

Planning Officers Society Annual General Meeting 2 October 2020 Report by POS Enterprises

Headlines of 2019/20

- 1 2019/20 saw a continuing increase in turnover, from £255,000 in 2017/18 and £275,000 in 2018/19 to £286,000. This was accompanied in a big increase in the profit on the year, up from about £16,000 in 2018/19 to over £36,000 (subject to the formal accounts). The main factors behind the scale of profit were the volume of elected member training, where we benefitted from changes to all-out elections in many authorities which brought in a lot of new members; together with our CIL learning groups having their first meetings in 2020 before the end of the financial year.
- 2 Work for local planning authorities accounted for all but 2% of our business in 2019/20. The remainder was for the delivery of free workshops for the Society. There was no work at all for the Planning Advisory Service, which had previously been a significant customer for local plan and viability support.
- 3 Once we have the formal accounts, the whole of the final amount of profit will be paid across to the Society by deed of gift. Together with a surplus on the Society's budget, this all helps it to provide enhanced services to the membership.
- 4 Being a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Society we share its values and objectives, while providing services and support to authorities and others on a fee basis. Directors put great value on the relationship, and the way the reputation and standing of the Society reflects favourably on POS Enterprises as a trusted provider of support.

Activities

- 5 POS Enterprises focuses on activities which support planning authorities and their staff in dealing with change and new challenges. The biggest area of support continues to be the supported learning groups, which are unique to us, and continue to account for over 55% of income. We continue with three CIL and infrastructure groups, two meeting in London and the third in Leeds. Similarly, we have two local plan groups, also based in London and Leeds. We continue to run the specialist minerals and waste group, the development management and localism group, and the neighbourhood planning group.
- 6 The remainder of activity takes the form of direct support to authorities. Apart from the success of elected member training, officer training has held up, as has development management support (albeit mainly due to one large commission). By contrast, local plan support has diminished, and other more specialist areas have fallen away. Nevertheless, the volume of direct support activity was up on 2018/19.

Covid 19

- 7 The arrival of the pandemic and lockdown meant that scheduled learning group meetings had to be cancelled, and POS Enterprises needed to gear up to emulate local authorities by holding meetings virtually. This involved a lot of development activity and learning by associates. All the learning groups now operate virtually, and it is anticipated that this will continue until at least Christmas.
- 8 Most groups now operate on the basis of two morning meetings rather than all-day events, reflecting the preferences of their members. There has been no loss of membership due to the change to virtual meetings, and feed-back from participants is

that these arrangements work well for them. Indeed, many have signalled that they would welcome continuing to meet virtually even when the pandemic is over.

9 However, other than some elected member training there has been very little direct support work since lockdown, which is perhaps not surprising given the circumstances.

10 Unless things change radically, turnover in 2020/21 can be expected to be down on 2019/20, but because of the saving on meeting venues, the profit on the year may be less affected.

Looking ahead

11 The Government's devolution proposals are expected shortly, and if informed speculation is correct, we shall see major changes to the local government map. That may be expected to have a big impact upon both the membership of learning groups and the level of direct support activity, and consequently on the amount of profit which can be paid across to the Society.

12 The Planning White Paper is also signalling the prospect of significant change to the planning system. There are many aspects where it is not at all clear how things would actually work under the new regime (as against the claimed advantages). So we are likely to go through an extended period of uncertainty while the Government puts the flesh on its proposals, and local government practitioners are able to make informed decisions. That may be expected to suppress demand for support at least in the shorter term.

13 However, POS Enterprises associates will make sure to develop expert understanding of the implications of the changed system. We can hope that as the uncertainty fades, there will be an upsurge in demand from authorities for support to provide confidence that their new style plans and practices are robust. There may also be opportunities to assist newly created authorities in developing new ways of working,

Our thanks

14 A key function of POS Enterprises Directors is to bring their knowledge and awareness about current challenges into our business planning and decisions on priorities for new services. Thanks are due to our Directors for their efforts on behalf of POS Enterprises over the past year: James Doe, David Evans, Peter Geraghty, Phil Kirby, Richard Morris, Sarah Platts, Paul Seddon, Karen Shaw and Penelope Tollitt.

15 The Directors are very grateful to our support team of Andrew Wright and Linda Durtnal for their hard work and commitment in sustaining services and developing new opportunities; and to our associates for their energy and exemplary commitment to supporting good planning.

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