

<b>DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT SERVICE – RESOURCE REVIEW</b>	
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<p>This report sets out resourcing options for the Development Management Service to ensure it can deliver timely planning decisions in the wider public interest following adoption of the Councils Local Plan on 17 December 2025 and the current/expected increase in planning application submissions.</p> <p>With increased planning fee income, now is the right time to review resourcing options to ensure a clearer division of labour and increased resource capacity to help maximise the value of skills and experience already in the team and drive forward improved planning outcomes and timeliness of decision making.</p>
<b>Options considered</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Option One – Do Nothing (Not Recommended)</b></li> <li>• <b>Option Two – Re-Assign Staffing Across the Wider Planning Service (Not Recommended)</b></li> <li>• <b>Option Three – Managed Growth (Recommended) which includes the creation of four new posts</b></li> </ul>
<b>Consultation(s)</b>	Consultations have been undertaken with the HR Advisor for Planning, Group Accountant, S151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer.
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>APPROVE “Option Three – Managed Growth” as set out in the report across paragraphs 3.14 to 3.30 to deliver a re-structured DM Service as set out at Appendix A Figure 2</b></li> <li>• <b>Authorise immediate recruitment to the four new posts.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Reasons for recommendations</b>	To ensure the Development Management Service is appropriately resourced reflecting increased application workload following adoption of the Council’s Local Plan
<b>Background papers</b>	N/A

<b>Wards affected</b>	N/A
<b>Cabinet member(s)</b>	Cllr Andrew Brown (Planning Portfolio Holder)
<b>Contact Officer</b>	Geoff Lyon, Development Manager <a href="mailto:geoff.lyon@north-norfolk.gov.uk">geoff.lyon@north-norfolk.gov.uk</a>

<b>Links to key documents:</b>	
Corporate Plan:	<b>Our Greener Future</b> <b>Developing Our Communities</b> <b>Meeting our Housing Need</b> <b>Investing In Our Local Economy &amp; Infrastructure</b> <b>A Strong, Responsible &amp; Accountable Council</b>
Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	N/A
Council Policies & Strategies	Local Plan Adopted 17 December 2025

<b>Corporate Governance:</b>	
Is this a key decision	Yes - This is a departure decision which would be outside of the agreed base budget framework for the Development Management Service but is to be supported from predicted increased planning fee income.
Has the public interest test been applied	N/A
Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter	CLT confirmed their agreement to the principle of using increased planning fee income and to support Option 3 as set out at <b>Appendix A</b> Figure 2.

## 1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1. To consider resourcing options for the Development Management Service aligned with the anticipated increase in planning applications and planning fee income following recent adoption of the Local Plan.

## 2. Introduction & Background

- 2.1. The Development Management Service is responsible for the effective and efficient processing of all planning and related applications for the District Council as Local Planning Authority.
- 2.2. The Development Management (DM) Service currently has the following staff resources:

<b>Role</b>	<b>No. of Posts</b>	<b>FTE</b>
<b>Development Manager</b>	1	1.0
<b>Team Leader</b>	3	3.0
<b>Senior Planner</b>	8	7.06
<b>Planning Officer</b>	2	2.0
<b>Trainee Planning Officer</b>	2	2.0

<b>Household Planning Assistant</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.54</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16.6</b>

