SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

22 NOVEMBER 2010

PROCUREMENT OF SYSTEM TO SUPPORT THE DELIVERY OF THE SDNPA PLANNING SERVICE FROM 1 APRIL 2011

Purpose of the report –

To obtain authority to begin procurement of software and related information technology implementation, to support the SDNPA Planning Service from 1 April 2011, that will also provide an electronic document management system for the Authority as a whole.

To agree that as the planning service system cannot be fully operational by 1 April 2011, this should initially be provided in partnership with the 15 LPAs within the National Park for an interim period of up to one year until 1 April 2012
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REPORT BY THE INTERIM HEAD OF PLANNING

1.   **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1.1   The Resources and Performance Committee is recommended to:

(i)   Agree the commencement of the procurement of the IDOX Group Uniform planning administration system and the related corporate Electronic Document management system, on the general terms set out in the confidential report relating to this item and in accordance with Contract Standing Order 3;

(ii)   Agree that as the South Downs National Park Authority planning administration system cannot realistically be operational by 1 April 2011, the administration of the Planning Service should be carried out in partnership with the 15 Local Planning Authorities, using their existing planning administration systems, until the SDNPA planning administration system becomes operational by 1 April 2012.

2.   **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

2.1   On 1 April 2011 the Authority will formally take on its full planning responsibilities. Much of the planning service will be carried out by the 15 constituent Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) through agency agreements. The Authority will need to be able to handle the planning applications it will determine itself but could also seek to encompass all of the applications in the National Park area handled by the LPAs. The Authority needs to consider whether it should procure a dedicated planning

administration system and if so, what system it should use. Reasons behind this consideration are:

- There will be a number of planning applications and related planning matters that the SDNPA will wish to deal with itself.

- For the planning service to operate effectively, it will be appropriate for existing relevant historic planning data (at least from an agreed date) to be available to and to be used by the Authority. It is strongly preferable for this to be held on a dedicated planning administration system.

- From 1 April 2011, the Authority will need to be able to record, have available and use all its own relevant planning activity records.

- The Authority should be able to publicise, seek comment upon, receive and manage representations on those applications which it deals with itself.

- The Authority will need to prepare and publish a Planning Register of all planning applications, enforcement actions and planning appeals in the National Park. It is expected that there will be of the order of 4,000 planning applications a year.

- There are a number of regular statistical and other returns to various bodies which the SDNPA will have a statutory responsibility for providing.

- From a reputational perspective, the Authority should be able to hold, manage and provide information relating to planning activities within its boundary.

- The Authority will need to be able to administer all planning matters in the event that any of the 15 LPAs decides that it no longer wishes to operate its Agency Agreement.

2.2   The use of information technology to help deliver an effective and efficient planning service has long been recognised and is strongly encouraged by Government and the planning profession. It is also supported by many of the users of the service.

2.3   There is also a strong link with e-planning and the ability of users of the service to be able to submit, find, view and comment on planning applications and related matters on line, through the internet. It is now routine for LPAs to use dedicated planning administration systems to help deliver their planning service, although there is a variety of systems.

2.4   There is a strong operational and reputational case for the Authority to have its own dedicated planning administration system to help deliver its planning services particularly in respect of the applications it will determine itself.

2.5   In addition the SDNPA will benefit from having a system which also encompasses the applications handled by the 15 LPAs. This is something which requires further discussion and negotiation with individual LPAs. While some of the above requirements could be met by combinations of IT systems operated by the constituent councils and the NPA, it would be more efficient if there was a common system which all LPAs used.

3.   **OPTIONS FOR THE SDNPA PLANNING ADMINISTRATION SYSTEM.**

3.1   There are essentially three options for Members to consider in terms of managing the future administration of the planning service, as follows:-

Option 1 - Procure no planning administration system and rely wholly on the 15 constituent LPAs to provide this service on behalf of the SDNPA.

Option 2 - Procure an administration system to manage only those planning applications (about 150 a year) which the Authority will deal with itself.

Option 3 - Procure an administration system to manage all planning applications (about 4,000 a year) and other planning activity within the National Park.

The advantages and disadvantages of each of these three alternatives are now considered.

