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| Report to | Resources and Performance Committee |
| Date | 19 November 2013 |
| By | Director of Planning |
| Title of Report | SDNPA Planning Development Management Service – Review of IDox UNIFORM Implementation |
| Purpose of Report | To review the implementation of the SDNPA development management IDox UNIFORM planning administration system and associated costs. |

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to note the report.

I. Introduction

- I.1 The South Downs National Park was designated on 1 April 2010. One year later, on 1 April 2011, the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) became the Planning Authority for the whole of the South Downs National Park.
- I.2 All 15 host authorities helped to deliver the development management service for the first year from 1 April 2011 until 31 March 2012. However, for that first year only, they provided this service using their own (different) planning administration systems. While this worked generally well for that first year in terms of customer service delivery, it also raised risks and issues for the SDNPA to consider. These included:-
 - The Authority had very little reliable or robust data on overall performance across the National Park
 - Financial fee reconciliation was very complex and challenging and took a significant level of staff time and resource
 - There were risks in terms of the Authority meeting its statutory responsibilities as a (new) Planning Authority
 - If any host authority provided notice of an intention not to continue with delegation, the SDNPA had no system on which to manage its own workload and meet its statutory responsibilities.
- I.3 To help manage these risks, the Authority employed a dedicated temporary consultant Project Manager to help oversee the procurement and development of a suitable planning administration system. This Project Manager reported regularly to a Project Board, which included two interim SDNPA Directors. A SDNPA officer Project team was also established to help with the day to day implementation of the project. Finally, to ensure that partner host authorities were involved in the project development and implementation, a Planning Administration User Group (PAUG) was established.
- I.4 Unlike most traditional planning authorities, the arrangements and options were more complex for the SDNPA. Some of the reasons for this included:-
 - The Authority was already working in partnership with 15 other local planning authorities across a wide area
 - A number of different planning administration systems (around 8) were being used by these 15 authorities

- The Authority was establishing a culture of partnership working with both the public and private sectors
 - Unlike more traditional local authorities, the SDNPA had no IT infrastructure on which to operate its own planning administration system or any commitment to a more centralised and tested IT system
 - A combination of the above factors additionally rendered the project risky, untested and challenging.
- 1.5 Officers had investigated a number of options, but due to cost considerations and potential technical difficulties, the hosted option was that which provided the Authority with the most cost-effective and practical overall solution. Members are reminded, however, that it was known that this approach was untested, was ground breaking and would be technically challenging. Members endorsed the principle of no major IT infrastructure in-house and to utilise partnerships and external platforms.
- 1.6 The Resources and Performance Committee considered a detailed report setting out the options and the reasons for a system being required on 22 November 2010. The Committee agreed to the implementation of IDox UNIFORM and to host authorities managing development management services on their own systems for a year from 1 April 2011. Implicit in the report was a commitment to introduce our own UNIFORM system from 1 April 2012. This report is attached as **Appendix 1**.

2. Project Implementation.

- 2.1 Following this decision, on 1 April 2012, the SDNPA introduced a hosted IDox UNIFORM planning administration system, after some planning, development and training. From 1 April 2012, four authorities had decided not to continue with delegation, mainly because the SDNPA proposed to introduce its own planning administration system which differed from the one that they were each using. For the SDNPA and the other 11 host authorities, effective implementation of the IDox UNIFORM project presented a significant challenge for the following reasons:-
- 2.2 In technical terms, the main UNIFORM system was hosted remotely by IDox which is based in Newbury. Effective and reliable IT connections then had to be established from IDox to the SDNPA, which at that time was using Hampshire County Council for the provision of its IT services. Since then, IT provision has been changed again and is now provided by a third party private sector partner (A365).
- 2.3 UNIFORM also had to be connected to work effectively with other systems (such as GIS for planning constraints) to ensure that it worked properly. This somewhat complex arrangement was quite different to the way that most traditional local authorities operate. They each normally have all their operational software systems sitting on and working together on their own IT platform, within their own offices and with their own IT staff to support it. That is a much simpler approach than was possible for the SDNPA.
- 2.4 In addition, the SDNPA system also then had to be extended to the 11 host authorities that the Authority was working with. The SDNPA system also needed to work effectively for all planning users and customers across the entire National Park area. The task was, therefore, unique and challenging, but also needed to be progressed as quickly as possible to help manage the risks and issues set out in paragraph 1.2.
- 2.5 The Resources and Performance Committee considered a second report relating to the risks around resources that related to the IDox project implementation on 8 February 2012. Members were advised that resources had been re-allocated to help ensure that the project would be delivered on time by 1 April 2012. This report is attached as **Appendix 2**.