- 2.3. The DM Service are carrying a workload of approximately 500 live cases including approximately 35 “major” Planning applications, 370 “non-major” with the remainder being requests for pre-application advice.
- 2.4. As Local Planning Authority, the performance of the Development Management Service is measured by government against “Speed” and “Quality” criteria (i.e. decisions made against nationally set determination time-frames (8/13 weeks) and number of appeals allowed against the total number of decisions measured.
- 2.5. When measured against those government criteria, the Development Management Service has performed very well over recent years being in the upper quartile for Speed and Quality and awarded “platinum” status in late 2024. Great efforts have been made as part of the Planning Service Improvement Plan to drive up performance leading to a notable reduction in the number of complaints and improved customer satisfaction.
- 2.6. It is widely recognised that the Planning System is becoming ever more complex with more requirements now falling within the sphere of planning consideration including biodiversity net gain and nutrient neutrality, amongst other things. This is set against a background of the ever-increasing threat of legal challenge from those wishing to delay or prevent housing and other growth within the District. The cognitive load now placed on our officers within the Development Management Team is the greatest it has ever been and, even with efficient processes and procedures in place, this significantly impacts the amount of work that can reasonably be completed by each officer per week.
- 2.7. Whilst recent performance figures have slipped a little, partly as a result of long-standing cases affected by nutrient neutrality being determined, it is considered important that the reputation of the Council associated with improvement within the Development Management Service is not undermined through lack of adequate resourcing aligned with an expected increase in planning application submissions over the coming years following adoption of the new Local Plan on 17 December 2025.
- 2.8. With the outcome of Local Government Reorganisation now clearer in terms of confirming that the entirety of North Norfolk will form part of a new East Norfolk Council, this gives some certainty moving forward in terms of likely resourcing demands aligned with future growth ambitions.
- 2.9. The Council’s new Local Plan was adopted by Full Council on 17 December 2025 to cover the period 2024 to 2040. This replaces the Core Strategy adopted in 2008. The Local Plan, amongst a suite of new policies, seeks to deliver nearly 10,000 new dwellings across the plan period through a combination of 27 site allocations, growth within 33 newly designated small growth villages, small sites of less than 10 dwellings, windfall sites and large sites with planning permission.
- 2.10. To put the above into context, over the next three years (2026/27 to 2028/9) over 2,200 dwellings are expected to be built (circa 714 per annum) rising to over 800+ dwellings per annum for subsequent years. To deliver the Council’s housing growth ambitions, a pipeline of planning permissions will need to be

delivered which requires timely planning decisions, especially those on allocated sites. Whilst a recently adopted Local Plan will see an increase in planning fees for this Council as allocated sites come forward (e.g. the recently validated **North Walsham western extension for 437 residential properties at £229,143** with further applications to follow to complete this 1800 home development) this requires an appropriately resourced planning service which is crucial to dealing with the planning applications and maintaining a pipeline of planning decisions and it is important that resourcing is reviewed periodically. Now is the right time to undertake that review. It needs to be recognised that Major planning applications will require experienced planners to drive the development forward and the team is facing increased demand. Fakenham Urban Extension and other significant developments will follow.

- 2.11. Whilst planning fees are currently set nationally, central government have recognised the importance of adequately resourced planning departments. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 included the capability for the Secretary of State to introduce Regulations. This would enable Local Planning Authorities to set a charge for planning applications with fees charged not exceeding cost recovery and are expected to be mostly ring-fenced to deliver planning functions. The government “expects cost recovery to lead to improved performance in the timeliness and quality of decision-making”.
- 2.12. On 23 March 2026, central government released its consultation on “Fees for Planning Applications” indicating that it was seeking to “establish a new national default fee schedule, based on 90% of estimated costs, to bring planning fees to a level closer to cost recovery and act as a baseline from which a new local fee setting model will operate”.
- 2.13. Recruiting experienced planners remains a challenge nationally and with planning fees expected to rise and demand for additional planning resources likely to increase the competition for planning staff, it is imperative for this Council to be at the forefront of change. Delay will only make the resourcing task harder to undertake.
- 2.14. Whilst there will undoubtedly be continued pressures to manage Council spending over the coming years aligned with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the government’s announcement on 25 March 2026 has made clear that the entirety of the geographical area of North Norfolk District would be subsumed within a new East Norfolk Unitary Council. This is helpful when seeking to understand the likely workload and staffing demands necessary to maintain business as usual for critical services such as planning. This paper therefore explores a range of possible resourcing options to ensure the Development Management service has a degree of resilience and capacity to manage the workloads ahead of Local Government Reorganisation taking effect and beyond.

### **3. Proposals and Options**

#### **3.1. Option One – Do Nothing (Not Recommended)**

- 3.2. This option seeks to see no resourcing growth beyond base budgets between now and LGR taking effect and is based on a continuation of base budget staffing levels set out in paragraph 2.2 above.

