

Implementing Charges for Pre-Application Development Control Advice

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Purpose of the Report

1. To ensure that we continue to operate an efficient planning service and are able to sustain our current high quality level of service it is recommended that the council introduce charges for providing some forms of pre-application advice.

Recommendations

2. That District Executive approves the introduction of a charging regime for pre-application advice in accordance with the attached schedule.

Background

3. The levying of a charge for providing pre-application advice is well established across the country. The rationale for this is that the cost of providing the service is recovered directly and is not added as a general cost to every household via the council tax. South Somerset is one of the few authorities in the south-west not to have introduced charging. It is estimated that over 75% of local authorities already charge for advice and all of our neighbouring authorities (Taunton, Dorset, Sedgemoor, East Devon, Mendip and Wiltshire) having been operating a similar system for some time.
4. In 2016 the district council responded in writing to more than 1500 requests for advice last year. Many of these enquiries resulted in a meeting and sometimes a site meeting and all received an informed and substantive response from an officer.

The Charges

5. The level of charges proposed is based upon several factors.
6. Firstly, a qualitative assessment of the actual cost of processing a variety of pre-application enquiries was carried out. This identified the time invested by the various members of staff that are involved.
7. Secondly, there has been an investigation into the charges being levied by other authorities around the country. It is clear from this research that some local authorities have decided to set their fees quite high as a means of achieving maximum income, particularly in relation to the large residential proposals.
8. The proposed charges at South Somerset are at the lower end of the scale and reflect the cost of providing the service rather than seeking to achieve a profit. The residents of South Somerset also benefit in the round from early engagement through a thorough pre- app service, and it is important not to deter approaches with too high charges.

Consultation

9. It is considered that the free service that South Somerset currently provides is equal to if not better than that provided by adjoining authorities that are already charging for the service. This view is based upon opinions expressed by agents, architects and developers at the quarterly meeting of the 'Users Forum'. At these meetings, regular customers have indicated that they accept that a charge will be levied but made it clear that the level of service should be maintained and possibly even improve to reflect the cost. A formal consultation on the proposed charges did not produce any responses.
10. The introduction of charges for pre-application advice was presented to the Income Generation Board several months ago and received full support.
11. The Charging Schedule was also approved by the Local Development Scheme Board in February.

Potential Impacts

12. Users of the service have consistently praised the quality and speed of response of our pre-application service. This is invaluable for customers when deciding whether to submit an application or put in an offer on a site.
13. It is also important that enquirers can have confidence in the advice that they have been given and this expectation is likely to increase when the advice has been paid for. Whilst it is recognised that a planning application is subject to a consultative process and that ultimately decisions are made by elected members it is necessary for officers to stand by their advice should an application be submitted. This will be contingent upon the application reflecting what was considered at pre-application stage and no further information or unforeseen circumstances become apparent.
14. There is potential for a reduction in customers using the pre-application service and this may lead to poorer quality applications. It is possible that this may increase the number of re-submitted applications, taking advantage of the 'free-go' within 12 months of decision. It is also possible that there may be an increase in the number of appeals lodged. However, discussions with other local authorities that have introduced a charging regime have shown that there was no noticeable increase in these areas.

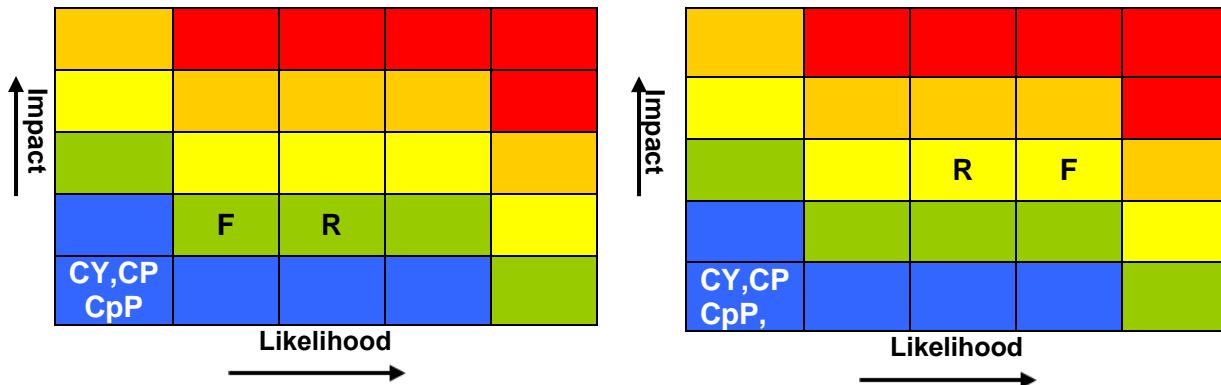
Financial Implications

15. On the basis of the number and type of pre-application enquiries that were submitted last year together with an estimated reduction of a third to reflect the imposition of a charge it is anticipated that an income of more than £20k is likely to be achieved in the first year.
16. It is important that the introduction of a charge does not result in significant additional handling costs. It is considered that the requirement for 'upfront' payment using current systems will ensure that this change can be accommodated within the existing process. This will mean that there will be no additional resource requirements and that all payments received will be net additional income.

Risk Matrix

Risk Profile before officer recommendations

Risk Profile after officer recommendations



Key

Categories	Colours (for further detail please refer to Risk management strategy)
R = Reputation	Red = High impact and high probability
CpP = Corporate Plan Priorities	Orange = Major impact and major probability
CP = Community Priorities	Yellow = Moderate impact and moderate probability
CY = Capacity	Green = Minor impact and minor probability
F = Financial	Blue = Insignificant impact and insignificant probability

Council Plan Implications

17. South Somerset will be a confident, resilient and flexible organization, protecting and improving core services, delivering public priorities and acting in the best long-term interests of the district. We will:
- Protect core services to the public by reducing costs and seeking income generation.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

18. The introduction of pre-application charges will have no impact.

Equality and Diversity Implications

19. An EQIA screening review has been carried out and this has demonstrated that introduction of pre-application charges will not have an impact upon any particular group within society. There is also the potential for an exemption from the charge if there is an appropriate justification

Background Papers

20. Report to Local Development Scheme Board February 2017
 21. Attached schedule and guidance