3. Post implementation issues

- 3.1 The hosted National Park UNIFORM system went live on 1 April 2012 and during the spring and summer 2012, quite a number of initial issues were experienced, managed and then dealt with. There was a combination of technical, operational and resource issues, which

included the following:-

- Slow operation or falling out of the system on some occasions
- Difficulties in accessing and viewing documents
- Providing customers with information in a way that they wished or needed to receive it (particularly Parish Councils)
- Difficulties in making documents appear or be produced as they needed to be (template issues)
- Some users being unable or to find it difficult to access the system, on some occasions
- Scanning levels (and costs) were increasing due to improved service delivery, increased workloads and some confusion as to how host authorities should be undertaking scanning
- Compatibility issues between the SDNPA and host authority IT systems

- 3.2 There were consequently some real potential reputational risks for the SDNPA as a result of the above, which required a number of actions to be taken. One member of the planning administration staff was also away from work on extended sick leave at that critical time and increased staff resources were applied to the project to help make up this shortfall and to add more resource to the project. Other additional support was also provided internally to help with IT and related issues.
- 3.3 To help ensure that customer needs and issues were fully understood and were addressed, a number of meetings were held with partners and customers, including host authorities, Parish Councils and planning user groups. Members of the Authority, the Director of Planning and other senior officers of the Authority contributed to this important element of the work and this was a key part of ensuring that problems were identified and resolved.
- 3.4 Two part-time consultants were also employed from the summer 2012 to help with different aspects of the project. The contract for the previous Project manager had come to an end at the end of March 2012. This new arrangement included the appointment of a new Project Manager to oversee issue resolution and project implementation, (with experience of many Local Planning Authorities and the IDOX system) and the appointment of another with specialist knowledge in IDox technical issues. A third consultant with GIS knowledge was also appointed to add further resilience.
- 3.5 To help ensure that issues were properly addressed, one consultant was retained until the end of March 2013 and the other until July 2013. Both resources added significant costs to the project during 2012/13 and to a lesser extent in the current financial year. Both consultants have not now been used for some months, while the GIS consultant is now funded from outside this project.
- 3.6 However, these resources were very clearly needed and they proved to be effective in helping address the issues that had arisen;
- on a system never previously used in a way involving I I Authorities.
 - using an off site IT provider (first Hampshire County Council and then Advance 365).
 - and a hosted system and a separate scanning provider dealing with in excess of approximately 80,000 documents.
- Other measures, such as the establishment and management of a dedicated Help Desk, were also put in place to help measure and check improvement over a prolonged period of time.
- 3.7 The help and assistance of the host authorities should also be considered. To varying degrees, they also experienced issues and problems when the system first went live. By working effectively together, the SDNPA and the host authorities have jointly addressed the majority of the issues that arose and the contribution that they made, particularly the larger users, should be acknowledged.
- 3.8 The Authority is consequently now in a much better position than it was 18 months ago. Most of the problems and issues have been resolved and those issues that continue or arise are of a type that might be expected anyway. Examples include lost passwords for users, the need for new users to be set up and some on-going connection and IT related issues that

are addressed directly with IDox from a technical perspective.

- 3.9 Finally, the Authority has recently appointed a Systems Supervisor with specialist IDox UNIFORM experience and skills who should be able to assist with resolving any outstanding or new issues that arise. This position replaces the previous Planning Administration Manager who resigned from her position some months ago.

4. Resources

- 4.1 Over the full 3 years since 1 April 2011 until the end of March 2014, the full cost of implementing IDox UNIFORM is likely to exceed the approved budgets by around £279, 000, by the end of the current financial year.
- 4.2 In the first year (2011/12), when IDox was being set up and costs were easier to manage and control, the actual spend of £282,000 was very close to the approved budget. In 2012/13 and in the current financial year (2013/14), final costs either exceeded or are expected to exceed the agreed budgets.
- 4.3 The highest over-spend of some £206,000 occurred last year (2012/13), the year that IDox UNIFORM was implemented and most problems arose. While the actual spend was significantly higher than the budget, the reasons for this and the actions that were taken are generally set out in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.6 above. The increase in costs was mainly attributable to three main factors.
- 4.4 First of all, the cost of employing three experienced part time consultants had not been envisaged when the budget had been set. Furthermore, the length of time that they were needed for also proved to be longer than first envisaged. During 2012/13, their costs amounted to over £150,000 and this accounted for a significant part of the overspend in 2012/13.
- 4.5 The second area where costs were much higher than expected in 2012/13 was for the scanning of documentation, for it being redacted, where required, and then entered into UNIFORM. This is an essential part of the process as only when this has been completed can plans, applications and all other documentation (including representations and consultee responses) be accessed and viewed through UNIFORM by officers, Members and the general public, including Parish Councils.
- 4.6 In most local authorities, dedicated staff are employed to undertake this task and even smaller authorities may have a number of staff involved in this process. The SDNPA does not undertake this work itself and has no staff resources or hardware to do so.
- 4.7 The original scanning contract was based on scanning and entering only 4,000 planning applications a year. At a cost of around £16 per file, the expected expenditure was around £64,000. In reality, actual application numbers were higher and during the year, the SDNPA also introduced service improvements and additional IDox modules that significantly increased file numbers (and associated costs). These included the scanning of files for appeals and for enforcement and the introduction of the pre-application advice service early in 2013. Actual scanning costs in 2012/13 were consequently some £62,000 over the anticipated budget of £64,000.
- 4.8 As Members may recall, a report on the new scanning contract was considered by the Resources and Performance Committee on 9 April 2013. The new contract is now in place and because it is based on overall workload rather than an individual file basis, costs are expected to be lower and will be more certain. Over the next three years, the cost of scanning under the new contract will be built into future budget planning and build. The report to this Committee in April forms Appendix Three to this report. The annual scanning cost based on the new contract is expected to be about £80,000 a year.
- 4.9 A third area of unplanned spend in 2012/13 was for the training of host authority staff and consultees (including Parish Councils) on the new system. This was partially due to issues that arose after implementation and also to help new modules and features to be introduced. These will bring longer term benefits but the cost to the SDNPA was an additional £16,000 in 2012/13.