- 3.3. Officers would be asked to manage increasing application workloads post Local Plan adoption for an extended period of time.
- 3.4. Key advantages of this option would be an expected increase in planning fees during this period (associated with increased workloads and rises in nationally set fees) which could help to substantially fund running of the wider planning service and cross-fund other non fee-earning service areas.
- 3.5. Whilst Officers would undoubtedly seek to do their best to manage a notable increase in work, Officer productivity is expected to be detrimentally impacted, especially once Officers begin to feel overwhelmed with work and unable to manage their workloads. Officers may seek to leave the authority, exacerbating workload pressures.
- 3.6. This option would increase the risk of mistakes and errors being made across the Service. Delays in processing applications and mistakes and errors will lead to an increase in service level complaints and inevitably lead to upheld Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints with potential risk of Ombudsmen complaints also being upheld resulting in reputational damage. Delays also risk the return of planning fees under the government's planning guarantee and appeals to the Planning Inspectorate based on non-determination of applications.
- 3.7. This option is not recommended for the reasons set out above. If this option is chosen then an immediate review of services undertaken by the Development Management Team would need to be completed in terms of what activities the service should prioritise and which should be de-prioritised or stopped altogether aligned with the workload capacity of the team. This would have political and reputational implications for the Council.
- 3.8. Option Two – Re-Assign Staffing Across the Wider Planning Service (Not Recommended)**
- 3.9. This option seeks to utilise qualified planners not currently within the Development Management Service to assist with the determination of planning applications.
- 3.10. Existing job descriptions across the Development Management and Planning Policy Teams provide resourcing flexibility. What this would mean is that post holders in the Planning Policy team could be redeployed to roles within the Development Management Service (and vice versa) depending on workload demands and fluctuations.
- 3.11. Whilst the Local Plan was only adopted on 17 December 2025, government have indicated an expectation that North Norfolk District Council will commence an immediate Local Plan review. This reflects the fact that housing numbers in the adopted plan are at a considerably lower level than now expected in the most recent version of the National Planning Policy Framework. A new Plan would likely see a near doubling of annual housing numbers required across the plan period. Government expect plan reviews to be completed within 30 months and this brings with it significant resource demands.
- 3.12. With work now already underway on a new Plan, the Planning Policy Team are already looking at resourcing requirements necessary to match government delivery expectations. As such, there is no spare resource capacity to re-deploy

Planning Policy officers to the DM Service. In any event, whilst some Policy Officers have DM experience, others have less so or no experience in determining planning applications which would have reduced the effectiveness of this option in the short term.

3.13. Option two is not recommended for the reasons set out above.

### **3.14. Option Three – Managed Growth (Recommended)**

3.15. This option would see the creation of four new posts funded by an increase in planning application fees together with a modest restructuring of the team with the intention of managing workload demand and to free up existing resources to better handle caseloads commensurate with job roles. With an increase in major planning applications, more experienced staff are required together with capacity to support and develop teams.

3.16. In coming to decisions about growth, recognition needs to be given to the fact that the Development Management Service saw **£280,000** of additional fee income in 2025/26, due in part to statutory fee increases, and with housing growth expected to increase following adoption of the Local Plan and planning fees also set to increase above inflation, the amount of growth proposed through the proposed addition of four posts would be offset by expected additional fee income, allowing for other unforeseen costs

3.17. This option would see the creation of

- **2 x Senior Planning Officer roles (2 FTE),**
- **1 x Planning Officer role (1 FTE) and**
- **1 x Household Planning Assistant role (1 FTE).**

### **2 x Senior Planning Officer roles**

3.18. With the current structure (See **Appendix A** Fig.1), some of the heaviest workload pressures sit with the three Team Leaders who are responsible for a number of critical functions within the DM Service including reviewing and allocating new applications, managing team workloads and performance and reviewing and signing off the majority of the 2,000+ planning decisions issued by the Council each year in addition to a small caseload of their own. With increased workloads, the ability for three Team Leaders to deliver these critical functions is put under further strain and this leads to increased risk of mistakes and errors being made. To relieve the workload pressures, it is critically important that work can be pushed down to an appropriate level to maximise the value of skills and experience already in the team.