Option 1 - Procure no planning administration system and rely wholly on the 15 constituent LPAs to provide this service on behalf of the SDNPA.

3.2   The advantages of Option 1 are:-

- There will be no direct financial cost to the Authority. Initial set up and ongoing revenue costs will be avoided.

- The 15 LPAS will be able to continue to manage all applications that they deal with using their own (single) administration systems.

3.3   The disadvantages of Option 1 are:-

- This would be an extremely "high risk" approach for the SDNPA. It would be extremely difficult to fulfill its statutory planning responsibilities in the event of any LPA no longer being willing or able to deliver it on behalf of the Authority.

- There will be no integration with other SDNPA information technology systems.

- The Planning Service will be provided to different standards and in different ways across the National Park area. This may well not meet customer expectations or SDNPA aspirations.

- The SDNPA will need to identify additional (staff) resources to deliver a number of statutory requirements that a single administration system will provide automatically. Examples include publishing weekly lists of planning activity, completing statutory returns, and maintaining a Planning Register.

- The 15 LPAs will also need to provide the SDNPA with more information through their own planning administration systems. The cost of providing everything that will be needed may well be higher as a result of lower overall efficiency. It will be virtually impossible to guarantee consistency of information provided in this way. This could only be offset by more resources being dedicated to ensuring consistency.

- Without the ability to be able to manage its own planning service effectively, the risk of the constituent LPAS not delivering efficiencies over time will be higher.

- Some SDNPA staff will need to spend more time in LPAs offices (to access and use their systems) which will reduce efficiency and increase costs.

- The SDNPA be unique as a planning authority unable to deliver its statutory planning functions itself, with consequent reputational issues for the Authority to consider.

- Planning history and records for 16 LPAs will be held in different places on a variety of different systems. Some of this will need to analysed and pulled together in order to fulfill SDNPA and other responsibilities, for which there would be additional costs.

Option 2 - Procure an administration system to manage only those planning applications (about 150 a year) which the Authority will deal with itself.

3.4 The advantages of Option 2 are:-

- The initial set up and ongoing revenue costs are likely to be less than those under Option 3

- The SDNPA will be able to effectively manage those applications that it decides to deal with itself.

- The 15 LPAS will be able to continue to manage all applications that they deal with using their own different administration systems.

3.5 The disadvantages of Option 2 are:-

- If one or more of the 15 LPAS decides that it no longer wishes to continue with delegation through the Agency Agreements (or if the SDNPA decided to withdraw it as a result of poor performance), the SDNPA will then need to identify additional resources (possibly at greater cost then) to expand its system.

- The Planning service within the National Park will be provided to different standards and in different ways across the National Park. This may not meet customer expectations or SDNPA aspirations.

- The SDNPA will need to identify additional (staff) resources to deliver a number of statutory requirements that a fully operational dedicated planning administration system will provide automatically. Examples include publishing weekly lists of planning activity, completing statutory returns, and maintaining Planning Registers.

- The 15 LPAs will also need to provide the SDNPA with more information from their own planning administration systems. The overall cost of providing and assembling all that is needed will almost certainly be higher without a fully operational dedicated system as a result of lower overall efficiency. It will be virtually impossible to guarantee consistency of information provided in this way. This could only be offset by more resources being dedicated to ensuring consistency.

- Given such increased costs and with initial set-up and ongoing revenue costs still being incurred, this may be a more expensive option.

- There will be ongoing costs each year in for bringing all relevant planning records together on to the SDNPA and/or LPA systems.

Option 3 - Procure an administration system to manage all planning applications (about 4,000 a year) and other planning activity within the National Park.

3.6   The advantages of Option 3 are:-

- With a single comprehensive administration system, the Authority will be in a strong position to fully meet customer expectations.

- It will not be at risk of not being able to provide an effective and robust planning service to the required standard.

- The Authority would have the capacity and the ability to provide an effective planning service if any of the 15 constituent LPAs (or the SDNPA) decides to withdraw from the Agency Agreements, at any stage.

