

**Bolsover District Council**

**Meeting of the Executive on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**Reducing Invalid Planning Applications and Back Office Planning System**

**Report of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance**

<b>Classification</b>	This report is Public
<b>Report By</b>	Chris Fridlington Assistant Director for Development and Planning e-mail <a href="mailto:chris.fridlington@bolsover.gov.uk">chris.fridlington@bolsover.gov.uk</a> ext: 2354
<b>Contact Officer</b>	Sarah Kay Planning Manager (Development Manager) e-mail: <a href="mailto:sarah.kay@bolsover.gov.uk">sarah.kay@bolsover.gov.uk</a> ext: 2265

**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to provide members with the details of the RIPA/BOPS project, which will provide the Council with funding to deliver digital innovation through its planning service.

The Council successfully bid to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities for this funding but through the application process; it was agreed on the funder's advice to work jointly with North East Derbyshire District Council with particular reference to the Councils' shared ICT services, accelerating learning and delivery, and obtaining best value for money.

This report recommends that members endorse the decision to join the project on the terms of the associated funding agreement and work with North East Derbyshire through the programme to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved from the project.

This report also recommends that members support the provision of North East Derbyshire with an indemnity to allow recovery of any ineligible costs claimed by this Council. The reason North East Derbyshire have received the funding is because they host the joint ICT service.

---

## **REPORT DETAILS**

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 In 2020, the Government published a White Paper outlining their proposals for reform of the planning system.
- 1.2 To date, there has been no substantive changes to the planning system following consultation on the White Paper but improving how digital technology is used by local planning authorities ("LPA"s) remains a key focus of Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities' work.
- 1.3 In particular, the department is investing money to improve the software used by LPAs in their development management processes through the RIPA/BOPS project.
- 1.4 RIPA and BOPS (Reducing Invalid Planning Applications and Back Office Planning System) are new digital products, which until now have been developed collaboratively by a select group of Councils.
- 1.5 These products are designed to be user-friendly and to make better use of the data related to planning applications. This opens up new opportunities to improve the accessibility, transparency and efficiency of planning services.
- 1.6 With these benefits in mind, Bolsover District Council made an application to join this programme and were successful along with North East Derbyshire and six other Councils therefore putting this Council at the vanguard of digital innovation in planning.
- 1.7 Consequently, Bolsover District Council and North East Derbyshire were jointly awarded £400,000 in grant in aid funding from DLUHC, which has since been received by North East Derbyshire on the basis that this is a digital innovation project and North East Derbyshire host the ICT service area.

### **2. Details of Proposal or Information**

- 2.1 In broad terms, around £100,000 of the grant will be used to support investment in the ICT systems and software already shared by North East Derbyshire and Bolsover District Council.
- 2.2 The remaining £300,000 would be split between the two Councils to pay for the cost of back filling officer time 'seconded' to the project over the twelve months it is intended to run.
- 2.3 The funding agreement is based on a commitment by both Councils to engage with a range of activities to properly engage with the project and work collaboratively with other Councils to develop the RIPA and BOPS products to a point where they can be rolled out nationally.
- 2.4 The specific objectives of the RIPA part of the project is to develop a digital service pattern called 'Apply for Planning Permission' that:

- allows applicants and their agents to submit planning applications to councils as data, as far as possible
- makes preparing and submitting a planning application as easy, unthreatening and as painless as possible for users
- reduces the number of invalid planning applications by 80%
- is interoperable with back-office platforms that can use the planning application data, making it easier and quicker for councils to process planning applications.
- is as easy as possible for councils nationwide to adopt and adapt.

2.5 The specific objectives of the BOPS part of the project include:

- developing a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) for assessing lawful development certificates, householder applications, and minor planning applications;
- developing Application Programming Interfaces (API) which allow alignment with existing systems and emerging systems, including the Reducing Invalid Planning Applications (RIPA) application system; and
- promoting widespread interest and adoption of BoPS by other local planning authorities through continuous engagement and promotion of the product.

2.6 The work officers would be completing would include:

- participating in a project control board including ICT lead and planning manager / head of service from both Councils, with oversight of the roll out of the project;
- ICT lead with oversight of the process of aligning our ICT system to work with the new system and new software products across both Councils;
- technical leads in both Councils with oversight of developing interface between new software and end users;
- professional leads in both Councils advising on planning matters; and
- administrative support.

