

Cabinet Report



Report of Planning Policy Manager

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Resourcing of planning policy team to expedite delivery of Vale local plan - core strategy

Recommendations

- (a) To recruit a part time project manager for up to eighteen months and an additional full time senior planner for eighteen months, and to secure additional consultancy support, and
- (b) To recommend Council to approve a one-off supplementary budget increase of £145,000.

Purpose of Report

1. To secure approval for the deployment of resources additional to those allocated this year to the Planning Service budget, to help expedite the delivery of the Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy.

Strategic Objectives

2. The Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy will guide investment and development decisions across the Vale for a fifteen year period. Through the process of producing the document and in its implementation it will be a major contributor to achieving the strategic objectives of:

- (a) a strong economy
- (b) positive and constructive work with community groups
- (c) housing for people who need it, and
- (d) communities involved in decisions about development affecting their local area

Background

3. Completion of the Core Strategy internal review at cabinet on 9 March 2012 provided a clear basis to progress the more detailed work for the next draft of the replacement Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy. That report included an indicative timetable for progress on the local plan, setting out alternative timelines, with the difference between them relating to the scope of further work required if new strategic housing sites were added.
4. Having regard to the significance of the Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy to the achievement of the Council's strategic objectives, there are benefits to securing the earliest possible adoption of the document, and conversely, the longer it takes then there is more exposure to risks. The sooner it can be progressed to the submission stage with a robust plan, the sooner we will give the emerging plan added weight for decision making on planning applications.
5. However, speed of progress should not be at the expense of producing an unsound document, whether by reason of process or content. Many of the tasks have limited potential to be completed more quickly, particularly as some are subject to statutory requirements.
6. To drive forward the preparation of the Vale Local Plan, to achieve either an earlier completion date or at least to minimise any additional time required to bring it to adoption, a step-change in the resourcing of the project is required. We need to consider a combination of targeted use of consultants, project management support to free up team time for preparing the plan and associated documents, and the recruitment of additional, experienced planners to help with preparation of the plan, up to and including the Examination stage.

Use of consultants

7. The project already allows for the use of consultants to assist in the preparation of evidence base documents and other specialist tasks, by the provision of a budget for 2012/13 (£100,000). The majority of this budget is committed. We can expand the use of consultants to bring forward other evidence we would otherwise prepare in house. For example to manage the preparation of policies for strategic sites, including masterplanning work and the preparation of technical site studies. This will free up time to allow the policy team to make progress on other tasks in the project.

Appointment of a Project Manager

8. Project management is usually undertaken in-house, led by the team leader and overseen by the Shared Planning Policy Manager. In this context it is one of a number

of tasks that require attention at any one time. The appointment of a designated project manager, who would have no other specified responsibilities, would not only release time for the team leader to use on other tasks, but in itself can help to create a more robust structure for the identification, co-ordination and completion of tasks.

9. The project would not require the services of a project manager full time. It is estimated that 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE) would be appropriate. We should seek someone with good experience, given the significance of the project, to work up to the examination for approximately 18 months.

Planning Policy team temporary restructure

10. The Planning Policy Team comprises a Team Leader, Senior Planning Policy Officer and three Planning Policy Officer posts on progressively more junior grades; all posts are full time.
11. The two most junior posts are vacant, following an internal promotion and a transfer to another team within the service. Steps had already been taken to recruit to these vacancies, but this work has been put on hold pending this consideration of a temporary restructure of the team.
12. The current experience profile of the team structure would be capable of delivering the local plan, but would require more time. This is because it includes junior officers, one is 'entry grade', who would require more supervision from senior officers and who will work more slowly due to their lesser knowledge and experience. Officers with more experience and knowledge, able to act with more initiative and independence, will be more likely to deliver successfully to a more demanding timetable.
13. There are two stages in the plan preparation where that experience will be of particular benefit:
 - (a) the writing of the document itself, a draft of which we wish to have completed before the end of this calendar year. This is the greatest demand on time
 - (b) the examination hearings, when the council's position is challenged in open hearing sessions by aggrieved parties and the Planning Inspector appointed to examine the document
14. It is, therefore, proposed to temporarily restructure the team. By holding vacant the two most junior posts, sufficient savings would be generated in-year to fund the appointment of another, senior planner for six months, to help with the production of the draft plan. Recruitment to the more junior posts would be timed to allow appointment as that six month period ends. However, while exchanging two more junior posts for one more senior would be beneficial, it would not alone be enough to create a big enough change. It is, therefore, proposed to also recruit another senior planner for eighteen months; with the option of extending this if the hearing sessions are not completed before the end of 2013. This post would deliver significant additional capacity to help with the production of the draft plan this year, and would then assist with the assessment of consultation responses and the defence of the document through the examination phase, including the preparation of additional documents for and attendance as an expert witness at the hearing sessions.

