

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide members with an update on the progress of the Council's Development Management service following the Committee request for further information on 13 February 2018 regarding staffing levels, recruitment activity, workload analysis and additional work anticipated as a result of the HS2 major infrastructure project.

2 Recommendations/for decision

- | |
|---|
| 2.1 That the Environment & Living Scrutiny Committee consider the contents of the report and associated presentation and provide recommendations if appropriate for the Development Management Committee. |
|---|

3 Supporting information

Aylesbury Vale is growing in both housing and economic terms. There has therefore been a regular and significant increase in the workload of the Development Management team over the last few years as this growth manifests in planning applications and associated workloads. Development Management planners sit within the Commercial & Built Environment Service (C&BES) Group, and are responsible for handling the caseload of planning applications. For clarity, they are not directly involved in the investigation of planning enforcement complaints, and although they have some involvement in strategic planning, this is also not part of the responsibility of the group. Development Management is typically referred to as 'planning', and in this report, the terms are used interchangeably, although it should be noted that the report does not examine any workloads or staffing levels for either planning enforcement or strategic planning (Local Plan, Neighbourhood Planning).

- 3.1 The increasing workload for Development Management is perhaps best illustrated by the large number of major applications that the Council has to decide. These have more than doubled since 2013 and the category of applications that AVDC receives are often for large numbers of houses or high investment retail developments.
- 3.2 There are also significant issues with recruitment and resourcing suitable planning staff for this busy and demanding environment.
- 3.3 Despite the challenges, AVDC continues to be one of the best performing Councils in terms of deciding planning applications on time, far exceeding both current and proposed Government targets.
- 3.4 A new computer system – called "Built Environment" – is being introduced to the service in 2018 to provide an up to date back office system combined with a flexible web-based enquiry system that representatives of the parishes will be involved in developing. Members will shortly receive an invitation to a workshop on this new application to see early demonstrations of the software and to discuss how they can make best use of it when it is introduced.

4 Staffing Levels & Recruitment

- 4.1 There is a nationally-acknowledged shortage of experienced planning officers, and the impact of this has been felt significantly at AVDC.

- 4.2 Although a wide range of innovative, non- traditional recruitment arrangements have been piloted within the service, recruitment into senior planning roles has been slow. As a consequence, the service has continued to make a reduced, but still significant, use of planning consultants and agency staff to support our slowly increasing number of permanent planners. Where gaps in service provision are identified, AVDC has committed finances to fill these with contractors.
- 4.3 The current staffing structure within the development management service contains a number of planning roles, currently at salary grades 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. The table below sets of the number of posts and those currently vacant at each level.

4.4 **Table 1 – Development Management Permanent Posts**

| Post | Total Posts (FTE) | In post, with delegation | Vacancies (FTE) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Graduate Planner (G2) | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| Technical Caseworker | 3 | n/a | 1 |
| Planner (G3) | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| Planner (G4) | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| Senior Planner (G5) | 6 | 2 | 3.5 |
| Principal Planner (G6) | 4 | 1 | 2* |
| Associate Planner (G7)** | 1 – tbc | n/a | 1 – tbc |
| Corporate Planner (G8) | 1 | 1 | 0 |

- 4.5 * Two principal planners have been interviewed and have been offered (and accepted) roles, so it is anticipated in 2 months, there will be zero vacancies at this level.
- 4.6 ** The role of the Associate Planner has not been approved yet. It is a current proposal by the C&BES Group to remain competitive with the private sector and to ensure a continuous career path for our planning officers which will support staff retention and professional development. The assumption is this post will replace one of the Principal Planner posts, which will reduce to 3, mirroring the number of teams in the Group containing development management planners, although staffing levels at each grade are under constant review by the management team.
- 4.7 A slide showing the current structure in C&BES will be shown during the verbal presentation to the Committee.
- 4.8 All vacancies in the structure are covered by interim contractors, so there is no shortfall numerically in terms of staffing. However interim staff represent

different challenges and these are covered in part 5 of this report, 'Development Management Workloads' and specifically under the point on delegated authority.