3.19. With a new Local Plan now adopted and a number of larger applications already submitted and more applications to come, it is important that there are enough experienced Senior Officers to pick up the expected application workload. Some of the larger applications will be time and resource demanding (often commensurate with the size of planning fees) and this will require a careful balancing of workloads to ensure the Development Management Service can maintain and improve planning outcomes and timeliness of decision making which are critical in achieving good planning outcomes for all of our customers.

- 3.20. The creation of 2 x Senior Planning Officer positions will provide the capacity and experience needed to help ease current workload pressures in the determination of major planning applications enabling a greater spread of workload to an appropriate level to maximise the value of skills and experience already in the team. This, associated with the other posts and a minor restructure, will increase capacity and resilience for the Service.
- 3.21. **The Senior Planning Officer roles are proposed on a permanent full-time basis.** This follows advice from the HR Advisor for Planning that “Fixed term contracts must be used for fixed term work. They should only be used where there is clear, time limited need, such as delivering a defined project or covering an absence. While funding constraints can justify fixed term arrangements, fixed term employees are legally entitled to the same legal rights as their permanent counterparts. Under employment legislation ending a fixed term contract is considered dismissal, this means employers must have legal grounds to dismiss. Most commonly, this is on grounds of redundancy (i.e. the work the employee was employed to do has ceased or diminished), given that the demand is unlikely to reduce or cease, there would be no justification to end the contract fairly. If we could justify redundancy due to loss of funding or a change in service structure, all employees on the same job description (or comparable JD) would have to be included in the redundancy pool, put at risk, and participate in a competitive selection process”.
- 3.22. Given the risks outlined above, it is evident that the employment of new 2 x Senior Planning Officer posts would be needed well beyond a fixed term contract and this is evidenced through increasing housing numbers in the Local Plan which are set to near double as part of the next Local Plan based on government set methodology for calculating housing supply requirements. These will translate into planning applications which will need to be determined whether that be under North Norfolk District Council or East Norfolk Council Unitary Authority.

### **Planning Officer Role**

- 3.23. With national challenges in recruiting experienced planners, the Council has had greater success through developing our own talent and this is evidenced through four existing officers having already completed their Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) accredited planning qualifications with the Council and going on to become Planners and then Senior Planners. There are three other officers currently going through the process of gaining their RTPI accredited qualifications. These people are our future managers and leaders and, even with LGR, it is important for the future success of the DM Service and delivery of business as usual that a pipeline of talent is maintained and developed, especially given the national recruitment challenges.
- 3.24. The Planning Officer role provides resource capacity for the team in picking up small/medium scale applications and helps free up capacity for Senior Planners to pick up the larger and more complex applications and leaves the household planning assistants to pick up the householder applications.
- 3.25. **The Planning Officer role is proposed on a permanent full-time basis** for the same reasons set out at paragraph 3.21 which apply to the Senior Planner roles following HR Advisor input.

- 3.26. A key benefit of creating a Planning Officer role is that, in the event that there are difficulties recruiting to the post, this would allow a Trainee Planner to be employed on a career graded post with the successful candidate becoming a Planning Officer once they have completed their qualifications.
- 3.27. With Apprenticeship Levy funding for Level 7 (master's level) apprenticeships now restricted to individuals under 22, this means that most applicants for a Trainee Planning Officer role would be ineligible to undertake the Chartered Town Planner Masters Degree Apprenticeship run by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and where two trainees are currently attending. Instead, trainees would need to undertake more traditional Level 7 planning qualifications. A 28-month part time MSc in Town Planning course at ARU would currently cost **£5,850** per year and these costs would need to be drawn from existing service training budgets.

### **Household Planning Assistant Role**

- 3.28. Householder applications remain the most frequent application type determined by the Council with more than 440 applications determined in 2025. With the current structure (See **Appendix A Fig.1**), there are currently only two designated household planning assistants (1.54 FTE) which means an average householder caseload of 286 per FTE post (based on 2025 determinations). Given that the highest performing members of staff in the DM Service over recent years delivered between 180-200 decisions each per year, the current Householder Planning Assistant staffing rates rely on householder applications also being picked up by more senior staff members, which reduces their capacity for more complex applications. The proposed 1.0 FTE addition of a Household Planning Assistant would enable an average householder caseload of 174 per FTE post (based on 2025 determinations). This is a more achievable workload and also allows in supporting the wider team through discharge of condition applications, amongst other things.
- 3.29. **The Household Planning Assistant role is proposed on a permanent full-time basis** for the same reasons set out at paragraph 3.21 which apply to the Team Leader role follow HR Advisor input.

