

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – PLANNING AND COMMUNITY

05 August 2025

OFFICER DECISION TO EXTEND CONTRACT FOR PLANNING POLICY CONSULTATION SYSTEM (OPUS CONSULT)

(Report prepared by Paul Woods)

PART 1 – KEY INFORMATION

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To seek the Portfolio Holder's concurrence with the Officer decision to extend the contract with JDi Solutions for continued use of the *Opus Consult* Planning Policy consultation system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report recommends a one-year extension of the contract with JDi Solutions Limited for the Planning Policy consultation system, *Opus Consult*.

The system underpins the Council's statutory and non-statutory planning consultations, providing a streamlined and accessible platform for public engagement on documents such as:

- The updated Local Plan;
- Supplementary Planning Documents;
- Conservation Area Appraisals; and
- Neighbourhood Plans.

Opus Consult provides a user-friendly, public-facing platform that enables individuals to submit representations on specific sections of consultation documents. The system has been successfully used by the Planning Policy team for recent consultations, including the Local Plan Review, Conservation Area Appraisals, Neighbourhood Plans, and the Statement of Community Involvement – all yielding positive engagement and outcomes.

The product is also used by neighbouring authorities – Colchester City Council, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, and Ipswich Borough Council – ensuring consistency and facilitating collaboration and best practice sharing among officers.

The annual contract cost of £6,960 includes:

- Technical support;
- Up to four consultation exercises per year;
- Software updates; and
- Access to new features.

A market comparison conducted via the G-Cloud framework confirmed that *Opus Consult* offers best value for money among available alternatives. The contract extension will be funded from existing council budgets.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that in accordance with the existing contract procured via the UK Government's G-Cloud 13 Framework (Lot 2), the Council extends the contract with JDi Solutions Limited for a further period of one year, to continue the use of the Opus Consult Planning Policy consultation system in support of statutory and non-statutory consultation activities.

PART 2 – IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION

DELIVERING PRIORITIES

The proposed extension of the contract with JDi Solutions for the *Opus Consult* consultation system directly supports the Council's Corporate Plan priorities by enhancing digital service delivery, promoting inclusive public engagement, and ensuring transparency in planning processes. It aligns with the commitment to "Pride in our area and services to residents" through accessible consultations, contributes to "Financial Sustainability and openness" by delivering value for money, and supports "Working with partners to improve quality of life" by enabling collaboration with key stakeholders throughout the Plan-making process.

RESOURCES AND RISK

The proposed one-year extension of the contract with JDi Solutions for the *Opus Consult* consultation system will be funded from existing Planning budgets, with no additional financial impact on the Council. The annual cost of £6,960 + VAT includes hosting, support, maintenance, software updates, access to new features, and up to four consultation exercises per year. This represents good value for money when compared with other platforms available via the G-Cloud 13 framework.

Risks associated with the extension are considered low. A Data Protection Risk Assessment has confirmed the system's compliance with GDPR and cybersecurity standards, reducing the likelihood of data breaches or processing errors. The continued use of a familiar and proven system also mitigates operational risks, ensuring continuity in statutory consultation processes and avoiding disruption that could arise from transitioning to a new platform.

LEGAL

The proposed contract extension is compliant with the Council's Budget and Policy framework and has been procured in accordance with the Council's Procurement Procedure Rules.

The original procurement was conducted through the UK Government's G-Cloud 13 Framework (Lot 2: Cloud Software), which is a compliant and approved route for public sector digital services. The one-year extension remains within the scope of the original framework agreement and does not require a new procurement process.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Area or Ward affected: All.

Consultation/Public Engagement: The platform enables residents, stakeholders, and statutory consultees to submit representations directly on specific sections of consultation documents, improving the relevance and quality of feedback. Its user-friendly interface and compliance with accessibility standards support broader participation, helping the Council meet its statutory duties while promoting transparency and community involvement in the planning process.

PART 3 – SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background:

The Council is required to undertake statutory public consultations during the preparation of Planning Policy documents, including the Local Plan, Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs), and Conservation Area Appraisals. Historically, these consultations relied on printed materials and written submissions, which were resource-intensive and limited in accessibility.

To modernise this process, the Council adopted an online consultation system in 2016, initially aligning with neighbouring authorities during the preparation of the shared Section 1 of the Local Plan. However, the system in use at that time included functionality beyond the needs of the Planning Policy team, resulting in reduced usability for both officers and the public.

Following a review of alternative platforms, *Opus Consult* by JDi Solutions was selected in 2023 as the preferred system due to its simplicity, value for money, and alignment with the Council's consultation requirements. The system has since been successfully used for several key consultations, including the Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community Development Plan Document (DPD), Local Plan Review, and Conservation Area Appraisals.

Key features of *Opus Consult* include:

- **Public-facing portal** for accessible online engagement;
- **GDPR-compliant contact database** with opt-in functionality;
- **Structured representation forms** aligned with Planning Inspectorate standards;
- **Document hosting and HTML conversion** for improved accessibility;
- **Reporting tools** for analysing consultation responses; and
- **Ongoing support and updates**, including access to new features developed for other councils.

The system is also used by neighbouring authorities – Colchester City Council, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, and Ipswich Borough Council – supporting consistency and enabling collaboration.

The contract extension for one year will maintain continuity, ensure compliance with statutory requirements, and support the Council's commitment to inclusive, efficient, and transparent public engagement.

Reasons for the decision:

The recommendation to extend the contract with JDi Solutions for the *Opus Consult* Planning Policy consultation system is based on the following key considerations:

1. Ease of use

The system is specifically designed to meet the requirements of Planning Policy consultations, offering a streamlined and intuitive interface without unnecessary complexity. This improves usability for both officers and members of the public.

2. Compliance with Standards

The system meets all relevant standards for data protection, cybersecurity, and accessibility. A Data Protection Risk Assessment has confirmed the platform as low risk, with built-in GDPR safeguards that reduce the potential for human error.

3. Value for Money

The annual cost is lower than comparable systems available through the G-Cloud 13 framework. The Council continues to benefit from a cost-effective solution that meets operational needs.

4. Proven Performance and Support

Over the past two years, JDi Solutions has demonstrated responsive and flexible support, particularly during high-profile consultations such as the Local Plan Review Issues and Options Consultation.

5. Procurement Compliance

The original procurement was conducted via the G-Cloud framework in accordance with the Council's procurement rules. The proposed extension remains within the scope of the framework agreement.

6. Funded using existing budgets

The contract extension will be funded from existing budgets, with no additional financial pressure on the Council.

The system continues to meet both the legislative and operational requirements of the Planning Policy team and supports the Council's commitment to accessible, transparent, and efficient public engagement.

APPENDICES

None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.