- 4.9 A wide range of recruitment activity has been taking place since September 2017 when the organisation-wide freeze on recruitment was lifted that was in place during the internal restructuring that affected all departments and service areas.
- 4.10 This activity includes: engaging recruitment agencies to headhunt suitable planning staff; regular activity on the LinkedIn social media platform; paying internal staff a £500 introduction bonus for recommendations of suitable candidates; pay external individuals £250 for recommendations of suitable candidates; offering 'golden handshakes' to qualified planners; starting a Built Environment Graduate Programme; engaging an in-house recruiter to work within the C&BES Group; paying for advertising space with national industry publications; holding weekly diary slots for 'open days' for interested candidates to visit the department; and successfully applying for national awards to showcase AVDC as a destination of choice for planning candidates.
- 4.11 This recruitment activity has resulted in 9 new officers being recruited into development management (external appointments), and a further 2 candidates have accepted positions in the team and are working their notice periods with their current organisations.
- 4.12 C&BES have on-going recruitment to the existing vacancies and the management team (and technical officers) are shortlisting and interviewing as and when suitable candidates apply.
- 4.13 The C&BES management team (for development management/planning purposes) consists of 3 generalist Team Managers and 1 Group Manager. As expected of a generalist manager, the role profiles for each of these roles has a heavy emphasis on people management, including resourcing. Each of the managers in the section is under instruction that recruitment activity is the absolute priority for the Group and that they are responsible for ensuring staffing levels are adequate to meet demand, either in the short term through contractors or in the long term through permanent appointments. There are 3 hours of recruitment-specific meetings in each managers diary every week, in addition to the activity each manager undertakes related to the examples given at point 4.10 above.
- 4.14 In addition to the resource identified above, there has been a temporary in-house officer in post for the past 12 months, who has been involved in setting up many of the activities highlighted in point 4.10. This post has now been deleted as per the corporate objective to remove all temporary personnel that are in addition to the structure agreed during the organisation-wide restructure. All associated tasks are now sitting with the management team in C&BES with support from our dedicated HR Business Partner and other HR personnel.

5 Development Management Workloads

- 5.1 For workload analysis, the calendar year 2017 has been used (Q4 2016/17 to Q3 2017/18 inclusive). In this time period, there were 3,720 total applications received. Of these, 51 were withdrawn, leaving a total application workload of 3,669 requiring allocation to officers.

- 5.2 There has been a significant increase in the numbers of major applications received in recent years. In 2013 AVDC received 48 major applications, this had risen to almost 100 'major' planning applications received in a 12 month period. This is expected to even out and then start to slowly reduce following the adoption of VALP later in the year Major applications are categorised as over 10 residential units or significant commercial development. For the purposes of this analysis, major applications are not assessed and are discussed separately due to the complexity of the cases and different consideration and expertise that this type of application needs, although they have not been removed from the total figure for the calculation of workloads.
- 5.3 As seen in the 'Staffing and Recruitment' section above, there are 23 posts in the current structure intended to carry an application caseload, ranging in experience from a graduate planner to a principal planner.
- 5.4 There are a potential 253 working days in the year per officer, discounting weekends and public holidays. An allowance of 35 days per officer has been made, taking account of annual leave and sickness, leaving 218 working days in the year, or 43.6 working weeks (218/5).
- 5.5 Therefore there are 3,669 applications that need allocation during a calendar year using the last available figures. Looking at the 23 planning posts available to allocate this work to if fully resourced, and the working weeks in the year, this equates to 3.6 applications per week or 159 per annum for each officer.
- 5.6 It should also be noted that there are additional, smaller pieces of work that planning officers are required to undertake that are auxiliary to the planning process that are not counted within the 3,669 figure. This work is typically brief and less complex than simple planning applications.
- 5.7 There is though a significant range in the complexity and time resource required to process the range of planning application types received by AVDC throughout the year. The range of case officers from graduate to principal is considered to be sufficient to manage this varied caseload.
- 5.8 It is also acknowledged that there will be a significant differential in the time taken to process the different types of planning application.
- 5.9 Considering now the nature of major applications, these are such that they are often complex and controversial, with both developers and objectors likely to be very vocal where actions of the Development Management team are perceived to not be to their advantage. This creates a challenging working environment where actions of planning officers are subject to intense scrutiny from all sides and decisions are often challenged both informally and formally.
- 5.10 Particularly high profile and contentious applications represent a significant resource investment from development management officers. These sites are difficult to anticipate and are challenging from a demand management perspective; they often require weeks of dedicated resource and this can come at the expense of other workloads. In instances such as this, it is often helpful to have the flexibility to consider using contractor resource, and the intention is that this will continue even after all vacancies have been filled.
- 5.11 Considering AVDC now receives in the region of 100 'major' planning applications a year, it is appropriate to have distinct planning posts at grades 5 & 6 who will primarily assess these cases, alongside a further caseload of the more complex 'minor' applications (typically 4-9 residential units or small scale commercial/other applications). The potential addition of the Associate

Planner role may impact on the number, but the financial investment in staffing resource will remain the same.