- The Authority will be capable of meeting all its statutory requirements such as producing a Planning Register, completing statutory returns and providing reliable planning information for Land Charges and related matters. While some of these requirements can be administered locally, some, such as the planning register, are required to be park-wide

- It will ensure that Planning is delivered in a consistent and suitably branded way across the whole of the National Park. All information on the system will be mutually consistent, and this will reduce time and effort in addressing inconsistencies which are otherwise inevitable.

- It will reduce the amount of work that the 15 LPAs and the NPA need to undertake and will therefore help reduce overall costs. It will consequently help ensure that the service is provided as efficiently as possible.

- From the time that the SDNPA system becomes operational, all future planning history and records will be held in one place, thereby reducing subsequent ongoing costs of bringing this together thereafter.

- It will help deliver the required future efficiencies in service delivery and reduced costs.

3.7   The disadvantages of Option 3 are:-

- There are initial set up costs and revenue costs from 1 April 2011, as set out in the confidential report related to this item.

- From the time the system is fully implemented, the 15 LPAS delivering SDNP Planning services will need to operate two administration systems in parallel.

4   EVALUATION OF OPTIONS

4.1   In relation to Option 1, without its own system, the Authority would be at a significant disadvantage in meeting customer expectations. The Authority would also be at risk of not being able to provide a planning service to the required standard. Furthermore,

while option 1 has no direct financial procurement cost, the inefficiency of not having a dedicated system will mean more manual work needing to be undertaken by both the SDNPA and the 15 LPAs. In reality, the difference between the ongoing costs of having or not having a system may not be significantly different.

4.2   The Authority must be confident that it has the potential to provide an effective planning service if any of the 15 constituent LPAs (or the SDNPA) decides to withdraw from the agency agreement at any stage, as otherwise the NPA would be unacceptably dependant on the LPAs for providing the service. This provides a strong and compelling case for the Authority having its own system in place. For this reason and those given above, Option 1 is not recommended.

4.3   It is therefore desirable for the Authority to have its own system and this report recommends the procurement of a system which will at least handle the planning applications/ the Authority will determine itself (Option 2).

4.4   However Option 3 would help to deliver a better delegated planning service in partnership with the 15 constituent LPAs within the National Park. The overall service provided to customers through the Agency Agreements would be more consistent and increasingly cost-effective. Furthermore, because the SDNPA will be able to take responsibility for managing many of its own planning affairs (e.g. statistical returns), this will be of benefit to the LPAs that would otherwise have to provide this service themselves. This will also help ensure that the service is cost-efficient. The difference in the costs of options 2 and 3 are not likely to be significantly different; additional costs to operate the system under option 3 will be offset by savings on the manual work co-ordinating information from a variety of LPA systems.

4.5   Option 3 is therefore the preferred option but the shared use by the 15 LPAs of a common SDNPA system will need to be negotiated with each LPA. The recommended approach is therefore to acquire the planning system for the SDNPA to use but make provision for handling all of the LPA applications in the National Park area assuming that these negotiations can be concluded successfully.

5.   THE IDOX UNI-form SYSTEM

5.1   Officers have been researching the potential planning systems that exist and what the 15 constituent LPAs currently use. In recent years, one particular company (IDOX) has expanded its services and now provides the IT administration support to the majority of LPAs in the United Kingdom. As a result of mergers and takeovers, there are, certain variations in the IDOX products, but the IDOX UNI-form system now appears to be the most commonly used.

5.2   Indeed, this is the system that is currently most commonly used within the 15 constituent national park LPAs, with 8 currently using IDOX products, of which 7 are UNI-form itself. The other 7 systems used are all different and appear to be used by those authorities for corporate or historic reasons. It is likely, however, that authorities seeking to implement a completely new system or those upgrading existing systems may well now consider IDOX UNI-form as the most appropriate. The reasons for this are:-

• It is the most widely used planning support system available. It is now used by 200 UK LPAs and benefits from the availability of established "user groups" and other networking facilities.

- It is generally well supported and is reviewed and updated on a regular basis to keep in-line with legislative changes and user requests.

- It offers flexible financial arrangements.

- It contains a number of Planning Modules (such as appeals, enforcement, LDF Management etc.) which can help enhance the overall planning service.

- It contains or is compatible with other local authority service modules such as Land Charges, Environmental Health and Building Control.

