

**PROPOSED TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCHEME OF FEES AND CHARGES FOR NON-STATUTORY PLANNING ADVICE**

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Cllr Kit Taylor
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Ruth Bamford
Ward(s) Affected	All
Ward Councillor(s) Consulted	No
Non-Key Decision	

**1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS**

- 1.1 As a result of the on-going planning transformation project, improvements in service provision in terms of customer experience externally and officer efficiencies internally have been implemented.
- 1.2 Other transformation work in planning has also had regard to the strategic and corporate priorities that have been set. As a result of both of these elements of work, a revision to the charges levied is proposed.
- 1.3 The charges dealt with in this report are those relating to permitted development enquiries – those seeking to know whether planning permission is required – and requests for pre-application advice – those seeking advice on whether their proposals are likely to be acceptable or not.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 **It is recommended that Cabinet approve the fees and charges scheme and schedule as presented in Appendix 1 to come into effect between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 and Appendix 2 to come into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014.**

**3. KEY ISSUES**

**Financial Implications**

- 3.1 Members should be aware that as a result of altering the way that officers in the planning teams operate efficiency savings have been realised by removing waste from the system of processing requests for advice. Therefore, the cost of providing the service, particularly in terms of the smaller, simpler requests for advice, has reduced in terms of stationery and processing costs as well as in staff time.
- 3.2 Whilst there would be a loss of revenue as a result of the proposal to cease charging in some areas, such as for householder enquiries, the loss is not considered to be of great significance in the context of the overall budget for the team in light of the decrease in cost of providing the service noted above and the

customer benefits. (Approximate figures can be found at appendix 3.) The shortfall in income generated will be offset by savings realised within the associated costs of the service.

**Legal Implications**

- 3.3 The Council has no legal obligation to provide these non-statutory services, but they are considered to be a benefit to the customers and to the quality of submission of applications received as a result of giving advice up front.
- 3.4 The Council 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 remain as covering these elements and not the advice itself.
- 3.5 The legal team have no specific comments to make on these proposals.

**Service / Operational Implications**

- 3.6 The planning transformation work has been on-going since Spring 2012 and has reviewed the way in which officers provide services to customers, as well as the back office operational aspects of service provision. It has altered the focus towards providing good quality customer services that meet their demands, by improving the efficiency and flexibility of the working practices of staff within the office.
- 3.7 As a result of customer feedback, an appraisal of the corporate and strategic objectives, the continuing work on evidence gathering and policy preparation in relation to Bromsgrove District Plan, and improved efficiency and internal office processes, it is suggested that some of the categories that were not previously exempt from charging should become so.
- 3.8 In order to reflect the strategic purposes of the Council Plan, particularly 'help me run a successful business' and 'provide good things for me to see, do and visit', it is proposed not to charge for non-residential development in order to encourage the work that is continuing under the remit of the LEPs (under the banner Bromsgrove is open for business) and all other economic development in the District.
- 3.9 Customer feedback identified that householders seeking advice on changes to their homes were receiving a mixed response depending on their method of enquiry. As a result, adaptations to the way these enquiries are dealt with have been put in place. These result in a more appropriate level of response to each individual, and a more reasonable requirement for providing information. By identifying what matters to each customer when their query is presented, officers are able to communicate more clearly and effectively at the outset, thus identifying the level of detail and information that is relevant and managing customer expectations on level and timing of services. Wherever possible, the

initial officer will continue with the query right through to the end. This has proved to be welcomed by customers.

- 3.10 Of the two different types of enquiry routinely received and charged for currently, it is suggested that the permitted development enquiries should cease to be subject to a charge. This is because they were almost entirely enquiries by householders relating to small matters on dwellings which can usually be dealt with more simply than via a formal administrative process.
- 3.11 As a result of the proposed changes above, the only remaining categories where charges would be levied would be where new or conversion to new residential development is proposed. Whilst it is noted that housing is also a priority in terms of meeting the housing targets being set, the level of involvement of officers is greater and the benefit of recovering the charges greater as there is more officer time and input in these types of cases. The benefits are also clearer later in the process when better quality planning applications with a higher likelihood of success are submitted.
- 3.12 It is noted that the fees were not increased in April 2013 because it was known that changes to the system were likely to be proposed. It is therefore proposed that this change of when to charge be introduced from the beginning of October, and then the fees increased by 5% in April 2014 to make up for the lack of increase this year (see appendix 3). This reflects a two year inflationary increase on the fee.

**Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 3.13 As a result of the proposed changes to the delivery and charging of this service, it is not anticipated that there would be any significant difference in these impacts. The service will remain advertised on the website and via the customer services team and will be available to all. It is now better tailored towards the individual needs of each customer, and as such has had positive feedback.
- 3.14 The head of service will continue to ensure that the customer service experience is of the highest possible standard. Staff will continue to receive training and feedback on their performance.
- 3.15 The Householder Planning Service remains popular with customers and so will continue to provide free advice on a walk-in basis.

**4. RISK MANAGEMENT**

- 4.1 The way in which the service is operated is such that any dips in capacity are promptly flagged up and addressed amongst the team in order to ensure that the service continues to be provided well.

- 4.2 The head of service will continue to ensure that advice is not given until a fee has been received in cases where one is due, and that other cases are not held up by any administration relating to fee collection.

**5. APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 – Proposed new charging schedule

Appendix 2 – Proposed new charging schedule with 5% increase to come into effect in April 2014

Appendix 3 – Likely changes to income as a result of the proposals

**6. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Bromsgrove District Council Plan (July 2013)

**7. KEY**

LEP = Local Economic Partnership

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**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

4<sup>th</sup> September 2013

**Appendix 1 – Proposed new charging schedule to come into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013**

Number of dwellings proposed	Development site area if no. of dwellings unknown	Cost of LPA advice	Cost of additional meeting (after first three)
1-4 dwellings	Less than 0.5ha	£268	£107
5-9 dwellings	0.6-0.99ha	£537	£107
10-49 dwellings	1-1.25ha	£1072	£536
50-199 dwellings	1.26-2ha	£2145	£793
200+ dwellings	More than 2ha	£3217	£1072

**Appendix 2 – Proposed new charging schedule with 5% increase to come into effect in April 2014**

Number of dwellings proposed	Development site area if no. of dwellings unknown	Cost of LPA advice	Cost of additional meeting (after first three)
1-4 dwellings	Less than 0.5ha	£281	£112
5-9 dwellings	0.6-0.99ha	£564	£112
10-49 dwellings	1-1.25ha	£1126	£563
50-199 dwellings	1.26-2ha	£2252	£833
200+ dwellings	More than 2ha	£3378	£1126

**Appendix 3 – Likely changes to income as a result of the proposals**

BDC	2012/13 year	Likely income if fees change	Likely loss of income p.a.
Pre-app income	£41k	£31.5k	£10k max
PD enquiry income	£2.5k	£0	£2.5k
Total loss of income?			<b>£12k max</b>