



## **Neighbourhood Planning & Local Planning Service Redesign & Capacity Building – DCLG**

### **Pilot Programme for Local Authorities**

#### **Redesigning Data Management summary paper**

## **Introduction**

The Local Authorities in the Exeter Housing Market Area (the HMA) have a strong record of working together and with other partners across administrative boundaries to plan for, promote, and deliver growth in an innovative way. The Local Authorities in what is termed the 'Greater Exeter area' are:

- East Devon District Council;
- Exeter City Council;
- Mid Devon District Council;
- Teignbridge District Council; and
- Devon County Council.

Alongside the involvement of the Exeter and East Devon Growth Point, the joint working of the Local Authorities has resulted in the development of the Cranbrook New Community to the east of Exeter, as well as large scale employment sites, all supported by significant transport, education and energy infrastructure.

This collaborative approach is set to develop further in the context of the devolution agenda which is emerging in the Devon area<sup>1</sup>. This will seek to establish a new, more formal joined-up approach to setting long term visions and development strategy across the HMA and travel to work area coupled with innovative mechanisms for development and infrastructure delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Information available at:  
<http://heartofswlep.co.uk/about-the-lep/strategies-and-priorities/devolution/>

The Authorities recognise that redefining and redesigning the way in which the Local Authorities work together on local plan making will be a vital part of ensuring that collaborative work continues and evolves. As such, the Local Authorities are coming together to work on a joint strategic plan for the area – the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan - a project to which the Partner Authorities have recently committed. The plan will provide a strategic planning framework following appropriate functional geographies, allowing the Authorities to operate more efficiently. It will also be important in ensuring that the Partners comply with the ‘duty to cooperate’ placed on the local authorities through the Localism Act 2011.

The Partner Authorities’ bid to DCLG included a request for funding to help redesign data management – to analyse, consolidate and achieve consistency across data sets. This work is helping to facilitate the preparation of the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan.

The Partner Authorities are continuing to work on data management to support the Strategic Plan.

## **Work package**

A joint bid to the Neighbourhood Planning & Local Planning Service Redesign & Capacity Building fund was submitted by the Partner Authorities.

Total funding of £60,000 was awarded in February 2016 covering three elements to support accelerated strategic planning. The elements were:

- Transportation study work: £25,000  
To develop the transportation evidence base to support joined-up plan-making and help develop a long term transportation strategy to support future growth.
- Environmental study work: £15,000  
To develop the environmental evidence base to support strategic plan-making and ensure the development of an appropriate strategy for accommodating future growth and environmental aspirations.
- Redesigning data management: £20,000.  
To analyse, consolidate and achieve consistency across existing data sets.

This paper summarises the data management element of the work. The outputs of the environmental and transport studies are considered separately.

## **Current data management**

Data for the Partners is currently held separately on independent systems at physically separate campuses. The data is currently managed by three separate IT providers - in two cases these are discreet organisations:

- ‘Strata Solutions’ supporting Exeter City Council and Teignbridge and East Devon District Councils;
- ‘Scomis’ supporting Devon County Council; and
- Mid Devon District Council’s own ‘in-house’ IT service.

The way that data is currently managed across the five Local Authorities has therefore posed significant challenges to joint planning activities that have needed to be reconciled and overcome.

## **Approach to managing data differently**

The Partners have reviewed their current data management where this relates to planning policy development. This has included:

- Data storage and file sharing;
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS mapping); and
- Website and public facing data.

### Data storage and file sharing

The Partner Authorities have identified potential approaches to how documents can be stored most efficiently to allow shared access and appropriate document version control.

Alternative options considered have included:

- A single lead authority to hold and disseminate files. This places an additional administrative burden on that authority. Data sharing is predominantly by email, which is cumbersome; and
- Each Local Authority being responsible for holding its own data. This risks inconsistencies in data sets and challenges of version control.

Given the limitations of the options above, officers are now pursuing the use of the cloud-based Microsoft product 'Sharepoint' for the storing and exchange of data by the Partner Authorities. The system is currently being established and it is expected this will be rolled out to officers in the autumn 2016.

### GIS mapping

Thematic workstreams for the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan have identified an early need for GIS support for the capture, storage and sharing of spatial data. This has culminated in an audit of spatial data needed (for example, designated heritage assets, landscape character areas) and the nomination of lead officers across the five councils for each of the identified data sets.

A series of potential approaches have been considered through discussions with planning officers and IT representatives from the Partners:

- Each Partner Authority to hold spatial data for its administrative area. This risks inconsistencies in data sets and a lack of complete plan area coverage on a single GIS;
- A single lead Authority to hold GIS data with access provided through a web browser; and
- A cloud-based based GIS . Each Partner Authority would be able to access and share information. This could prove cost prohibitive to purchase and would incur ongoing service charges.

