local Authorities \(Executive Arrangements\) \(Meetings and Access to Information\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#) require documents to be open to inspection by members of the public, they must be available for inspection: -

- (a) at all reasonable hours at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council;
- (b) on the Council's website; and
- (c) in the case of documents to be available for inspection pursuant to regulation 15, on payment of a reasonable fee required by the Council by the person seeking to inspect the documents at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council.

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