

Rother District Council

Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	11 December 2023
Title:	Planning Software Funding
Report of:	Kemi Erifevieme, Development Manager, Mark Adams, Head of Digital and Customer Services and David Wharton, Digital Services Manager (Report Authors)
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Prochak
Ward(s):	Whole administrative area for Rother District Council as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
Purpose of Report:	To seek approval of funding for the replacement of existing antiquated software for the Planning Service. Including associated hardware required to support the new software. Including fund/budget for a dedicated Project Officer to oversee the project which will ensure implementation runs to timescales.
Decision Type:	Key
Officer Recommendation(s):	Recommendation: It be RESOLVED: That
1)	the capital funding requirement to procure and implement the new planning software of £359,000 be noted, to be funded from the Invest to Save budget within the approved capital budget; and
2)	the Head of Digital and Customer Services be granted delegated authority to take all decisions in relation to the implementation of the new planning service software in consultation with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Digital Transformation and Customer Services.

Reasons for Recommendations:

Ocella is the current software that the Planning Service uses to undertake its function as a Local Planning Authority (LPA) as well as support functions. The software providers have stated that they are disbanding the business and will not be able to support the system by the end of 2027. As such, this provides an opportunity for the Service to consider other solution providers to; source out modern software solution; allow more automation of tasks; improve the function of the service in line with the Government's White Paper requiring all LPAs (indeed Councils) to engage in digital technology in undertaking its functions/duty.

Introduction

1. This report seeks to set out the current position for the Planning Service's key software/technology for carrying out its functions as a Local Planning Authority (LPA). The exiting software 'Ocella' was implemented in the late 1980s and has been supported as best as possible by the owners/providers of the system.

Although the support and updates enabled adequate function to support the service, it also does not support full automation, which means many of the tasks within the process has to be undertaken manually and outside of the system.

2. The full automation of the antiquated system going forward is further compounded by the news from the solution providers that they will be packing up the business in the next three years and support beyond this period will no longer be possible.
3. As such, the current position provides an opportunity for the service to review its processes and tasks and seek an appropriate solution provider to support its function with particular emphasis on full automation which is lacking in the current system.
4. The report will explain the necessity for a new solution to be sourced, requirement for a dedicated project officer (on a fixed term contract basis), the risk of doing nothing or waiting to the end of the shelf life of current system.
5. There is potential to consider utilising the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities' (DHLUC) Open Digital Project fund (which RDC has applied to become partners in the next round which comes with funding), to undertake a comprehensive digital health check of the service which will include looking into our data and its management. Data management is a massive part of any digital solution and how ready the Council's data is for incorporating into the new software will be extremely important to how fully well any solution (we decide on) is fully integrated and serves purpose. The fund, if successful, will be useful in undertaking this key project.

Analysis / Details of the proposals

6. To review position of:
 - current held data;
 - digitisation;
 - process/task automation;
 - public access;
 - customer facing;
 - information sharing;
7. In addition to the above, the readiness of the LPA to align with the Government's ambition to improve information sharing amongst councils and LPAs.
8. A soft market test has been undertaken in addition to meetings with the East Sussex Procurement Hub. So far, the following potential solution providers have been sourced and request to demonstrate what/how they can support our function:
 - DHLUC Open Digital (Plan X; BOPs);
 - Idox Cloud;
 - Agile Ai (can only support part of functionality);
 - DEF – scheduled demonstration;
 - Civica – Scheduled demonstration.
9. A preferred solution provider is Idox Cloud, for the following reasons:

- module used in Council at present
- over 70% of LPAs currently use this solution in one form;
- supported and integrates with Open Digital Planning solutions*;
- supports information sharing;
- cloud based product – in line with current modern solutions and supports easier access, mobile working, resilience, security, and decreased maintenance requirements;
- cost lower than existing system and overall cost saving;
- quick and easier implementation.

Options

10. There are no other options considered – aside from above. The ‘do nothing’ is not necessarily an option. The risk with that is not meeting our duty or function as an LPA and also data handlers.
11. The risk to the Service will be **significant** in its operational function:
 - Failure to meet national targets for planning applications and appeals, can result in intervention from the Government (as a failing LPA);
 - Loss of data (data uploads etc) – no back up;
 - Slow inaccessible system – no support;
 - Updates – no support;
 - Poor public access;
 - Inadequate information sharing;
 - Risk of system failure;
 - Increase in complaints.
12. There are moderate risks in terms of resource where more tasks will have to be undertaken by staff, this risk is moderate in the shorter term and could be significant in the longer term.

Conclusion

13. In summary, it is essential to the Planning Service as the LPA in carrying out of its duty in that capacity to ensure that the operations (processes and tasks) within the function are carried out within statutory time. Many of the processes are also subject to nationally set targets for those operations to be undertaken. Continuous failure of an LPA to meet the national targets for planning application decisions (major, minor/others and appeals) can result in the Government putting an intervention in place for that failing authority.
14. It is recommended that a new software is implemented before the current one becomes disbanded to avoid serious risk of service failure in its operational duties, which could result in the LPA being placed on intervention by the Government.