### **Wider Structure Review**

- 3.30. This proposal involves an associated minor restructuring of teams (see **Appendix A Figure 2**) to accommodate the new posts and to try and ensure some balance across the three teams in terms of officers and experience levels. The aim of the restructure is that Team Leaders will have only a very small caseload of their own, the bulk of the complex applications (major applications) will be picked up by the Senior Planning Officers with Planning Officers picking up small majors and larger minor applications and Trainee Planning Officers picking up the smaller minor applications and Householder Planning Assistants picking up the Householder cases. This clearer division of labour and increased resource capacity will help maximise the value of skills and experience already in the team and drive forward improved planning outcomes and timeliness of decision making which are critical in achieving good planning outcomes for all of our customers.

#### 4. Corporate Priorities

- 4.1. Having an adequately resourced Development Management Service helps the Council to meet various Corporate Plan Objectives.
- 4.2. **Our Greener Future** – Ensuring that Officers help protect and enhance the special landscape and ecological value of North Norfolk whilst improving the biodiversity of the district. Strengthening the ability for local communities to deliver on local environmental ambitions and priorities, many of which require the grant of planning permission to help secure.
- 4.3. **Developing Our Communities** – Through supporting timely planning applications associated with developing further the leisure facilities provided across the District. Helping ensure planning applications help create active environments for all ages and abilities including contributing through S106 obligations to help upgrade essential services.
- 4.4. **Meeting our Housing Need** – through timely issuing of housing related planning decisions (including allocated sites within the new Local Plan) and assessment of follow on matters including discharge of conditions including mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain.
- 4.5. **Investing In Our Local Economy & Infrastructure** – through adequate business support working with the economic development team to help secure inward investment and to help businesses navigate the planning system in a timely manner. Securing S106 obligations including upgrading infrastructure which can help support jobs and growth.
- 4.6. **A Strong, Responsible & Accountable Council** – Through realising service efficiencies without compromising service standards and outcomes and maximising the opportunity to deliver the growth that the District needs. Creating a working culture for the Development Management Service that empowers and fosters an ambitious, motivated workforce.

#### 5. Financial and Resource Implications

- 5.1. Preferred Option 3 – Managed Growth will result in an increase to the base budget as set out below. Working with the Group Accountant, the following costings are estimated:

<b>Proposed Role</b>	<b>Cost per annum</b>
2 x Senior Planning Officers	£115,614 per annum
Planning Officer	£50,154 per annum
Household Planning Assistant	£42,804 per annum
<b>Total 2026/27 Base</b>	<b>£208,572 per annum</b>

- 5.2. Factoring in staffing underspends (£47,000), proposed growth would actually amount to **£160,866**.
- 5.3. However, in coming to decisions about growth, recognition needs to be given to the fact that the Development Management Service saw **£280,000** of additional fee income in 2025/26 and with housing growth expected to increase following

adoption of the Local Plan and planning fees also set to increase above inflation, the amount of growth proposed through the proposed addition of three posts would be more than offset by expected additional fee income, allowing for other unforeseen costs.

- 5.4. With additional expected workloads, resource demand will also increase hence the requirement to act promptly in ensuring the DM Service can accommodate the additional resource demands whilst offering the level of customer service expected of a strong, responsible and accountable Council.