- 4.10 In relation to the current financial year, the potential overspend generally falls within the same areas. A sum of £10,000 was anticipated for consultants, but these actually amounted to £35,000 as a result of one consultant being needed until July this year. In addition, the (older) higher scanning costs had to be covered for the early part of the year until the new contract came into effect. This element accounts for a further £36,000 of the potential overspend this year. Finally, new IDox modules and features were introduced which have added a further £16,000. Together, these three elements will together make up almost all of this year's overspend of £76,000.c
- 4.11 While there were some other more minor additional costs in 2012/13 and 2013/14 relating to the improvement of UNIFORM, these three elements generally account for a significant proportion of the overspend. Over the full three years, these elements alone are likely to account for about £300,000 of overspend on the overall project. This will be off-set by some minor savings elsewhere within the project that will reduce the net overspend about £279,000. The likely overall budget situation for the full three years is set out below:-

| IDox budget and actual expenditure | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 |
| | £ | £ | £ |
| Budget | 285,000 | 172,000 | 206,000 |
| Actual spend | 282,000 | 378,000 | 282,000* |
| Difference | -3,000 | +206,000 | +76,000* |
| CUMULATIVE ACTUAL SPEND | 282,000 | 660,000 | 942,000* |
| CUMULATIVE TOTAL BUDGET | 285,000 | 457,000 | 663,000 |

*Latest Projection

- 4.12 While the overspend in 2012/13 was unfortunate, it could not have been avoided without significant reputational and other potential damage to the Authority. Similar comments apply for the potential overspend in 2013/14, although this overspend is expected to be considerably less than it was in 2012/13.
- 4.13 The improved scanning contract has now been implemented and will operate over the next three years. Both consultants have now completed their work with the Authority and have been released. Finally, some of the additional costs of the consultants that were employed can be off-set this year by the saving that has accrued from the vacant Planning Administration Manager's post over a period of some months.
- 4.14 The budget for 2014/15 has yet to be considered by the Authority but with the improved scanning contract and IDox UNIFORM now operating much better, costs next year will be more predictable and likely to be lower than this year and previous years.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 The greatest risk to the SDNPA was that from 1 April 2011 when it became the planning authority for the National Park, it had no system on which it could manage its significant planning caseload. It is the 8th largest planning caseload in the country and the risk was potentially high. There was a particularly high risk if any of the (then) 15 host authorities decided (as four subsequently did) not to continue with delegation after the first year.
- 5.2 There were also risks around the Authority not being able to fulfil its statutory responsibilities (such as publishing a Planning Register) or being able to monitor and publish overall performance or financial arrangements around planning fees effectively. As Members are aware, the latter has been the subject of considerable interest by both internal and external audit over the last 18 months.
- 5.3 Finally, there was also the potential risk of significant reputational risk to the SDNPA once the new system went live if the problems that had become apparent were not dealt with

quickly and robustly. The early and decisive actions that were taken and the additional resources that were applied, particularly during 2012/13 and some of which have continued into 2013/14, were crucial to the sound reputation of the Authority being maintained.

- 5.4 Because of the actions that have been taken and the resources applied, potential future risks around this project are now considered to be considerably lower. It is also considered that as a result of the successful retendering of the scanning contract and the bedding down and establishment of the IDox UNIFORM system, that there is much greater certainty (and less risk) over the future cost of the project. These are expected to reduce from 2014/15 onwards.

6. Human Rights, Equalities, Health and Safety

- 6.1 There are no direct implications arising from this report. However, the implementation and improvement of IDox UNIFORM has provided much better opportunities for SDNPA development management customers to access and use our services and to be able to do so much closer to where they live and work.
- 6.2 Overall, it is considered that the arrangements will have helped to improve and enhance these important considerations.

7. Sustainability

- 7.1 The implementation of IDox UNIFORM planning administration system will have helped (and will continue to help) better informed and more efficient planning decisions to be made in accordance with National Park purposes and duties.
- 7.2 It will also help to ensure a strong, healthy and just society is maintained. Local decisions should also help to deliver sustainable local economies and should promote good local governance and help encourage local active participation.

8. External Consultees

- 8.1 None.

TIM SLANEY Director of Planning

Contact Officer: Mike Bleakley – Planning Services Manager

Tel: 0300 300 1053

email: mike.bleakley@southdowns.gov.uk

Appendices

1. Report RPC08/10
2. Report RPC08/12

SDNPA Consultees

Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Director of Operations, Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer & Legal Services.

Background Documents

[Report to the Resources and Performance Committee and 9 April 2013](#)