

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING	Planning, Housing and Economic Development Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel
MEETING DATE:	Tuesday 5 th July 2016
TITLE:	Planning Pre-application Service
WARD:	All
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM	
List of attachments to this report: Appendix 1 – Charging schedule	

1 THE ISSUE

1.1 This report updates the Scrutiny Panel on a new chargeable Planning Pre-application Service that is being promoted to developers, agents and private households.

2 RECOMMENDATION

2.1 That the Panel note the progress on the pre-application service launched April 2016.

3 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

3.1 Pre-application advice is provided by planning officers and other specialist advisors within the planning department and other Council departments. It is a non-statutory service and fees can be locally set which can generate additional income in order to cover the cost of providing the service.

3.2 It is forecast that the income generated by this service will offset costs associated with the provision of the statutory planning function and make the consideration of planning applications a faster and more certain process for customers and residents providing an overall cost saving. The 2016/17 approved budget includes an additional £13k income related to this service and there is also the potential to generate further income in the future, offsetting statutory planning services costs.

4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS AND BASIS FOR PROPOSAL

- 4.1 The National Planning Policy Framework 2012 is clear in its expectations that planning authorities should engage pro-actively at pre-application stage. Paragraphs 188-191 advise that early engagement has significant potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties. Good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources and improved outcomes for the community and the more issues that can be resolved at pre-application stage, the greater the benefits.
- 4.2 Whilst a pre-application advisory service has been on offer within this Council prior to April 2016 it received variable feedback and was not covering its costs. A full root and branch review of the process has taken place leading to a renewed service being launched in April of this year.

5 THE REPORT

5.1 Following a full review of the pre-application service that was being offered pre-April 2016 the service was re-designed. This included benchmarking with other Local Authorities in relation to the scale of fees charged for the pre application service and having regard to the special environment of Bath and North East Somerset,(including listed buildings, the World Heritage City of Bath, two areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Green Belt). Instead of charging per hour the new schedule separates different proposals by size and complexity. The new schedule can be seen at Appendix 1. The benefit of this approach are as follows:-

- A new and fairer charging schedule based on the scale and type of development
- Clearer charging schedule for applicants as costs will be known up front
- Charges are more realistic to cover the costs associated with the service

5.2 The key changes of the new process are :-

- Payment is taken in advance saving staff time in invoicing and ensuring that payments are made and provides clarity to the applicant on payment process
- There is clarity on what the service will provide for our customers
- Clearer responses that are easier to read
- New flexible timescales that put the customer in control
- Improved website
- Discussion and negotiation with customers
- More training for staff

These changes will provide

- An improved service for our customers,

- Increased income for the Council
- Provide a template for other services to roll out similar charging of their own.

The next key step is to monitor and review the process. This will be achieved through :-

- Performance monitoring of decisions to ensure that these are being issued in accordance with published timescales or other target timescales (but only if these are first agreed with our customer).
- Customer satisfaction through surveys and other pro-active approaches to canvassing views.
- Levels of income achieved.

6 RATIONALE

- 6.1 These are changes to an existing service which is already well used
- 6.2 The price increase is alongside extensive improvements to the service and it is already of note that no reduction in the use of the service has occurred since the charges increased.
- 6.3 The main customer group i.e. planning agents are supportive of the changes
- 6.4 Increased charges are required to cover delivery costs of the service but these can only be delivered alongside improvements to the quality and timeliness of responses.

7 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 7.1 Stop delivering the pre-application advice service as it is non-statutory, however this is not advised because:
- Customers expect councils' to deliver a pre-app service to assist in preparation of planning applications
 - Experience has shown that complaints increase if this service is withdrawn.
 - Could undermine the Councils position at appeal and this may lead to costs being awarded.
 - Increase the time taken on statutory applications, potentially affecting performance
 - Would likely lead to an increase in refused applications because they were unrealistic and appeals would also create a need for additional resources.

8 CONSULTATION

- 8.1 Consultation was undertaken during the redesign process with specific input sought from members, planning staff, consultees, planning agents, Other B&NES Services; Service Users; Stakeholders/Partners; Section 151 Finance Officer.

9 RISK MANAGEMENT

9.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

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Background papers	
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