

<b>Questioner:</b>	Mr Declan Hill
<b>Scrutiny Meeting:</b>	10 January 2024
<b>Question:</b>	
<p>I refer to Agenda Item 7, Appendix E (Economy &amp; Environment Directorate Delivery Plan 2024/25), particularly page 3 which anticipates a concerning reduced income of £1.3 for Development Planning, which I assume to be the Development Management Team, one of the few departments in the Local Authority which usually brings in a small surplus to Council coffers and does not appear to account for the rise in Planning Fees which came into effect in December.</p> <p>Noting the widely-known predicament that the Development Management Service has been under for much of the last five/six years, could the SMB ascertain via the Cabinet Members for Planning and Finance whether the 'Proposed Saving' of 'Delete vacant permanent posts not currently occupied' includes that of Planning Officers? This is of considerable concern to an already overstretched department which lacks resources and staff at the best of times compared to adjoining Local Planning Authorities, seeing the ever considerable turnover of staff/advertisement of posts. Could a figure be provided as to current staffing levels by Area Team/Majors?</p>	
<b>Response:</b>	
<p>The planning income for 2023/24 is lower than forecast. However, due to wider economic circumstances there has been a national downturn in planning applications, particularly for larger housing schemes. The forecast includes an allowance for the increased planning fees which are set by government. It was anticipated that these increased fees would be introduced earlier in 2023/24. The national delays in introducing them has meant they could only be brought in from December 2023 for the final 4 months of the financial year. We can confirm that the savings related to 'Delete vacant permanent posts not currently occupied' does not include planning officers. Like all Local Authorities we have encountered difficulties in recruiting, however we are actively recruiting to three senior planning officer posts at the moment. The current levels of staffing in the Area and Major Teams is 17 FTEs.</p> <p>The council has recently focussed on clearing the 5 week backlog of applications awaiting validation. We are urgently exploring opportunities to seek additional capacity whilst we seek to recruit to current vacancies. However, we do now have a permanent Service Director responsible for planning in place, and we have recently appointed a permanent Head of Planning and Building Control due to join in the next 3 months bringing stability to the team. We have re-established a planning agent forum to help improve communications/engagement and already have a planning improvement plan in place to help enhance the service over the coming months, which is overseen by an Improvement Board including the Leader, cabinet portfolio holder and chair of the planning committee.</p>	

<b>Questioner:</b>	Ms Reid, Hereford
<b>Scrutiny Meeting:</b>	10 January 2024
<b>Question:</b>	
<p>'Appendix A: Savings Proposals recommended for 2024/25' includes the Children and Young People directorate saving £2.5 million. One way of reducing costs would be to reduce the number of Section 47 enquiries. The Children's Services Commissioner's report (12/23) states:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"Section 47 enquiries continue to be significantly higher than the England average (180 per 10,000 children) and that of our Statistical Neighbours (158 per 10,000 children). Additional management oversight is being undertaken to ensure S.47 enquiries are proportionate and this has resulted in a steady decrease in the number of Section 47 enquiries from a rate of 520 (per 10,000 children) in March 2023, to a rate of 260 in July 2023."</p> <p>In what ways will the number of S47 enquiries be reduced during 2024-25 to a rate similar or lower than the council's Statistical Neighbours so that they are proportionate?</p>	
<b>Response:</b>	
<p>Under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, the council has a duty to make enquiries if there is a reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. Significant care needs to be taken to consider the number of section 47 enquiries as a potential cost saving matter or to set targets in respect of this.</p> <p>It is recognised however that the higher rate of section 47 enquiries indicates a cautious approach and we are continuing to safely and robustly manage this process alongside our partners. This has resulted in a safe and steady reduction of the number of section 47 enquiries undertaken. The council and its partners are increasingly able to provide appropriate challenge where there appears to be a risk averse approach.</p>	

<b>Questioner:</b>	Mr Declan Hill, via email
<b>Scrutiny Meeting:</b>	10 January 2024
<b>Supplementary Question:</b>	
<p><i>Supplementary Question:</i></p> <p><i>There are valid planning applications already over government statutory timescales (eight weeks on day of validation) which haven't even been allocated to a case officer, undermining confidence further in the development management team. What provision is going to be made for the requirement again for Herefordshire Council to likely to have to overspend on 'Planning Consultants' to clear the ever-growing backlog of Planning Applications in Herefordshire, given development managers reluctance to allocate to case officers likely due to their mental well-being. Has this been considered in the budget and does this need to be a catalyst for a re-ignited review of the service, particularly in light of the revolving door of 'Interim' Service Directors?</i></p>	
<p><b>Response:</b> Herefordshire Council currently has a large number of live applications (over 650) awaiting determination, we have a number of vacant planning posts with a relatively high turnover, which like the majority of Local Authorities we have struggle to recruit to due to national shortages in people with the required skills. To address this the council has and continues to bring in additional short term external capacity such as consultants. We are currently recruiting 8 additional permanent planning posts, having successfully recruited a permanent Head of Planning and Building Control, who will take up their post in April, and a permanent Service Director. The council has a planning improvement plan in place, overseen by a Planning Improvement Board, which includes the Leader of the council, Deputy Leader/ Lead Cabinet Member for Planning, and Chair of the Planning Committee. On the 9<sup>th</sup> February as part of our annual budget setting, councillors also made a very significant investment in the planning and regulatory software system, which will also improve the service offer and efficiency.</p>	

<b>Questioner:</b>	Ms Fiona Reid, delivered in person at meeting.
<b>Scrutiny Meeting:</b>	10 January 2024
<b>Supplementary Question:</b>	
<p>I do <i>not</i> consider that my public question has been satisfactorily answered. Many responses to public questions have <i>not</i> been satisfactorily answered or answered <i>late</i>. I shall give a few examples of numerous possible examples.</p> <p>My supplementary question to the 8 December 2023 Council meeting has still <i>not</i> been answered.</p> <p>I submitted a public question to the 14 December 2023 Cabinet meeting asking how many children are in care. But the Monitoring Officer rejected it claiming it was a Freedom of Information request.</p> <p>Members of the public voiced their dissatisfaction with responses to public questions to the Chief Executive on 8 December 2023.</p> <p>How will the Scrutiny Management Board ensure that from now on, public and councillor questions and supplementary questions are satisfactorily answered, by deadlines and in accordance with the Constitution?</p>	
<b>Response:</b> The chair of the board thanked Ms Reid for her question and instructed the clerk of the committee to note the question and ensure it was considered by the committee when it next looked at its work programme.	