**Comments from the S151 Officer:**

*The net increase in establishment of three posts is subject to Full Council approval. If the additional application fee is realised then the net financial impact on the MTFs will be limited. For prudence, the budget impacts will be grossed up to fully reflect the additional cost burden. It is recommended that any unused capacity be proactively offered up to partner local authorities forming the successor East Norfolk Council.*

**6. Legal Implications**

- 6.1. Progressing with Option Three does not give rise to significant legal implications.
- 6.2. Progressing with Option One (the do nothing approach) increases the potential risk of legal errors in the processing of planning applications, particularly as Officers begin to feel overwhelmed with work and unable to manage their workloads which increase the risk of mistakes and errors being made across the Service

**Comments from the Monitoring Officer**

*The Monitoring Officer (or member of the Legal team on behalf of the MO) will complete this section.*

*The report is before Members as it recommends an increase in headcount. However, it is not anticipated that there would be a significant increase in financial strain.*

**7. Risks**

**7.1. Option One – Do Nothing (Not Recommended)**

This option carries significant financial and reputational risk for the Council associated with a service which would be unable to fulfil its statutory obligations in terms of timeliness of decision making. Officer productivity is expected to be detrimentally impacted, especially once Officers begin to feel overwhelmed with work and unable to manage their workloads increasing the risk of mistakes and errors being made across the Service. Officers may seek to leave the authority, exacerbating workload pressures. With increased workloads and under

resourcing, the number of upheld complaints will increase. Delays also risk the return of planning fees under the government's planning guarantee.

**7.2. Option Two – Re-Assign Staffing Across the Wider Planning Service (Not Recommended)**

This option carries some risk for the DM Service from potentially inexperienced staff moving to the DM team but the much greater risk is associated with impacts on the Planning Policy Team and the delivery of the next Local Plan, especially with the 30-month delivery targets set out by central government.

**7.3. Option Three – Managed Growth (Recommended)**

This option is not without risk. The primary risk would be the failure to recruit to new roles, especially the Senior Officer roles which are critical in reducing the work pressures associated with an increase in larger applications. If recruitment is delayed due to an inability to attract the right people into posts then the risks associated with Option One would come into effect. It has to be acknowledged that the Council's pay and grading structure makes this Council less attractive (in terms of pay) than some of its neighbouring authorities, especially during a cost-of-living crisis. The use of "Golden Hellos", will be applied in relation to Senior Planning Officer roles and has been factored into the costings.

**8. Net Zero Target**

- 8.1. The Climate Impact Assessment Tool has been completed and the recruitment of four posts raises no matters requiring mitigation. The largest impacts associated with recruitment to these roles relates to transport activities (site visits) and these can be mitigated through use of the Council pool cars (electric).

**9. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion**

- 9.1. The creation of four additional posts in the DM Service does not give rise to implications in relation equality, diversity and inclusion. Recruitment to the posts will be undertaken in accordance with best practice and the Council's recruitment processes.

**10. Community Safety issues**

- 10.1. The proposals do not give rise to any Community Safety issues.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

**With the Local Plan now adopted and an increased caseload of applications being submitted for determination, it is considered necessary to review the resourcing levels within the Development Management Service to ensure they remain appropriate with sufficient resilience to maintain business as usual. With increased planning fee income, there is funding available to resource the four additional posts proposed.**

**The Recommendation is to**

- **APPROVE “Option Three – Managed Growth” as set out in the report across paragraphs 3.14 to 3.30 to deliver a re-structured DM Service as set out at Appendix A Figure 2;**
- **Authorise immediate recruitment to the four new posts**

## APPENDIX A

Figure 1 - DM Team Structure (Current)

