

**Committee:** Scrutiny Committee (Local Plan)

**Date:**

**Title:** Local Plan Update

17 January 2023

**Report Author:** John Clements, Interim Local Plans and New Communities Manager

jclements@uttlesford.gov.uk

---

## Summary

1. Progress on the Local Plan is at severe risk as a result of resignations of key members of staff. This is likely to set back the delivery of the publication of The Draft Local Plan for consultation from the agreed date of August 2023, with consequent knock-on effects for later stages of plan preparation.
2. Strenuous efforts are being made to mitigate the situation, as outlined below, and a verbal update on this will be given at the Scrutiny Committee meeting.
3. Up until January, good progress had been made on preparing the plan, albeit the programme is running a little behind where it was anticipated to be by this date.

## Recommendations

4. That the current staffing situation, and the severe risk to timely progress on the preparation of the new Local Plan is noted.
5. That the success of mitigation of the staffing situation is kept under review.
6. That continuing progress on the plan's preparation, albeit currently at risk, is noted.

## Financial Implications

7. It is hoped that the situation can be recovered within the current Local Plan budget, through recruitment. Some longer-term potential courses of action should recruitment not be fully successful could add significantly to the cost of the plan's preparation, but no decisions will be made on these imminently, nor without other options first being exhausted and appropriate governance of such changes being put in place.

## Background Papers

8. Appendix A: Local Plan Risk Register – January 2023

## Impact

9. See table:

Communication/Consultation	In the event that a significant delay to the agreed plan timetable does arise as a result of the current situation, this will need to be appropriately communicated.
Community Safety	n/a
Equalities	n/a
Health and Safety	n/a
Human Rights/Legal Implications	n/a
Sustainability	Any resulting delay to the Plan timetable will increase the time in which the Council's ability to resist unwelcome development proposals is limited.
Ward-specific impacts	n/a
Workforce/Workplace	The current situation adds significantly to the already great pressure under which the Local Plans team and Planning Directorate management is operating. The stress that team staff are already experiencing is very likely to be exacerbated.

## Situation

10. Two key members of the Local Plans team have, coincidentally, resigned since the New Year. These are the Interim Local Plans and New Communities Manager and an Interim Principal Planner.
11. This severely escalates the already very challenging situation with ongoing rapid turnover of staff in the team (turnover is at 58% in the past 12 months), where another team member is already leaving this month, and a further post is currently vacant.
12. A third of the total complement of 9 staff in the team, half of those who are development planners, will have left by the end of the month (unfortunately, another is already on sick leave, possibly long-term.) The latest vacancies, crucially, are among the most experienced in the team, and who have had key roles in managing the programme, dealing with the most complex issues, and leading other team members.
13. The impacts of these staff losses are not solely in the number of staff hours available to be devoted to the plan's production at its different levels, but perhaps more crucially in the loss of knowledge of detail, and understanding of

the broader context of the plan's preparation and the intended programme to achieve this.

14. Urgent efforts are being made to recruit replacement staff to resolve the immediate situation, and to develop contingency plans in case recruitment is unsuccessful or only partly so. At the time of writing, interviews were already under way for interim replacements for the latest, most senior, resignations, and the closing date for applications for permanent appointments to these posts is imminent. Interviews are being held within 24 hours of writing for a permanent replacement for the Career Grade post about to become vacant, and an appointment has been made (subject to references, etc.) for the current vacancy for a transport planner.
15. It should be recognised that it is currently an extremely difficult recruitment environment for all planning authorities nationally, especially at the more senior/experienced levels. There is a shortage of qualified planners, and public sector permanent staff pay scales are significantly exceeded by those offered by the private sector and temporary public sector contracts. That challenge occurs in a context where plan preparation has become ever more complex, for a variety of reasons.
16. The wider service recruitment campaign is live (at time of writing). This covers ten vacant and new posts across Development Management, Planning Policy and Planning Enforcement. Vacancies were placed on the Planning Magazine (Haymarket) website (Heritage and Ecologist jobs were also posted on the IHBC-Jobs and Green Jobs sites respectively), email bulletins sent to 19,000 subscribers to Planning Resource (an online resource for development professionals) and an article published on working for Uttlesford on Planning Resource on 15 November 2022. The posts have also been widely shared on Linked-in and appear on the UDC website. Planning staff also attended Uttlesford Careers Fair in November 2022 to promote entry-level planning vacancies.
17. The Director of Planning is formulating more radical options should the current recruitment drive not be successful. Some of these could have financial implications for the longer term, in which case the appropriate procedures for any change will be undertaken, but for the moment the current Local Plan budget should be adequate to address the immediate situation.
18. Notwithstanding the current staffing crisis, and the longstanding ongoing staffing challenges, progress has been made on plan preparation.
19. Among the most obvious examples, the revised plan programme has now been set up in MS Project to aid monitoring of progress, although it remains subject to further detailing, additions and refinement. A new, improved assessment of potentially available sites (n.b. 'screening/triage', not allocation decisions) is well under way, with the methodology and tools used completely overhauled, the 'strategic/new community' scale sites completed, and a good start made on the large number of smaller sites. (Note this progress is highly likely to slow as two of the three officers who worked on this to date are leaving imminently.) A review of the strategic/new community scale potential

sites has been progressed, involving re-assessment of previous assumptions, a series of meetings with some of the developers/promoters, and the procurement or re-focusing of transport consultant's work to inform the deliverability and other issues associated with the different sites/areas proffered. Design coding work has continued with very well received consultation events.

20. Alongside these a variety of work has been undertaken on a range of fronts, including to refine and develop methods and shared team understanding of other areas of work, including further developing the forward plan preparation programme, settlement assessments, policy and chapter writing, etc. The 5 Year Housing Land Supply Statement has been published, a Draft Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) published for consultation, and Parish/Town Councils consulted on the latest availability of local facilities in their settlements. One Neighbourhood Plan has been brought into force, while another is scheduled to achieve this at the next Council meeting. The team continues to deal with a host of other matters, including queries and Freedom of Information requests.

## Risk Analysis

21. It is highly likely that the current situation will cause some delay to the anticipated publication of the Draft Local Plan for consultation in August 2023 and subsequent stages, but the extent of that delay – whether minor or major - will be highly dependent on the results of the current recruitment drive, or the nature of alternative arrangements put in place should that drive be unsuccessful. The latter could have impacts on the Local Plan budget, which will be addressed should the necessity arise.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Inadequate staffing resources to satisfactorily progress local plan preparation.	4	4	Urgent recruitment drive already underway. Potential for other measures already being scoped.

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.