

Report of: Director of Place and Engagement

Subject: Proposal to acquire a new planning database

Decision Required: Yes

Recommendation:

The Authority is recommended to:

- a. Approve the acquisition of a new planning database

1. Key Messages

- 1.1.1 This paper addresses the requirement to review the current planning database.
- 1.1.2 The review has identified there are some significant challenges with the current planning database relating to previous data migration, reporting abilities and customer service.
- 1.1.3 New systems have been investigated with a potential new solution identified, subject to final costings & procurement and clarity on IT.

2. Background

2.1 The current planning database system has been in place since 2018 and has broadly served the Authority well during this time. Since the original contract was issued, a number of upgrades and changes have taken place. These include ensuring that all planning applications are available to view online and the move to a fully hosted cloud system by the Authority. As a result of Covid-19 the Authority moved to a fully electronic planning system in 2020. Whilst the provider claims the database has the ability to use online work processes to support online working, in reality staff have been unable to benefit from such work flow processes in the manner claimed and there have been a range of challenges with the database not fully supporting the newer way in which the Authority is working since Covid.

Of late the following issues have been identified:

- Significant delays in time in resolving issues by the supplier, even for basic changes
- Increasing instability with daily challenges for users such as an inability to log in.

- Data corruption during the most recent upgrade which resulted in a need for a second upgrade to resolve issues.
- Continued corruption in some media documents in the pre-application and enforcement modules which the provider has been unable to resolve.
- Support has become increasingly difficult to access with often no clear solution.
- Issues with mapping constraints disappearing from the map layer despite the information being set accurately by PCNPA staff.

Other issues include:

- Poor reporting capability with very little support from the provider for this
- Lack of live, up to date data for managers
- Process inefficiencies

As a result, over the last year we have been investigating new solutions and making enquiries of other National Parks and other Local Planning Authorities who are in a similar position. We have found that a number of other National Parks in England have already either migrated or are in the process of contracting with a new planning database provider. We also undertook an exploration of the market by contacting 3 providers on an existing Government framework in April of this year with a pre-engagement consultation to assess likely costs and provision. This process included consideration of the current provider, to assess whether an updated contract could address the issues above. Following on from the pre-engagement process we have undertaken a more extensive direct assessment of potential provision with two providers and are in a position where we have identified a preferred option. Under procurement rules the Authority is able to use the UK Government framework for a direct award for a contract of this type.

3. Consultation

3.1 PCNPAs IT Manager has liaised with other National Parks to discuss their plans in this area. He identified that many of those using the PCNPA current provider were already in the process of finding an alternative planning database provider. He has sought advice from those Parks about their experience of transition to a new provider and the relative difficulty/ease of doing so with different models. Planning Officers have also consulted with other LPAs to understand their experience of different providers.

3.2 Key planning and IT staff were invited to all demos of various planning database solutions and gave feedback. In fact, some providers were invited more than once to provide reruns of demos and clear queries.

3.3 Inevitably, each planning database has some similarities in the type of provision made in order to support the processing of planning applications, enforcement records and pre-application inquiries. The final recommendation is based on cost and the provider who, the team feel can best meet our needs.

3.4 The IT team have also been consulted and are very supportive of the decision to move. They highlight a significant delay in implementing a multi factor authentication as the latest example of poor customer service from our existing provider.

4. Strategic Policy Context

- 4.1 The proposals are in line with supporting and safeguarding our business continuity plan.
- 4.2 A new system will support our corporate governance by improving reporting effectiveness and generate process efficiencies.

5. Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- a. A financial assessment has been made on each of the systems viewed, initially as part of a pre-engagement exercise and more recently with our two preferred providers as part of a detailed exploration of costings within the government framework option. Costs for transferring the database as well as annual licence costs have been assessed. PCNPA has an identified reserve for the transfer costs available. It is intended that the transfer will take place whilst the existing model is still in use, with a changeover taking place at the start of the next financial year.
- b. Overall costs of transfer and annual costs for a four year period based on provision of a like for like similar model but with enhanced reporting to existing arrive at approximately £120k-£127 for both providers.
- c. PCNPA has identified its preferred provider based on the ease of transfer and the better ability to use word processing and mapping in a way which works with the LPAs existing processes.
- d. In addition to the basic model the intention is to purchase some add on modules which add value. Both providers offer additional functionality in different ways which could be added on for a price. Options available and yet to be finalised include potential provision of a Local Land Registry dedicated module, online pre-application submission module and dedicated online measuring tool for the public for plans. These provisions result in an increased annual cost but these additional benefits are considered to provide significant added value. Depending on the final solution chosen annual costs on a like for like basis vary between approximately £18,600 and £23-25k per year in comparison with an existing annual cost of £25k per year. Add ons of the type described above if incorporated in full would be likely to bring an annual maximum cost to approximately £33k per year (all potential add ons identified may not be pursued). The increased cost will be incorporated in budgets for 26-27. A specific reserve for the transfer costs has been identified and is available to support this work.

- e. The increase in cost should be outweighed by improved efficiencies not only within the planning team but also for the IT team. A new system should release members of the planning from heavy manual procedures to providing improved statistical monitoring of performance for individual officers and a better public facing provision with options for members of the public to measure plans online themselves more easily and submit online pre-application submissions directly.
- f. Continuing to use a cloud-based solution will continue to reduce future need for storage capacity on our servers.
- g. A cloud-based system will allow our external and internal auditors and staff to access information and view documents even if PCNPA has IT issues.
- h. There will be initial implementation costs of set up, ranging from £21k to £53k dependant on solution. These will be deemed as capital costs for which a capital fund is available.
- i. As the Authority is moving from one hosted system to another, the burden of administering the changeover falls to the new provider and therefore at this moment in time no additional staffing resource is considered necessary.
- j. The Authority's preferred provider and full transfer costs plus the additional added value elements are likely to result in full costs over 4 years of approximately £150k if all additional add ons were included – a final decision has yet to be taken on this.

6. Risk and Compliance Considerations

- a. The current planning database is functioning but the increasing challenges of dealing with the current provider mean the Authority is keen to move. The organisation has already experienced disruption in operation of the planning system and services, with significant reporting issues. A move to an alternative system is considered to result in a better value for money service for the Authority.
- b. This proposal will support the Authority to meet its corporate governance requirements. Not implementing exposes the Authority to potential increased IT systems risk and failure.
- c. Continuing with a cloud-based solution, the IT risk will be transferred to the solution provider. It will be their responsibility to manage cloud-based services. Their IT compliance policies and data protection policies have been requested as part of the assessment. The Authority also holds relevant insurance which would provide additional coverage in the event of a failure by the provider.

7. Impact on our Public Sector Duties

7.1 Welsh Language Impacts

Any contract issued will ensure that the public facing version of the website displaying planning applications is available bilingually.

7.2 Biodiversity Duty and Carbon Emission Impacts

As part of the assessment of the final solution provider, we have requested their sustainability strategies to ensure we are supporting our socially responsible procurement and environmental strategies.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The trend within planning databases increasingly is to move systems to the 'Cloud,' automate processes and improve analytics.

8.2 The current system is outdated, challenging to collect, integrate and analyse data. It lacks automation and AI for robust analytics, leading to inefficiencies and added costs.

8.3 A new planning database solution should not only provide more efficient and robust core statistics, but also provide the following added benefits:

- **Modules** – a dedicated TPO module and direct Land Registry reporting module
- **Online public benefits** – dedicated online measuring tool for the public when viewing plans, as well as ability to easily submit online pre-application inquiries
- **Reporting** tools to generate accurate statistics including individual officer performance analysis

8.4 The preferred finance solution identified as best suitable for our needs is DEF Mastergov. The final decision will be dependent on final costs, implementation schedule, IT security and sustainability policies, review of SLA and support agreements.