Implications

Financial Implications

15. The revenue costs of our current system Ocella have been £300k over the last 5 years, averaging £60k pa. The maintenance and licensing costs of the Idox solution total £200k over 5 years equating to £40k pa. Moving to the new

system would therefore result in a £20k annual revenue saving. The revenue costs are already built into the current budget.

16. The estimated capital costs for the new solution total £359k as detailed within Appendix 1 (please note this figure is based on Idox Cloud being the preferred solution provider). At present this requested capital budget would be in addition to existing capital funds allocated to the Digital Transformation (DT) programme. Alternatively however the DT budget could be accessed for this project while the wider Digital Strategy is still being delivered.
17. The £359k capital budget includes the following:
 - Set up and implementation £84k
 - Project management (18 months) £70k (with a 28% tolerance)
 - Software development/integration/data transfer £100k
 - Additional hardware costs (TBC) £45k
 - Contingency (20%) £60k
18. Other unforeseen costs have not been identified in this report although provision has been made at this stage for a 20% contingency. A full Business Plan will be necessary to support the project initiation which will be comprehensive.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Cost/Benefit	Staff	Customer	Stakeholder
Expected Outcome	Improved efficiency Reduction in waste Reduction in time undertaking tasks within processes Eliminate duplication of tasks within processes Significant reduction in time to undertake tasks within processes Increased automation Reduction in errors/mistakes Improved customer facing Reduction in complaints Improved data management Time management efficiency Improved staff morale Cloud hosting system requires less maintenance by IT staff Easier access for staff and end users Improved integration with other systems (website, GGP) Data migration	Improved management of customer expectation Improved customer satisfaction Improved front loading of information Clearer messaging and requirement Quick access to information Automation of information Reduction in complaints Quality of information Improved data management Reduced customer contact Improved web interface for customers and stakeholders	Service performance
Cost of Software	Staff	Customer	Stakeholder
Associated cost	Software including installation Associated hardware Material cost Overhead	Data cleansing Associated product to improve public access	Access to data

		Public facing access to information - Plan X	
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Legal Implications

19. None identified.

Human Resources Implications

20. No significant implication however this project would require a dedicated PM for a minimum duration of 18 months to oversee the inception to implementation of the project. Salary implication for a dedicated PM should be factored into the project at circa £47,500* per annum (public sector) for a minimum duration of 18 months.

Other Implications

21. Access to information implications will be to data management and ensuring that information is accessible at all times and in all relevant format to meet the Government Accessibility/data management requirement. This is moderate potential implication.
22. Risk management implications. This can be assessed by a competent Project Manager which is a recommendation for this project.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	Consultation	No
Environmental	No	Access to Information	Yes
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

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Appendices:	1 – Financial Information 2 – Survey
Relevant Previous Minutes:	N/A
Background Papers:	*Information on Project Manager salary taken from APM Survey (2022)
Reference Documents:	N/A

Financial Information

Ocella Costs (revenue only)

2022	£70k
2021	£57k
2020	£60k
2019	£59k
2018	£55k

Total 5-year costs (2018 – 2022): £300k

Average annual cost: £60k

Ibox total cost of ownership over 5 years

	£000
Revenue costs	
Maintenance and licensing (£40k pa x 5 years)	200
Total revenue costs	200
Capital Costs	
Set up and implementation	84
Project management costs (18 months)	70
Software development, integration and data transfer	100
Additional hardware costs (estimated)	45
Contingency (20%)	60
Total capital costs	359
Total cost of ownership over 5 years	559

DEF (MasterGov) projected costs

Set-up and Implementation: £29k

Annual Maintenance and Licensing:

- Y1: £74k
- Y2: £77k
- Y3: £81k
- Y4: £84k
- Y5: £87k

Total 5 year costs: £432k

(Solution used by Wealden District Council)

Appendix 2

Survey of Planning Solution used by LAs in Southeast - July 2023

Authority	Jul-23	System Analysis	Number	Percentage
Adur-Worthing	Idox	Idox	28	71.8%
Arun	Ocella	Civica	3	7.7%
Ashford	x	Ocella	3	7.7%
Brighton & Hove	Idox	Salesforce	3	7.7%
Canterbury	Idox	DEF	1	2.6%
Chichester	Idox	NEC M3	1	2.6%
Crawley	x	Unknown	3	7.1%
Dartford	Idox			
Dover	Idox			
East Hampshire	Idox			
Eastbourne	Civica			
Eastleigh	Salesforce			
Elmbridge	NEC M3			
Fareham	Ocella			
Folkestone & Hythe	Salesforce			
Gosport	Idox			
Gravesham	Idox			
Guildford	Idox			
Hart	Idox			
Hastings	Idox			
Havant	Idox			
Horsham	Idox			
Lewes	Idox			
Maidstone	Idox			
Medway	Idox			
Mid Sussex	Idox			
Mole Valley	x			
Rother	Ocella			
Sevenoaks	Idox			
South Downs National Park	Idox			
Spelthorne	Idox			
Surrey Heath	Idox			
Swale	Idox			
Tandridge	Salesforce			
Thanet	Idox			
Tonbridge & Malling	Idox			
Tunbridge Wells	Idox			
Waverley	Civica			
Wealden	DEF			
Winchester	Idox			
Woking	Idox			
Wokingham	Civica			