- It is compatible with many IT based systems, such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS), street numbering and naming and address/postcode software.

- It is resourced and experienced in uploading historic planning data from other sources. This is likely to be easier (and cheaper) where that data is already held on other Uniform systems.

- IDOX Public Access for Planning is the first of a new generation of web based, citizen focussed solutions, designed to provide real time tailored information to citizens, Councillors and other users, whilst completely integrating with the local authority's own web site.

- Public Access embraces all types of user and provides a tailored information delivery service thereby reducing the demand on more traditional channels such as face to face, mail, phone and e-mail.

- Whether the user is a member of the public, a Councillor or a local authority staff member, all users can choose to register and create their own profile thereby enabling the information disseminated by Public Access to be tailored to their own needs.

- Public Access provides the following capabilities related to tailoring the service received by the user:

  • A simple registration process and profile configuration facility

  • The ability to save application searches, track planning applications and be notified of new applications within a search, applications whose status has changed or against which new documents have been stored

  • Public Access users may also submit comments on applications within a defined period of the applications lifecycle.

5.3   The Scottish Government appointed IDOX to supply the planning solutions for the entire Country and IDOX also delivers the planning solution to the whole of Northern Ireland.

5.4   A further benefit is that IDOX will also provide, at no additional cost, a dedicated Electronic Document Management System for the Authority as a whole. This is required as soon as possible for operational reasons. For all of the above reasons, therefore, the IDOX solution is considered to provide the appropriate system for the Authority to use.

5.5   On the basis of the reasons above it is recommended that the Authority should procure the IDOX uniform system.

5.6 It would normally be a requirement that the Authority seeks competitive tenders before procuring a system of this potential value. However, in this case, it is not considered to be possible to do this. IDOX offers a specialised product and there are no alternatives that would meet the required specification and be as easily compatible with current LPA systems. IDOX do not use agents to sell their products and therefore it is only possible to purchase directly from them.

5.7 The overall contract costs exceed the European Union procurement threshold. The procurement will therefore follow EU Public Procurement Directives and seek to use an established procurement framework which will ensure that the Authority achieves best value.

5.8 Consideration has been given to a number of different ways that the system might be hosted. Having considered the risks, the potential costs and the number of LPAS (16 including the SDNPA) which will eventually have access to and will be encouraged to use the SDNPA system, a system hosted by IDOX itself presents the optimal option. This will ensure that upgrades and improvements are carried out in a timely, consistent and concurrent manner and that it relieves the Authority of undertaking this and other work itself across the entire National Park area.

6 IMPLEMENTATION TIMESCALE

6.1 The Electronic Document Management System element for the Authority as a whole is required as soon as possible and needs to be operational well before 1 April 2011.

6.2 While it would also be desirable to have the planning Uniform system operational by 1 April 2011, this is not realistically achievable. There are a number of actions required before the system can work effectively, including:-

- SDNPA staff will need to be appointed, to be in post and to be trained to use the system. Some staff may only be in post a little before 1 April 2011 and some may possibly not be in post until after this date.

- Templates for standard letters, forms and other material all need to prepared and uploaded onto the new system before it can be used. This is already under consideration but requires agreement on format and branding which is still being considered. This is a significant piece of work.

- The physical implementation needs careful management and effective programming and then adequate testing, before the system goes live. This will be achieved through a Project Implementation Document (PID) that is currently being prepared.

  Assuming that the system is adopted by all LPAs in the National Park area:

- Staff within the 15 LPAs will also need to be trained and there will be timing and resource issues for the LPAs to take into consideration.

- Historic planning data needs to be uploaded from the 15 constituent LPAs to make the system effective. Given the significant variations in the volumes of date, the different formats in which it is held and the different systems used by the LPAs, more work is needed before this can be implemented. It is possible that this may need to be phased over a longer (2-3 year) period.

- From the time that the system becomes operational, the 15 LPAS will be encouraged to register and process all SDNPA applications on the SDNPA system, while continuing to administer their other applications on their current systems. This will mean two systems being used and this will raise training and operational issues that will need addressing. For those 7 LPAS not currently using or familiar with IDOX software, those issues and training needs will be greater and may well require a little more time and support from both the SDNPA and IDOX.