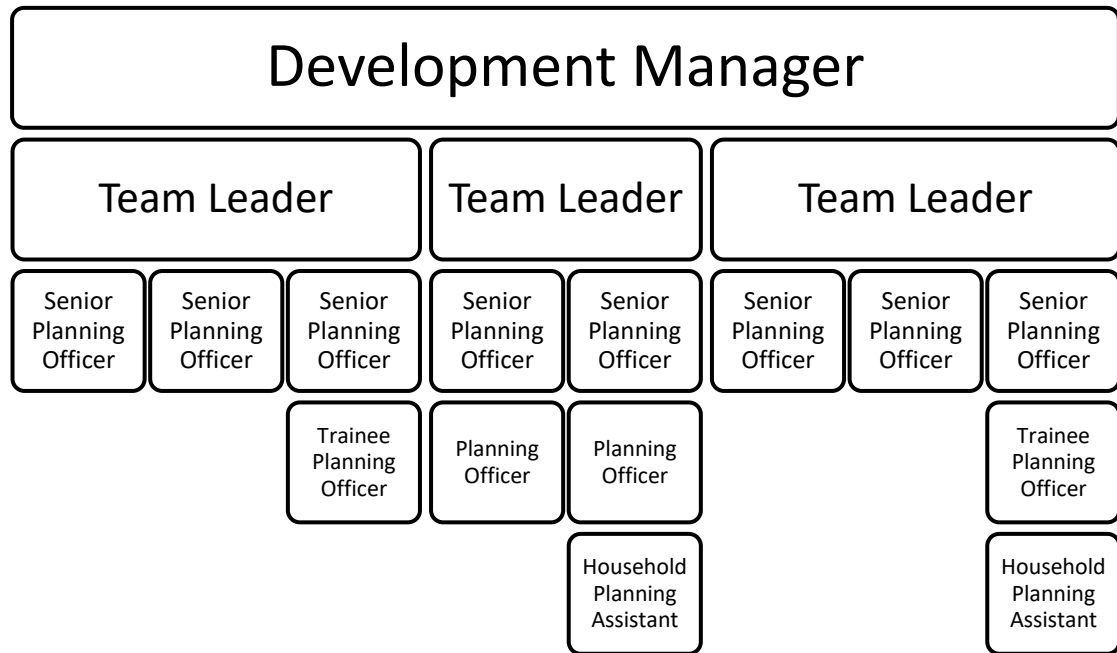
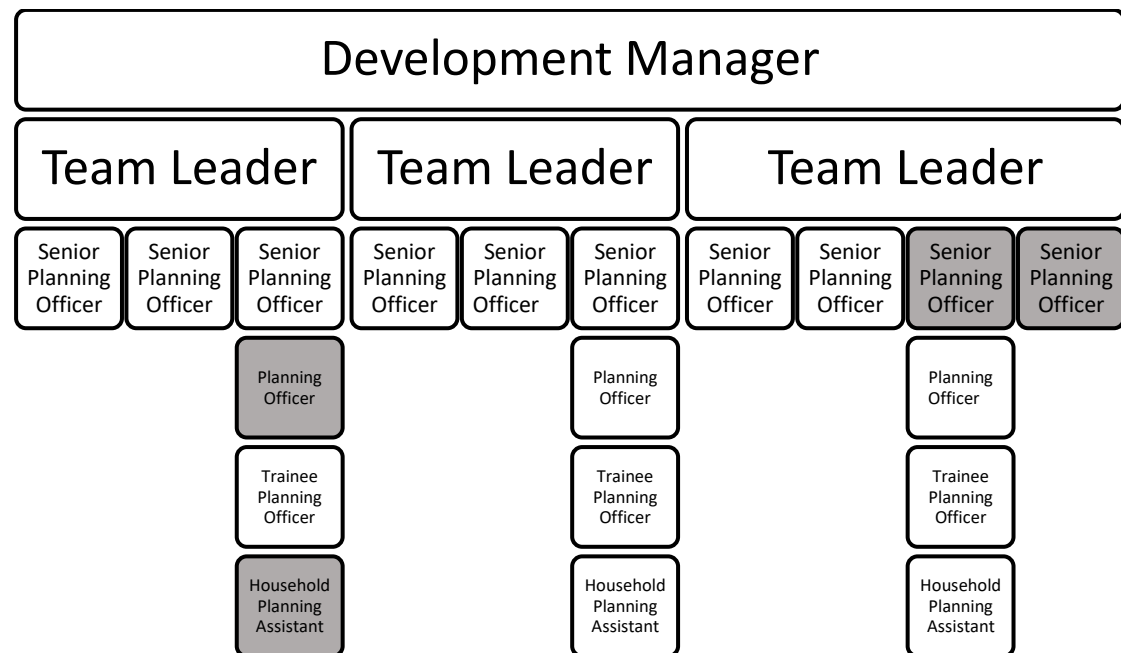


Figure 2 - DM Team Structure (Proposed)



**Note:** Grey shade denotes new posts to be created