The most practicable way forward will be for a single lead authority to provide complete plan area coverage for a GIS. Devon County Council is able to take this role because it can build on existing GIS covering the whole of the plan area through an online system. This approach will involve significant frontloading of data management to bring different datasets together, make them consistent in their format, symbology and meta data and transfer the data to a single system. The capture of new data will need to be co-ordinated and have quality controls.

Significant resource will be required to undertake the frontloading of the GIS data management. Existing IT support across the Partner Authorities is likely to be able to support some of this work, however additional short term capacity improvements will be required to expedite this work. There will be a cost implication for the Partner Authorities in the autumn 2016, and this is being met by the DCLG funding.

### Website and public-facing data

The Partner Authorities have identified the need for a specific website to provide for public facing work, including providing information about the Strategic Plan and facilitating future public engagement involving consultation exercises with web response forms.

Alternative options considered have included:

- Each Partner Authority having its own dedicated webpage for the Strategic Plan. This has a potential risk of inconsistent information being provided and would be an inefficient approach as it would require the maintenance of numerous webpages;
- A single lead authority hosting the website. This places an additional administrative burden on that authority and risks politicising the preparation of the Strategic Plan where its content may impact on adjoining authority areas; and
- A free-standing independent website. This would be neutral and can include independent branding that is bespoke and specific to the preparation of the Strategic Plan. It would provide a single public facing place on the internet thereby avoiding duplicating webpages on Partner Authority's websites and risk of multiple and potentially inconsistent information being provided.

The Partner Authorities consider the free-standing independent website to be the most practicable and advantageous way forward. Devon County Council will develop the website working with media / communications teams from the other Partner Authorities. The cost incurred will be met from DCLG's grant award.

### **Lessons learnt**

Work for the redesign of data management is currently ongoing. However, the Partner Authorities have learnt a number of lessons from the progress made.

### Project management

Several planning officers, with support, have worked together to move the project forward. However, limited capacity to do so in light of other work commitments and the practicalities of bringing together IT specialists from across the Partner Authorities has meant this work has taken some time. Project management from a dedicated 'lead officer' is important to take responsibility for, and co-ordinate, the data management work across the area.

### Business justification

There is a need to identify a clearly defined business justification for the redesign of data management to help align the work priorities of each Partner Authority's IT service provider and to confirm the timely delivery of the project. Given the size of the Partner organisations and the competing needs, the length of time required to execute such a project should not be underestimated.

## Communication

There is a need to communicate the aim of redesigning data management effectively to each IT service provider from each Local Authority. Key to this is identifying the appropriate contact officers and ensuring regular communication. IT officers are not 'planners' and therefore a need exists to communicate the relevance of the plan work to them so that they can understand how they can contribute towards this. Planners also need to better understand IT capabilities and limitations and what can feasibly be achieved.

## Timeframe

The review of data management has so far taken a number of months, with good progress, however the time required to secure agreement from each Local Authority is significant. The length of time that such a project takes to deliver should not, therefore, be underestimated.

## Innovative thinking

The project has three main components. Bringing these together in a timely manner to meet the IT needs of the Partner Authorities poses significant challenges which have required careful timetabling and planning.

Limited available budget and resources have helped to focus attention on finding practical and achievable solutions. Procuring a new external IT service provider specifically for the purpose of the Strategic Plan is not an option and therefore the Partner Authorities have brought together specialists from each of their IT providers to think and work collaboratively on the project. The lead responsibility for each of the three IT components has effectively been passed to the IT provider associated with the Authority that is best placed to deliver.

Identifying 'quick wins' has helped to build and maintain momentum in the project – the use of existing available and affordable commercial products such as 'Sharepoint' to provide a cloud-based data storage / sharing have put in place early IT capabilities to help the Partner Authorities prepare the Strategic Plan.

## **Sharing of learning**

Officers from the Local Authorities will share the learning which has resulted from this work through relevant networks via the Department for Communities and Local Government, to Planning Advisory Service, Royal Town Planning Institute and the Town and Country Planning Association.

At a more local level, there are specific examples of emerging cross-boundary plan-making taking place in the Plymouth and northern Devon areas where lessons here could be applied. Discussions could be initiated in the context of the existing Devon Duty to Cooperate Protocol<sup>2</sup> and through the Devon Planning Officers Group which meets quarterly.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at:

<https://new.devon.gov.uk/planning/planning-policies/the-duty-to-co-operate>

## Further information

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