- 5.12 It should be noted that the resource required for these major applications needs to be considered *in addition* to the 3.6 applications each of the 23 officers are required to determine each week, but that this resource can only come from the 10 FTE 'senior' posts currently in the structure. The nature of major planning applications as highlighted previously means that a degree of flexibility will always be required when dealing with these case, and even with a fully resourced team, it will be necessary to bring in temporary (often specialist) staff to work on complex cases.
- 5.13 The most significant obstacle to delivering all application types on time is delegated authority. As shown in table 1, the number of officers with delegated authority within the service area is currently 7 (including the Corporate Planner). For the structure to work efficiently, all posts must be filled, and importantly, all officers need the level of delegation appropriate to their grade and experience.
- 5.14 The scheme of delegation is crucial to the smooth running of the service and in the quality of decisions that officers are making. Officers submit their initial reports to officers with delegation at the appropriate level and this experienced officer makes comments and changes before a decision is issued. This level of quality control is vital in ensuring decisions are correct. It does however come with strict knowledge and experience criteria that our current staff do not all possess and can only be gained through a training programme. As we have had many new starters into the service, they must all be assessed appropriately by the Corporate Planner for their suitability for the level of delegation required.
- 5.15 Consultants and contractors cannot hold delegated authority, in spite of their often excellent skills and substantial experience. This means that although they are able to write reports and make determination recommendations, a permanent officer with appropriate delegation needs to ensure this is correct. This system ensures appropriate checks and balances are in place and that due diligence on the work of temporary staff is thorough.
- 5.16 The consequence of having several temporary staff covering vacancies, and several inexperienced, junior staff in post, is that applications can be delayed during the sign off/review process, and that more work is required of those staff with delegated authority as they sign off more reports than would normally be expected of them.
- 5.17 The solution to this issue is to a) recruit more permanent members of staff and b) ensure that a thorough training programme is in place to pass delegated authority to new and existing members of staff. Part a) is discussed in section 4 of this report. Part b) is in place now – both managers and senior officers are working towards staff being measured against a competency framework that includes evidence of professional development and achievement of key skills. The expected timeframe of this training programme is 6-9 months and the impact of ensuring that all new officers receive a level of delegation appropriate to their grade will be hugely positive.
- 5.18 The overall assessment of senior management is that the current structure is sufficient to handle the existing and expected workload, providing delegated authority is continuously rolled out to new officers and that continued on-going recruitment efforts are fruitful. A fully staffed structure (shown during presentation), with all appropriate delegations in place would provide the

capacity to manage the demand and expected demand on the service effectively. However it is acknowledged that it is not sustainable to continue without the correct number of planning officers and with the current levels of delegation.

6 National Infrastructure Projects

- 6.1 The responsibility for the HS2 development management caseload will sit outside of the normal day to day operations of C&BES, so it is anticipated that the impact on the core function of the service will be minimal. The Corporate Planner will be responsible for the oversight of applications associated with HS2 at AVDC, alongside the overall strategic delivery of the project in the Vale, and working within regional and national partnerships.
- 6.2 The number of technical caseworkers (who validate planning applications) has recently been increased to three, in part to better manage resilience of this core function and also to ensure there is additional support available to validate HS2 applications as they come in.
- 6.3 The Corporate Planner post was created during the restructure with a significant focus on the delivery of major strategic projects in the area. As a major national infrastructure project, HS2 was certainly a key consideration in the creation of this role. Therefore the preparation for ensuring that workloads associated with HS2 were delivered with minimal impact on the day to day running of the development management service began in late 2016 as the job description was drafted.
- 6.4 In terms of the current preparations, there is a Service Level Agreement with HS2 Ltd which covers the additional workload demands expected of the authority in areas like development management, ecology and heritage. There is a forward-funding agreement in place on an 'as and when' basis for staff in these areas, with the SLA covering the funding required. There is therefore no anticipated impact on the normal functioning of the development management service. Current plans are for one consultant post and one forward-funded post, both contractors, paid for by HS2 Ltd, therefore not impacting on the financial resources of the service.
- 6.5 Although we have yet to receive full details of the potential impact on the vale of east-west rail or the NIC, we are very alive to the potential impact in future years and are accelerating our planning graduate scheme to ensure we have trained planners in place within the next 2/3 years.

7 Options considered

- 7.1 None

8. Reasons for Recommendation

- 8.1 Development Management is a high profile service and will continue to be so in the coming years.

9. Resource Implications

- 9.1 None

Contact Officer

Henry Allmand 01296 585320