Options

15. The possible options include continuing with current team structure, but with temporary exchange of more junior posts with a senior for six months. A formal decision on the latter part is not required because it can be funded in-year from within the Service budget.
16. There are various resource options to consider, which can either be combined into a package or considered individually. The recruitment of additional staff or additional resources that will help expedite the delivery of the local plan are
 - (a) recruit a part-time project manager for eighteen months
 - (b) recruit an additional senior planner for eighteen months
 - (c) provide additional funding for consultancy support
17. The most progress could be made through the appointment of the project manager and the additional senior planner, and the provision of additional funds for consultancy work. Any of the other options would also deliver some benefit but obviously not as great. Having just an additional senior planner would be likely to deliver the greatest benefit, compared to having just a project manager or just additional funding for consultancy or both.

Financial Implications

18. The Service budget for this financial year currently allows for £100,000 for external costs in relation to the progression of the local plan. Of this £75,000 is already spent, committed or is estimated to be required this financial year. It is prudent to allow a contingency because not all work has been costed yet and 20% is a reasonable margin (£15,000). This margin is based on experience. That leaves £10,000 to fund additional consultancy work. However, and using the example above as a bench mark, it is assessed that it is more realistic to allow £30,000 for additional consultancy work, including a contingency. Therefore, an additional resource of £20,000 is sought.
19. As stated already, a senior planner for six months can be funded in-year from the Service budget. But neither the Project Manager post nor the additional senior planner for eighteen months can be. For these posts additional funds from outside the Service budget are required. Their costs for eighteen months are calculated using current rates of pay. The cost of employing a project manager, part time, for eighteen months could be up to £36,500, and for a senior planner, full time, for eighteen months could be up to £73,000; plus recruitment agency fees of £15,500.
20. No underspend in 2012/13 has yet been identified from which this could be funded and there are insufficient funds in the contingency budget. Therefore this additional expenditure will need to be funded from the council's general reserve (£4.03m as at 31 March 2012) and consequently a supplementary estimate (budget increase) of £145,000 is requested. As this request is over £100,000, this will need the Council's approval.

Legal Implications

21. Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 the council is required to prepare a Local Development Framework (LDF) for its area. The Act does not prescribe the timeframe within which local development documents should be produced. Nonetheless, the Core Strategy is the principal Development Plan Document in the LDF and the risks of not having an up to date Core Strategy in place are spelt out elsewhere in the report.

Risks

22. The current local plan is becoming increasingly 'out of date'. The Vale Local Plan to 2011, adopted in 2006, set out the council's vision for spatial development to 2011. Parts of this plan are now out of date, although the housing allocations still stand and a number of policies are saved and continue to carry weight except where superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework. However, it does not provide a vision for on-going and future strategic spatial planning. The Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy will provide this but until adopted there is an on-going risk of development not occurring in the locations or in the form the council thinks best satisfies the needs and aspirations of the Vale. It may also weaken confidence in the Vale amongst those making decisions about where to make investments. The sooner the local plan can be brought to adoption the less exposure there will be to these risks.

23. After April 2014 there will be restrictions on the scope of planning obligations i.e. 'S106 agreements'. This will occur because the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is designed to be the lead vehicle for securing planning gain from new development, to fund strategic infrastructure requirements. A CIL can only be introduced in an area with an up to date local plan (core strategy). Therefore, if we do not adopt the Vale Local Plan - Core Strategy before April 2014 then we will face a period when we may be unable to secure the level of funding for strategic infrastructure that we would normally expect. This risk can be minimised if not avoided by working to expedite the delivery of the local plan.

24. There have been significant changes to the planning system under the Coalition government. No further significant planning changes are currently proposed, but how we implement and operate the new system will still be subject to change which may possibly delay the progress of the local plan. Such further changes and delay may follow as elements of the new system are tested through the examination of other local plans, through the determination of appeals on refusals of planning applications and through the outcome of legal challenges in the courts, or as a result of additional government advice. We can expect to be in a more robust position to deal with these unforeseeable changes, if we strengthen the planning policy team and are able to drive forward towards adoption in a more determined fashion.

25. We may be unable to appoint suitably skilled and experienced staff, or as quickly as we would like. This would weaken our ability to improve the progress of the local plan.

Other Implications

26. Helping to expedite the delivery of the local plan will establish an overarching spatial vision for the district that will allow other more detailed planning documents to be produced. These include the Managing Development DPD that we intend to produce

that would deal with non-strategic land use allocations and update our development management policies. Adoption of the local plan will also establish the strategic context which neighbourhood development plans (NDP) must conform with, thereby releasing those communities who wish to have a NDP to progress one to adoption.

Conclusion

27. Additional temporary funding and resources are required to achieve the delivery of an updated local plan. The resources include:

- (a) the recruitment of a part-time project manager for eighteen months
- (b) the recruitment of an additional full-time senior planner for eighteen months
- (c) additional consultancy support.

Background Papers

- n/a