

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING, ECONOMY AND REGENERATION

DISCRETIONARY CHARGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT SERVICE.

Cabinet Member(s): Cllr Richard Chesterton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration
Responsible Officer: Mrs Jenny Clifford, Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration

Reason for Report:

In 2018 a cost analysis of the Planning Service was carried out in partnership with Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting (CIPFA) and also involved a staff time recording exercise over a 1 month period. A report by CIPFA was subsequently produced on the 30th October 2018 and is the subject of a separate report on the agenda of this meeting. Analysis of the data in this report has enabled the Development Management Service to identify areas of discretionary service currently being provided without charge. There is therefore the potential for cost recovery and efficiency opportunities with regard to such elements of the service being offered.

This report relates specifically to services at a pre-application stage where advice has previously been provided to prospective applicants via walk into the office or phone call. Reassessment of the basis upon which this service is offered will enable the duty officer to be continued, but for its cost to be recovered via the introduction of a fee for the Planning Duty Officer Service.

RECOMMENDATION: That Cabinet agree

The introduction of a fee for the Planning Duty Officer Service to be initially set at £30 (plus VAT).

Relationship to Corporate Plan:

The Planning Service is a statutory service, the effective operation of which seeks to deliver high quality in terms of customer care and developments. The services in Development Management are relevant to the Corporate Plan priorities of community, housing, economy and environment.

Financial Implications:

The introduction of charges for a Planning Duty Officer Service will help to cover the cost of providing this valued service whilst also improving the service for our customers.

Legal Implications:

It is important to ensure the advice given by the Duty Officer is accurate and correct as this advice can be challenged and could lead to unlawful development taking place. By providing notice of the issues to be raised in an allocated meeting slot and by providing time to allow the officer to make notes of the discussion the new process would ensure the advice provided is robust and documented. The Duty

Officer service complements the pre-application advice service that is already charged for.

The fees charged are on a cost recovery basis.

Risk Assessment:

The current Duty Officer service is provided on a free, discretionary and informal basis. The proposed approach will give customers clearer advice via a more controlled and documented meeting, reducing the risk of misinterpreted advice. The submission of inaccurate, poor quality planning applications generates risks through delays to the processing of applications and the requirement for the planning support team to carry out extensive checks and to manage the storage of invalid applications whilst they are awaiting further information.

The proposed fees for the areas of the service as identified in this report are on a cost recovery (non-profit making) basis, where evidence has been gathered via the recent CIPFA exercise on the cost of provision.

Equalities Impact:

There are no equality issues identified in this report.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In 2018 an analysis of the Planning Service and the cost of different activities and officer time was carried out in partnership with Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting (CIPFA). A four week time recording exercise was undertaken in addition to activity and application processing cost analysis. This work has allowed the Planning Service to identify and prioritise cost recovery and efficiency opportunities for certain discretionary areas of the service that to date have been provided free of charge to the customer and hence at a cost to the Council. An area of the service have been identified with regard to the potential introduction of a fee: for the Planning Duty Officer Service.
- 1.1. The information gathered through this cost and time recording exercise has informed service improvements which prioritise areas for cost recovery and efficiency savings that can be achieved during 2019-2020.
- 1.3 The Duty Service currently provides free planning advice using Planning Officers to answer general queries from customers who arrive at the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9-12am. Free general planning advice is also provided through the Planning Support team on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9am – 12pm. The CIPFA report of the 30th October 2018 has identified that the unpaid duty planning services utilise 1638 hrs of staff time with direct costs of £27,000 per annum. When this is combined with overhead costs the Duty Officer service currently costs the Council £46,000 per annum. Whilst Members will be aware that MDDC provides a paid for pre-application advice service, the CIPFA report has clearly identified that officers are still spending a lot of time helping customers on queries which do not fall within the current paid for pre-application advice category.

2.0 PAID DUTY OFFICER SERVICE

2.1 The cost of the current Duty Planning Officer service is currently borne by the Council at an estimated annual cost of £46,000. This is a discretionary service. The Development Management service has looked into ways to try to address this cost in order to be able to continue to provide this service that is valued by customers. This investigation work has established that South Hams District Council introduced a paid for duty service approximately 12 months ago. Their paid for duty service has been hugely successful with the number of customers utilising it increasing over the past year. It has also provided a greater level of customer care and recovers the cost of the service provided, ensuring its continuation against a background of service budgets being under increasing pressure. The approach at South Hams involves a fee of £30 for a 30 minute meeting with a planning officer on an appointment basis.

2.2 Customer service benefits

2.2.1 The benefits of this type of service are that it enables the customer to come in for an organised meeting at a set time. It removes the frustration of turning up and having to wait in a queue with no guarantee on the amount of time with the planning officer. Currently customers are experiencing uncertainty over whether they will get the planning advice they need, how long they will have to wait to get that advice and how long they will have with the Planning Officer. Having made the effort to visit the MDDC offices to specifically get planning advice it is understandable that customers could find the current service less than satisfactory, particularly if they arrive at a busy time and need to wait.

2.2.2 The opportunity has been taken to review how the duty planning officer service is structured and resourced as part of a paid for service. The proposed approach will give customers greater certainty on when the planning guidance sought will be available by offered a pre-booked appointment. They will arrive with the knowledge that they will definitely have 30mins with a Planning Officer who is aware in advance of the nature of the planning enquiry.

2.2.3 It is crucial to ensure that our customers are made fully aware of the level of service that the paid for Duty Officer Service will provide. A customer advice note will be prepared setting out the operation of the service and service standards to be expected.

2.3 Appropriate fee for this service.

2.3.1 Setting the correct fee for this service is an important consideration and will need to offset the cost of providing the service, offer value for money and also not be so high as to be unattractive to customers and hinder such advice being taken at this stage with the resultant impact on the quality of applications. It is also important to ensure that the service does not undermine the more detailed paid for pre-application advice service. The fee must therefore be lower than the adopted pre-application advice charges.

- 2.3.2 Based on the figures from the time recording exercise carried out as part of the CIPFA report, the unpaid duty planning services utilises 1638 hrs of staff time and directly costs £27,000 per annum to run. When overhead costs are included this figure rises to £46,000 per annum, equating to £28.08 per hour.
- 2.3.3 The number of duty planning enquiries dealt with by officers in the last year was 1428. The charging of a fee will be likely to impact upon the total number of requests for this service and initially demand is expected to fall until the new service beds in and the benefits to customers through the restructuring of the delivery of this service are clear. It has been estimated that the number of Duty Officer queries could initially be reduced by 50%, equating to 714 per annum. A £30 charge would generate £21,420 per annum at this level of service activity and cover the cost of the service. It is proposed to monitor customer feedback and use of the service in order to review its operation after six months from its relaunch. This £30 charge is also in line with that charged by South Hams. It should be noted that the proposed £30 charge excludes VAT. The £30 fee will provide an appointment in the office or over the phone of up to 30 minutes.
- 2.3.4 Members should note that it is intended that the Planning Support Team still provide a telephone service for general customer enquiries on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9am to 12 noon and an online enquiry form is also used.

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Circulation of the Report: Cabinet Members

List of Background Papers: 2018 CIPFA report