2.7 The project is scheduled to run for a period of 12 months from April 2022 and the aim is for the Council to go 'live' with both the RIPA and BOPS software within those 12 months.

### **3. Reasons for Recommendation**

3.1 The existing back-office systems that are used by planners to determine planning applications are complex, confusing and difficult to navigate. Significant training and workarounds are required to undertake an assessment and the systems often do not link with front facing or monitoring systems.

- 3.2 Therefore, it generally costs more money for councils to determine smaller planning applications compared to larger applications, because the staff time using the existing systems is so time intensive.
- 3.3 Similarly, a significant number of planning applications received are 'invalid' whether it is because required documents are missing, incomplete or incorrectly formatted.
- 3.4 Often, the reason for an invalid application can be seemingly insignificant but can be important to the robustness of the decision making process such as a missing north arrow or red-edging around an application site.
- 3.5 However, the process of validating applications is hugely costly - in terms of time and money – for both applicants and planning authorities because of the delays incurred pending validation of an application.
- 3.6 The delays are often incurred through subsequent and often protracted communications between the applicant and the case officer - largely by email or phone – requesting and explaining the need for additional information, or revised and/or additional plans for example and the provision of whatever is required to make an application valid.
- 3.7 Therefore, the benefits of joining the RIPA/BOPS project include receiving grant in aid funding to support the Council:
- improve the planning process for both officers and applicants;
  - provide better customer service in both Councils;
  - help both Councils make more effective and efficient use of officer time;
  - allow both Councils to consider additional income generation opportunities;
  - put both Councils in a stronger position with improved ICT systems; and
  - a better understanding and awareness of the new digital technology the Government wishes to see adopted by LPAs,
- 3.8 Consequently, it is recommended that this Council works with North East Derbyshire on the RIPA/BOPS project and enter into a legal agreement with North East Derbyshire that will allow this Council to draw down the appropriate funding as required.

#### **4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 4.1 The 'do nothing' option was rejected because this project provides a unique opportunity to improve its planning systems with external funding.
- 4.2 To undertake the project separately as an 'alternative option' for both Councils was rejected on the advice of the funding body and in light of the efficiencies to

be gained because both Council's planning services operate with the same ICT functionality and support.

---

### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

1. That members endorse the decision to join the project on the terms of the associated funding agreement and support the provision of North East Derbyshire with an indemnity to allow recovery of any ineligible costs claimed by this Council.

Approved by Councillor Duncan McGregor, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

**Finance and Risk:**            Yes ☒            No ☐

**Details:**

The funding agreement allows the Council to make improvements to its ICT and planning systems that it would not normally be able to consider within its own budgets.

There is a risk that this Council would need to reimburse North East Derbyshire if funding was drawn down but spent on ineligible items.

On behalf of the Section 151 Officer

**Legal (including Data Protection):**            Yes ☒            No ☐

**Details:**

This project requires this Council to be bound by the terms of the funding agreement and an associated legal agreement.

The project will be carried out in compliance with existing privacy statements.

On behalf of the Solicitor to the Council

**Staffing:**            Yes ☒            No ☐

**Details:**

The project will mean taking officers off their day to day duties but the funding award should cover the cost of backfilling officer time given over to the project.

The backfill arrangements will need to go through the appropriate processes as the precise details of the staffing proposals are confirmed.

On behalf of the Head of Paid Service

### **DECISION INFORMATION**

<b>Is the decision a Key Decision?</b> A Key Decision is an executive decision which has a significant impact on two or more District wards or which results in income or expenditure to the Council above the following thresholds:  <b>Revenue - £75,000</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Capital - £150,000</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Please indicate which threshold applies</i>	Yes
<b>Is the decision subject to Call-In?</b> <i>(Only Key Decisions are subject to Call-In)</i>	Yes

<b>District Wards Significantly Affected</b>	All
<b>Consultation:</b> <b>Leader / Deputy Leader</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Executive</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>SLT</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Relevant Service Manager</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Members</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Public</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	Details:

<b>Links to Council Ambition: Customers, Economy and Environment.</b>
This proposal has links to the Council's ambition and corporate priorities because it is aimed at making efficiencies and more effective use of officer time so it can be better spent on dealing with pre-application advice and major applications that will drive sustainable growth rather than back office systems or minor applications that drain resource and capacity for little gain.

DOCUMENT INFORMATION	
Appendix No	Title
n/a	n/a

<b>Background Papers</b>
<i>(These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Executive you must provide copies of the background papers).</i>
n/a