

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – 9 NOVEMBER 2017.

REVIEW OF THE CHARGES LEVIED WITH REGARD TO PLANNING PRE APPLICATION ENQUIRIES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. This report advises the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel of the findings of the Task and Finish Group who met twice to consider the scope of the Council's charges for pre application advice, and the amounts charged five years on from the introduction of these charges in 2012.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The Council introduced a system of charges for pre application advice, covering the vast majority of planning and related enquiries, in 2012. The intent was to cover the full costs of providing such advice, with the exception of householder enquiries and those regarding Listed Buildings, which were subsidised. The income target for the current financial year is set at £75,000 and at present income is on track to achieve this notably due to the existence of a few larger schemes paying substantial amounts and one scheme, Fawley Waterside paying a five figure amount by the end of the year.
- 2.2. Details of the pre application enquiry process and how advice can be obtained from the Council is available on our website via the following link.
<http://www.newforest.gov.uk/article/13716/Am-I-likely-to-get-planning-permission-for-a-scheme-or-project-Getting-pre-application-planning-and-related-advice>
- 2.2. In charging for such advice the Council followed the lead taken by the majority of Local Planning Authorities and the level of service provided has been good in terms of the timeliness and calibre of response, with very few concerns being raised by users of the service.
- 2.3. As a generality, the majority of these concerns have been from individual residents who, as a matter of principle, do not see why they should pay for advice on extensions and alterations they propose to their properties, especially if they are Listed.

3. KEY OUTCOMES OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP'S REVIEW

- 3.1 The review basically considered four questions namely:

The level of charges levied

The scope of enquiries charged for

The principle of subsidised charges

The level of advice provided on the web with regard to the pre application enquiry process

These are considered individually in the following paragraphs.

3.2 The level of charges levied

The Task and Finish Group looked at the current level of charges as compared to those charged by nearby Local Planning Authorities. They also considered information provided to them by the Planning and Building Control Service Manager in respect of the actual time it took to deal with these matters.

The Group decided that it was relevant to increase charges to fully cover the time spent by planning and administrative Officers and the actual cost of the Officers involved in undertaking the response. They accepted that even though this would put the Council towards the top, or in some cases over, the extremely varied charges for similar matters levied by other Councils, it was only right to reflect cost recovery, based on the accurate assessment of the time spent to undertake the work now available.

They noted that tree enquiries are not charged for as the responses on such matters come from the National Park who deal with all planning related tree issues on behalf of this District under a specific SLA that incorporates a fixed global amount for such work.

They also considered that an automatic refund if the anticipated target time for any pre application enquiry response was missed was not appropriate and that the decision in such cases should be on the basis of a one off assessment of the delay and the reasons for it.

They noted that a proportion of the proposed rise is down to inflation as the charges have not been increased on an annual basis.

The existing and recommended proposed charges including VAT and the percentage increase between the two are set out in Appendix One.

3.3 The scope of enquiries charged for

The Task and Finish Group looked at the range of enquires charged for and agreed that these should be expanded to cover areas not currently charged for that, over the lifetime of the charging scheme, have been the subject of requests. These new charges would cover the following areas.

Advertisement Matters

High Hedge enquiries (these cover the entire District not just the Council's planning area)

Planning Conditions

It was also agreed that there should be a catch all rate for enquiries not set out in the defined list, with the costs to be based on a case by case basis of the anticipated Officer time involved in the response.

3.4 The principle of subsidised charges.

The Task and Finish Group considered whether subsidised charges should continue to apply to householder and Listed Building enquiries as had originally been agreed. They decided that, given the small scale of the relevant enquiry fees and the need to ensure that sufficient Officer level resource was available to deal with them in an appropriate manner, a cost recovery charge should now be applied.

- 3.5 The level of advice provided with regard to the pre application enquiry process
The Task and Finish Group reviewed the web pages that advise on pre application enquiries, how to submit one, the cost involved, the likely response time and the calibre of response to be expected. In doing this they were guided by an independent review undertaken by a Council Officer not involved with the Planning Service. They felt that improvements were required in terms of the clarity of the information provided and how to access it, with more relevant guidance on what information is required from the enquirer, and clearer links to the Government's National Planning Portal.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 In conclusion, the Task and Finish Group was generally pleased with the way the planning pre application process had evolved since it was first rolled out. They agreed that notwithstanding the high percentage increase costs should be raised to accurately reflect the amount of work involved, that additional categories of advice should be included, that no subsidising should remain and that the information on the web should be reviewed and improved to reflect comments received. The proposed and revised charges suggested by the Task and Finish Group are set out in Appendix 1 to this report.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. The adoption of revised charges and an expansion of the areas charging covers will bring additional levels of income to the Council but these will only reflect the actual cost of providing the service in a way that ensures sufficient officer resources are to hand.

6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The provision of pre application advice assists in the production of high quality development proposals to the benefit of the environmental qualities of the District.

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 None

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the Panel advise the Portfolio Holder that they agree with the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group with respect to the new categories and rate of charging with regard to pre application enquiries, asset out in Appendix 1 to this report, and the need to review and enhance the relevant web pages.

For further information contact:

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Background Papers:

Pre App Charging Task and Finish
Group Minutes (2017)
Proposed web page changes

Appendix One: Current and Proposed Charges (following Portfolio Holder agreement) and Officer Hourly rates

Enquiry Type	Charges including VAT		
	Current	Proposed	Inc
Planning Application Checking	£30.00	£42.00	40%
Householder Is development acceptable enquiry	£90.00	£130.00	44%
Householder Is permission required and acceptable enquiry	£180.00	£211.00	17%
Householder post decision clarification	£52.00	£86.00	66%
Non Householder post decision clarification	£212.00	£264.00	25%
Shop fronts, telecommunications and changes of use enquiry	£90.00	£130.00	44%
Small scale development pre application enquiry	£277.00	£396.00	43%
Minor development pre application enquiry	£555.00	£726.00	31%
Major development enquiry	£832.00	£1188.00	43%
Principles of development enquiry	£2120.00	£2862.00	35%
Larger schemes enquiry	Hourly rate	Hourly rate	N/A
Trees enquiries	No charge	No charge	N/A
Straightforward Heritage Advice enquiry	£27.00	£66.00	144%
Complicated Heritage Advice Enquiry	N/A	£198.00	N/A
Advertisement Enquiry	N/A	£86.00	N/A
High Hedge Enquiry	N/A	£173.00	N/A
Conditions Pre App Householder	N/A	£86.00	N/A
Conditions Pre App Non Householder	N/A	£132.00	N/A
Catch All Enquiry not covered above	Hourly Rate	Hourly Rate	N/A
Officer Scale	2017/2018 Charge per hour (inc. on costs)		
Executive Head	£83.00		
Service Manager	£82.00		
Team Leader	£76.00		
Senior Planner	£55.00		
Technical Officer	£36.00		
Administrative Support	£35.00		