

SUBJECT:	Joint Working Proposal - Planning Policy
REPORT OF:	Officer Management Team - Director of Services

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To consider a proposal to undertake a joint working initiative utilizing the services of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS).

2. Links to Councils' Policy Objectives

- 2.1 The proper planning of both districts and the efficient and effective deployment of resources are key policy objectives for both Councils.

3. Background

- 3.1 The PAS is part of the Local Government Association and uses Department of Communities and Local Government funding to provide consultancy, peer support programmes and similar to Local Planning Authorities (LPAs). This support is provided free at the point of use to LPAs.
- 3.2 SBDC and CDC have not previously used PAS for tailored support, though officers have attended PAS training events and seminars, and are members of a PAS national benchmarking project on localised planning fees. SBDC and CDC have used other tailored planning support packages in preparing their Core Strategies. The Planning Officers Society Enterprises provided both authorities with 'critical friend' advice, and as part of the Planning Inspectorate's Early Engagement Programme, both Councils had their emerging Core Strategies and related evidence base critically examined. Officers found the support and guidance very helpful.

4. Discussion

- 4.1 The Planning Policy team at SBDC had planned to use the PAS to help it advise on its future Local Development Framework (LDF) programme. However matters were paused pending the commencement of the joint management arrangements.
- 4.2 The past three or four years have already seen considerable joint working between the two authorities, albeit mostly on the commissioning of joint pieces of work to inform the two Core Strategies, rather than on joint DPDs or SPDs themselves. Examples include the Strategic Housing Market assessment, Retail & town centres Study, Strategic Flood Risk assessment, and currently a Joint employment land study. This has had benefits in terms of cost of consultancy and use of professional resources, as well as providing evidence which is embedded in the wider context. It has also engendered a degree of personal and professional understanding between the two teams.
- 4.3 Accordingly, now that a formal decision has been made to have a joint senior management team, and to follow on with phase 2, Peter Beckford and Anna Cronin have discussed the matter and consider that it would be appropriate to invite PAS to undertake a piece of work looking at both authorities LDF programmes and including identification of the potential for closer joint working. This might extend as far as joint DPDs / SPDs, or potentially of more formalised

joint project teams. In doing so it would need to explore the following matters in relation to both councils:-

- The extent to which its intended approach to preparing a number of DPDs and SPDs (as agreed by Members) fits with emerging NPPF guidance and current government thinking
- Whether there is a good 'fit' between its available resources and the proposed timetabling
- Whether there are opportunities to progress documents more quickly than currently intended.

4.4 It should be clearly understood that this work is around joint working, and not around designing a shared service. That would be for a later date.

4.5 Should Members agree to this proposal further discussions would need to be had with PAS, but it would nevertheless be important to ensure that the priorities of both Councils are recognised and positively built in to any recommendations. It would be necessary for PAS to actively involve officers of the two Planning Policy Teams, to get 'buy in' and to ensure that the recommendations were realistic.

4.6 The key question is 'when should PAS be asked to undertake this work'?

If it is undertaken in the short term, eg before the Joint Heads of Service are appointed, there is the risk that some staff may consider that this is 'jumping the gun', and that it is effectively phase 2 of joint working commencing before phase 1 has been finalised.

However, this risk may be minimised by the recent history of joint work and by careful scoping of the PAS brief, as well as by the known employment status of Peter and Anna respectively.

In addition, it may provide an opportunity and a demonstration of a more closely integrated joint working, while retaining the individual sovereignty of each authority, which could support cultural change in a wider sense.

4.7 However, the longer it is deferred the greater the risk that each authority (both having adopted Core Strategies within the last year) will have progressed new policy documents to the extent that opportunities have been lost, particularly potential opportunities to share skills. This would be unfortunate, particularly given that each District (whilst not identical) has a number of similar issues and will have to achieve a great deal within limited resource constraints.

4.8 Now that the formal decision has been taken to proceed with joint working, and given that PAS is independent and will be providing independent advice to both authorities jointly, undertaking this work now in advance of phase 1 having been finalised should not be seen as being premature. There are no preconceptions as to what the outcome might be. It is therefore considered that it would be appropriate to contact PAS now, to discuss re-scoping their work and to ask them to set up their review very shortly.

5. Resource and Wider Policy Implications

5.1 The commissioning of the PAS to undertake this work will be at no direct costs to the Councils save for the commitment of staff resources in support of the work. Any resultant joint working should result in efficiencies although it is not possible to quantify these at this time.

5.2 There are some possible reputational risks to both Councils in terms of being seen to be acting ahead of any shared service arrangements being in place for this area. However for the reasons detailed in Paragraph 4.7 above these are outweighed by the opportunities now presented. In addition any substantive recommendations from the PAS's work would be referred to each Council for endorsement in the usual way.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Members are asked to endorse the proposal to retain the services of the Planning Advisory Service to work with the respective Planning Policy teams as detailed in this report.

Officer Contact:	Bob Smith - Director of Services email: bob.smith@southbucks.gov.uk bsmith@chiltern.gov.uk
Background Papers:	None