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Careers Advice: Project-managing local plan production

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The production of a local plan (or the update of an existing local plan) is a highly complex and often lengthy project. Conscientious project management is therefore required in order to efficiently produce a local plan in a timely fashion. Attempting to rush the process or progress in an uncoordinated, ad hoc manner will almost certainly result in further work being required at a later stage. This will not only elongate the process but may also result in additional costs to the local authority.

That is not to say that the successful production of a local plan requires a sophisticated project management system. The majority of local authority planning policy teams are stretched, often without dedicated administrative support. Planners within the team will not be able to spend hours updating systems and spreadsheets. Rather the application of sensible and straightforward project management principles is required if the process is to be kept under control and manageable. This includes maintaining realistic programmes and task lists which are kept under regular review.

Project Programming

The successful production of a local plan requires the coordination of a large number of interrelated projects, often over a number of years.

The production of the local plan document itself is only one relatively small, if hugely important, task. In project-managing the production of a local plan, it is essential to consider the scheduling of interrelated

tasks which inform the production of local plan policies, including:

- The production of the evidence base – either in terms of commissioning new studies, or updating existing evidence;
- Engagement and public consultation;
- Ongoing discussions with key stakeholders, including the development industry and infrastructure providers;
- Regular reporting to internal colleagues including the management team within the council;
- Regular reporting to elected members;
- Ongoing discussions and collaboration with neighbouring local planning authorities and sub-regional organisations, such as the local enterprise partnership; and
- Testing of emerging policy proposals, including technical transport assessment work, the production of infrastructure delivery plans, and viability assessments.

It is advisable to maintain an overarching project programme, in addition to more specific programmes for key tasks or sub-projects. For instance, it is advisable to establish a plan and programme for reporting to elected members, with clear linkages through to the overall project plan. Without this, you may find that the programme you have established for progressing the local plan becomes impossible to meet because you have failed to consider democratic cycles, such as election periods, which may limit what can be achieved at certain periods of time.

One team member (typically the Planning Policy Manager or Team Leader) should be assigned overall responsibility for reviewing and maintaining the overarching project programme. Individual team members may be assigned responsibility for managing more specific programmes for tasks or sub-projects.

Reporting structures within the team must be clear and unambiguous, with opportunities for both one-to-one meetings and team meetings to take place at sensible and realistic intervals.

Contingency Planning

In scheduling tasks and producing work programmes, careful consideration must be given to available resources both now and in the future. An element of contingency planning is essential at all stages. It is necessary to consider from the outset how the progression of the local plan would be impacted by unforeseen events, such as staff illness or departure to a new job. Unfortunately, over the course of such a complex and often lengthy project, changes in personnel are inevitable. This can have a significant impact on the project programme as time is spent recruiting new staff potentially at the expense of progressing work. Loss of key staff can also impact upon the continuity of the work of the team. Can you call on colleagues in other departments to assist should you need to? Is your folder and filing structure sufficiently clear and consistently maintained? A contingency allowance of time should always be built into work programmes in order to ensure that project programmes are as realistic as possible.

In order to minimise the potential for disruption, investing in staff retention is crucial. It is important not to underestimate the need to maintain good staff morale, recognising how onerous and at times stressful the production of a local plan can be. Producing a local plan requires a significant team effort. Therefore, acknowledging and rewarding achievement and progress throughout all plan-making stages is essential, as is making time to provide guidance and assistance to more junior members of the team.

Corporate Ownership and Risk Management

In considering the scheduling of tasks and the project programme for local plan production, it is vital to ensure that buy-in is received from the team directly undertaking the work, in addition to colleagues in the council with responsibility for supporting the production of the plan. This should include senior management and elected members, who must have a role in 'championing' the plan and supporting (as well as sustaining) key officers within the team.

The production of a local plan requires a substantial corporate commitment from across the local authority and must not be seen as being a task purely for the planning team. In order to ensure that local plan production is as effective and efficient as possible, it is necessary to make sure that it is given adequate and appropriate status within the local authority. A cross-

departmental working group or similar should be established from the outset (if it does not already exist) in order to support and monitor progress. This should include consideration of risk management and mitigation.

Balanced and Proportionate Approach

Whilst the importance of project management should not be underestimated, the approach taken within each local authority will inevitably vary depending on local circumstances and resources available. Project management should not be overly onerous and must not detract from getting the plan produced. Therefore, a careful balance must be struck.

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