6.3   Under the circumstances, discussions with the 15 LPAs and with IDOX have confirmed that it will not be practicable or expedient to try and implement the new system for 1 April 2011. A realistic programme, which can ensure delivery on time, is currently being discussed with IDOX and the 15 LPAS and this will be finalised as soon as possible. The aim will be for implementation to be at the earliest date that is as risk-free as possible, and certainly no later than 31 March 2012. At this stage, however, this Committee's approval is required to procure the system for its own use but capable of being extended to encompass all 15 LPAs. This will enable the momentum of implementing a delegated planning model to be maintained.

6.4   In the intervening period, from 1st April 2011, the 15 existing LPAs can continue to receive and validate all applications received within the National Park, regardless of whether they or the SDNPA then processes them. The 'agreement to agree' relating to planning delegation, which has been signed by all 15 LAs provides the basis for them to provide this service for the NPA. This will create extra work for the LPAs, and the SDNPA, but this is considered to be a fair trade-off for reducing the risk of implementation by 1 April 2011. Any significant transitional costs incurred by the LPAs will be met by the SDNPA.

6.5   To reduce these costs it is advised to work towards implementing the SDNPA planning administration system as quickly as is practically possible. Best current estimates are that this could take of the order of 12-15 months and that the SDNPA should have its own system operational by no later than 1 April 2012. Any contract with IDOX will need to ensure that the agreed timescale for implementation is fully met.

7.   CONCLUSION

7.1   There is a strong operational, reputational and risk based case for the SDNPA procuring and implementing an IT based planning administration system to help deliver its own planning services, as soon as possible after 1 April 2011. The recommendation is that a system should be acquired to do this.

7.2   There are further benefits to be secured if agreement can be reached with the 15 LPAs to use a common SDNPA system. The proposed system is therefore capable of being extended to encompass this option subject to concluding negotiations with the 15 LPAs.

7.2   For a variety of reasons, the IDox Uniform system presents the appropriate package for the Authority and financial provision is being made for this within the SDNPA budget.

7.3   For a number of reasons, it will not be possible to have this system operational by 1 April 2011, but it is anticipated that it will become so at some stage during that financial year and that it is fully operational by no later than 1 April 2012. In the meantime, the 15 constituent LPAS will continue to receive and host all planning

applications submitted within the Park from 1 April 2011, even though the Authority will wish to deal with some of those itself.

7.4   There are some real benefits to the Authority of being provided with a corporate dedicated Electronic Document Management System as part of the overall package.

8.   RESOURCES

For commercial confidentiality reasons, costs and the related risks are considered in part 2 of the agenda.

9.   RISK MANAGEMENT

9.1   The risk for failing to procure and implement an appropriate planning IT administration system as soon as possible is considered to be high. In this regard, there are both reputational and operational risks for the SDNPA to consider. There will be a Project Implementation Document (PID) to support and help manage the implementation of this project. This is currently being prepared and will be finalised well in advance of project Implementation.

9.2   There is also a very important need to ensure that the Authority is in a position to be able to deal with its potential overall planning caseload, in the event that one or more of the 15 constituent LPAs was to decide that it no longer wishes or was able to deliver the service thorough the currently envisaged Agency Agreements. There is a risk that the Authority would find it most difficult or impossible to do this if it did not have its own system in place. The early implementation of a dedicated planning administration system will significantly reduce this risk.

9.3   One further risk that will need to be considered, in due course, is the potential cost implications of any LPA deciding not to use the SDNPA system, once it becomes operational. It would be very much better if all 15 LPAs do so, as this will avoid costs of managing weekly uploads from other systems into the SDNPA system. Such uploads would be required to ensure that all planning data is robust and up to date, as it will be used for land charges and statutory planning returns to government and elsewhere.

10.   HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES, HEALTH & SAFETY

10.1   Equalities and human rights should be enhanced through the implementation of an established and accessible planning administration system, with a good public interface, for customers to be able to access and use.

11.   CONSULTEES

11.1   Interim Chief Finance Officer, Interim Head of ICT, Premises and Procurement and Interim Procurement Officer.

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