

## **BRIEFING NOTE**

### **MANAGEMENT TEAM**

**7/2/23**

#### **DRONE OPERATIONS**

(Briefing note prepared by Communications Manager, Will Lodge)

##### Introduction

Tendring District Council (TDC) has successfully operated a drone for four years for publicity purposes. This briefing note seeks to update Management Team (MT) on current operations; request approval for renewal of appropriate compliance documents; and look at expanding operations.

##### Background and context

TDC has operated a drone since 2019, and at that time adopted a policy to govern its use internally. TDC is also registered as an operator with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) for its drone use, while the Communications Assistant is registered as a pilot; with the Communications Team overseeing overall strategic use of the drone. A separate insurance policy is in place for the drone and operations.

Successes have included aerial coverage of the Corbeau Seats Rally (which required the pilot to undergo marshal training and secure Motorsport UK approval to operate); coverage of the Tour Series and Women's Tour cycle events (the latter was unable to secure its usual helicopter coverage due to weather conditions); and at the 2022 Clacton Airshow for the first time ever, with the team working with the flight director to enable operation at the event. It is worth noting that no incidents have been reported since the drone has been operational, and regular maintenance and flight log checks have revealed no issues.

Our current policy only permits use of the drone for communications and marketing purposes. There have been occasional, ad hoc requests to use the drone for non-communications operational work (e.g. TDC building inspections); these have been refused as are not in line with policy, however the team is often able to assist in other ways.

In 2021 there was a move to expand operational use to allow for aerial photography of some planning applications to support the work of the Planning Committee (particularly when site visits were restricted due to Covid-19). A revised drone policy to permit this use (covering "committee services support purposes") was agreed by MT in 2021, subject to a suitable protocol governing when the drone could be used for Planning Committee being agreed. Work started on this but due to higher priority work (and reduced need as Covid-19 restrictions eased) this was not completed.

There has been renewed interest from the Planning Committee to pursue this work in light of recent events surrounding site visits, along with the appointment of a new Planning Manager who has used drones in their previous role.

Similarly now is the right time to progress plans for expanded pilot coverage across the council (*see below*) and to widen the scope of the policy to permit further operational use, to ensure the council can benefit from the opportunities provided by drone technology. It is not proposed to include surveillance within this use.

While a full cost/benefit analysis has not been conducted – and it is recognised that expanded drone use has some initial one-off costs and small recurring costs (*see below*) – there are potential opportunities to save costs through use of drone technology. An example would be surveying the roof of a council building: conducting an initial visual inspection by drone instead of requiring scaffolding and contractors would be less expensive.

Similarly while the Drone Policy does not permit use for surveillance, it could be used for enforcement – provided it met the necessary requirements of the appropriate enforcement policy (e.g. use is demonstrated as proportionate and necessary and subject to a risk/harm assessment).

Expanding the scope of the Drone Policy allows for these opportunities to be explored further and trialled.

#### Budget & resources

There is currently no set budget for drone operations, with annual costs covered by departmental budgets (for CAA registration) or corporate budget (insurance). It is proposed that a small base budget be established to formalise these arrangements to ensure resilience moving forward, to cover the below cost items:

- Insurance (currently £3,000pa premium)
- CAA annual registration (£124 + £9pp pa)
- Replacement parts contingency (£200)
- New drone 'pot' (£200pa, anticipated replacement every five years)
- **Total: £3,551** (based on three pilots *see below*).

This does not include one-off training costs of around £600 per person to get someone qualified as a pilot, which is proposed to be met from existing training budgets.

To provide resilience in drone operations, and support expanded use of drones, it is suggested that three pilots are trained up by the council – one each within the Communications, Planning, and Building and Public Realm areas. While each would be expected to lead on use within their areas, for both resilience and CAA registration purposes drone pilots would be considered a 'corporate resource' and expected to help out across the organisation.

The Communications Team would remain as the lead for the council's drone strategy and governance.

While the drone operation costs are currently met by the Communications Team, if the scope of usage is widened then contributions should be made by other services accordingly to reflect the benefits they receive.

There is also the potential to recover some costs if a drone service is provided to external and partner organisations (as is permitted under our current drone policy).

## Governance

Annual renewal of the CAA registration, due at the end of February, has been carried out previously as an operational decision in line with the Drone Policy – which itself was agreed by MT. Given it has been four years it is recommended that MT renews this commitment to CAA registration, and an officer decision published.

In addition some minor amendments are proposed to the Drone Policy, to support expanded use for committee support services and operational use, as identified as an opportunity above. This has previously been agreed by MT as an operational policy and is not proposed to go a committee, instead being recorded as an officer decision. Correlating amendments will be made to our Operations Manual (a document required as part of our CAA registration).

To support the expanded use for Planning Committee a protocol has been developed for this use. Again this is operational so is suggested that it is an officer decision, with consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee.

## Recommendations

**Management Team is asked to:**

- a) Agree to renew TDC's registration with the CAA as an operator;**
- b) Support taking most of opportunities to increase drone use and to agree the revised Drone Policy for publication as an officer decision, subject to consultation with the Corporate Finance and Governance Portfolio Holder;**
- c) Support the Planning Committee Drone Protocol, subject to consultation with the Planning Portfolio Holder;**
- d) Agree to the Communications Manager working with the Assistant Directors for Finance and Governance to establish an operational budget for the drone;**
- e) Agree to the Communications Manager working with the Organisational Development Manager to access appropriate staff training budgets for getting pilots qualified**
- f) Instruct Assistant Directors or other appropriate managers to work with the Communications Manager to identify suitable staff for training as drone pilots (in line with their Personal Development Plans).**

## Attached documents

- Draft revised Drone Policy
- Draft Planning Committee Drone Protocol

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