

PLANNING SERVICES – INCREASE IN CHARGING FOR PRE-APPLICATION DISCUSSIONS

(Report of the Acting Head of Planning and Building Control)

1. Summary of Proposals

To alter the current scale of fees and charges for PD enquiries and pre-application advice to a common county-wide scale of charges and approach to service provision, and to maintain the fees at the same level as the other districts within Worcestershire.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to **RECOMMEND** that

- 1) the schedule of charges, detailed at Appendix 1, be adopted and implemented by Planning Services from 1st April 2010; and
- 2) authority be delegated to Officers to maintain the fees at a standard county-wide level in future.

3. Financial, Legal, Policy, Risk and Climate Change / Carbon Management Implications

Financial

- 3.1 Permitted Development enquiries and pre-application advice are already provided here in Redditch to this level of service. There would be a financial benefit from increasing the current level of charging.

Legal

- 3.2 The authority cannot make profit from charging for services. However it is able to cover the administrative and overhead costs of service provision, providing this is made clear at the point of charging. Therefore, the proposed fees would not be charging for the advice provided.

Policy

- 3.3 It has been the policy of Planning Services to provide these services because they are perceived to be of benefit to customers, the wider community, Officers and the overall quality of the built environment of Redditch Borough.

Risk

- 3.4 In adopting the proposed fees and charges, there may be a small risk that some people would not seek advice prior to implementing developments, and that this could lead to additional enforcement caseload. However this risk is considered to be minimal, and could be covered by existing arrangements.

Climate Change / Carbon Management

- 3.5 These are material planning considerations central to the process and thus need no further consideration here.

Report

4. Background

- 4.1 Following an O&S fees task and finish group, Planning Services considered introducing fees for non-statutory planning functions such as Permitted Development Enquiries and Pre-application Discussions. The principles of charging for such matters were agreed, the details were refined and the charging began on 1st January 2009.
- 4.2 Concurrently with this process, Planning Officers from the six districts across the County were considering the implications of such charging and the benefit or otherwise of bringing in a standard table of fees to provide consistency and clarity of approach. When the fees were introduced in Redditch, they were therefore considered to be a pilot scheme for a County-wide approach, with a review period included.
- 4.3 Following further discussions at Head of Service and Manager level across the County, details of how such a scheme could be implemented consistently across the county have now been agreed, and a scale of fees proposed.

5. Key Issues

- 5.1 Whilst the scale of fees and service level has been agreed County-wide, there are some small variations, for example one authority also chooses to charge for services that Redditch do not provide, and one authority has chosen not to make charges on householder schemes, in order that enquirers are not put off, despite the low charge proposed.
- 5.2 The table of charges attached at appendix one for adoption is therefore the extract which would apply for Redditch, as proposed by Officers. These relate to Permitted Development enquiries (asking whether permission is needed for proposed development) and pre-application discussions (relating to requirements for the submission of an application, likely outcomes, and the policy framework that should be taken into account when proposing a development).
- 5.3 The proposed charges are higher than those previously charged here in Redditch. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the principle of charging for these services has now been shown to work with a minimum level of fees set, without covering all the internal charges, and so it is considered reasonable to increase the fees. Secondly, having considered the fees charged by other authorities nationally, and particularly beyond the Worcestershire fringes (e.g. Tewkesbury, Stratford-on-Avon) it is considered reasonable to levy similar scales of charges. This would also ensure that the service was provided to a high and consistent standard, raising customer service levels and giving credibility to the process, as well as removing from the system any inappropriate enquiries.

6. Other Implications

Asset Management	-	None known.
Community Safety	-	None known (material consideration dealt with in the planning process).
Health	-	None known.
Human Resources	-	None known.
Social Exclusion	-	None known (material consideration dealt with in the planning process).

Environment / Sustainability	-	None known (material consideration dealt with in the planning process).
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7. **Lessons Learnt**

So far, the benefits of charging for these services have been an increase in income generation of approximately £5000 in a 12 month period, an improvement in the quality of information provided when advice is sought, and which leads to a more thorough consideration of and response to proposed schemes, a reduction in wasted officer time and a general acceptance of the principle of charging. There have been no complaints in the first twelve months of operating the scheme, nor has there been a reduction in the number of enquiries made to the development control team.

8. **Background Papers**

The previous reports to exec were sent on 2nd April 2008 and 19th November 2008. They also note other relevant background documents within them.

9. **Consultation**

There has been no consultation other than with relevant Borough Council Officers.

10. **Author of Report**

The author of this report is Ailith Rutt (Development Control Manager), who can be contacted on extension 3374 (email: ailith.rutt@redditchbc.gov.uk) for more information.

11. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Proposed new scale of fees and charges.

Appendix 2 - Proposed guide to service – to be provided separately, electronically.