

Planning Committee

2.00pm, Wednesday, 29 January 2020

Changes to the pre-application advice service – update

Executive/routine	
Wards	All
Council Commitments	13 , 14 , 50

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee:
 - 1.1.1 notes the update on the changes to the Council's pre-application advice service agreed on [15 May 2019](#) and implemented on 1 July 2019; and
 - 1.1.2 agrees that a follow-up report on the changes be brought to Planning Committee once sufficient data has been collected on performance.

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Changes to the pre-application advice service – update

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report updates the Planning Committee on the refreshed pre-application advice service (PAAS) introduced by the Council on 1 July 2019. The PAAS is functioning smoothly with 109 valid requests received as of 31 December 2019, representing £147,000 of income from the newly introduced charges. A quality assurance regime is being put in place to assess the quality of service being provided to customers.

3. Background

- 3.1 Pre-application advice refers to advice given to a prospective applicant before a planning application has been submitted. While providing pre-application advice is not a statutory planning function, in line with Scottish Government guidance the Council provides this service to support the efficient operation of the planning system. The annual costs to the Planning service of providing the PAAS are estimated at £231,000; this does not include the costs of input from other Council service areas.
- 3.2 In response to customer feedback on the quality of the PAAS, coupled with challenges with resourcing the service, Council officers developed proposals to improve the quality of the PAAS, as well as to make it financially sustainable by introducing charging on a cost recovery basis. These proposals were approved by the Planning Committee on 15 May 2019 and subsequently enacted on 1 July 2019.

4. Main report

- 4.1 The changes to the PAAS were enacted on 1 July 2019 and the new service has therefore now been in place for slightly under seven months. As of 31 December 2019, the Council had received 109 valid requests for the PAAS (inclusive of repeat requests), broken down as follows:
- 51 local development (small) requests;
 - 30 local development (medium) requests;

- 19 major development requests; and
 - nine pre-position discussion requests.
- 4.2 The delivery of the refreshed PAAS has generally gone relatively smoothly to date with only modest procedural difficulties. Work is ongoing to improve how requests are made (migrating from the current email-based system to a web form with integrated payment) and to improve the financial reconciliation process. Both the provision of the service itself and the supporting activities (such as taking payment) are working well, and staff resources are being managed within the Planning service to deliver consistency of service.
- 4.3 The biggest risks to the continued smooth delivery of the project are the potential that consultees are unable to provide the Planning service with the input required to produce comprehensive responses and the need to manage the workload within the Planning service. Remedial actions to mitigate these risks are ongoing.
- 4.4 The key driver of the changes to the PAAS is improving customer service. To help the Council ascertain whether this goal has been realised, the project board is implementing proposals for quality assurance. There are four broad elements to the quality assurance monitoring regime which are each being introduced:
- 4.4.1 customer feedback – capturing the views of customers via surveys and other mechanisms such as the annual Customer Forum;
 - 4.4.2 live review – peer review of ongoing cases;
 - 4.4.3 retrospective review – peer review of completed cases; and
 - 4.4.4 key performance indicators – statistical data on the service provided.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 The Council will continue to deliver the refreshed PAAS.
- 5.2 As part of the refreshed PAAS, the Council is tracking the time spent responding to requests for PAAS by Council officers of each grade. The data yielded by this exercise will enable the Council to more accurately assess the costs to the Council of delivering the PAAS, informing the setting of charges in future. Any proposals to alter the charging regime will be the subject of a separate report.
- 5.3 Work is ongoing to further improve the PAAS, with specific areas including ongoing enhancement of staff procedure manuals, refining payment procedures to reduce delays, increasing the suite of optional additional services that customers can access and enhancing the meeting facilities provided for customers.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 The [Council budget for 2019/20](#) assumed that the Planning service would receive a minimum income of £100,000 from the new charges for PAAS (pro-rata over three quarters of the financial year). The £100,000 figure was an estimate but not based upon the costs to the Council of delivering the PAAS and therefore was not used as a basis for setting charges.
- 6.2 As of 31 December 2019, the total income collected from charges for the PAAS was £147,000. It is important to note that this income does not represent a profit to the Council, it represents the costs of delivering the PAAS. It is also important to note that this figure cannot necessarily be used to project a full-year income year as a relatively high number of PAAS requests for major developments were received in the first two quarters (19 out of a projected full year total of 27) which suggests income may be weighted towards the first two quarters and lower in the remaining two quarters.
- 6.3 As agreed by Planning Committee, charges for the PAAS are being waived for any developments primarily concerning works relating to accessibility for people with disabilities. One customer has made use of this exemption to date with a cost to the Council in terms of forfeited income of £300.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 As set out above, the Council is enacting a quality assurance regime to enable it to monitor the quality of service being provided to customers. The regime is still in its infancy, but once the quantum of data is greater officers will be able to prepare regular reports on the quality of service being provided to customers.
- 7.2 The changes to the PAAS were discussed at the Planning and Building Standards Customer Forum on 10 September 2019.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 Changes to the pre-application advice service and Edinburgh Planning Concordat report, Planning Committee on [15 May 2019](#).

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.