

 Employment Committee –15 February 2017		Agenda Item No. 7
Title	Pre-Application Officer	
For further information about this report please contact	Gary Fisher 01926 456502 gary.fisher@warwickdc.gov.uk	
Wards of the District directly affected	All	
Is the report private and confidential and not for publication by virtue of a paragraph of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, following the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006?	No	
Date and meeting when issue was last considered and relevant minute number	Executive: 5 January 2017	
Background Papers		

Contrary to the policy framework:	No
Contrary to the budgetary framework:	No
Key Decision?	No
Included within the Forward Plan? (If yes include reference number)	No
Equality & Sustainability Impact Assessment Undertaken	N/A
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Officer/Councillor Approval		
Officer Approval	Date	Name
Deputy Chief Executive	2/2/17	Bill Hunt
Head of Service	2/2/17	Tracy Darke
CMT	2/2/17	
Section 151 Officer	2/2/17	Mike Snow
Monitoring Officer	2/2/17	Andrew Jones
Finance	2/2/17	Jenny Clayton
Portfolio Holder(s)	2/2/17	Councillor Stephen Cross
Consultation & Community Engagement		
N/A		
Final Decision?	Yes	
Suggested next steps (if not final decision please set out below)		

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for a new dedicated full time Senior Planning Officer post in the Development Management Team within Development Services.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 Members agree that the following post be added to the Council's permanent staffing establishment:
- a. Senior Planning Officer

3. **REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 At their meeting of 5 January 2017, Executive agreed to the permanent introduction of a pre-application charging scheme including the provision of an additional full time Senior Planning Officer post to undertake that role.
- 3.2 Prior to that, commencing in February 2016, the revised pre-application charging scheme was trialled in order to establish whether (i) that scheme is attractive to our customers in providing an enhanced pre-application advice service, and (ii) the income received is sufficient to fund an additional full time Senior Planning Officer post which is needed to undertake that work.
- 3.3 The purpose of the Executive report was to advise that the trial had been successful on both counts above and it therefore requested authorisation to adopt the scheme permanently and seek the additional post.

4. **Policy Framework**

- 4.1 **Fit for the Future** – Over the period of the trial of the revised pre-application scheme, the experience has been that this enhanced service has increased the quality of development schemes coming forward, contributing to the vision of making Warwick District a great place to live, work and visit as set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy.
- 4.2 The proposal is consistent with the Fit for the Future Programme as follows:
- Service: To Maintain and Improve Services* – the proposal will allow the Council to maintain a planning advice service of good quality.
- Money: Achieve and maintain a sustainable balanced budget* – the charges will enable the right level of resource to be available to provide the service at no additional cost to the Council.
- People: Engaged and Empowered Staff* – as it will help the Council to make sure it has the right staff in place and that they are appropriately supported and engaged to deliver the service.
- 4.3 **Impact Assessments** – It is anticipated that the permanent introduction of this enhanced service and the provision of an additional resource within the Development Management Team in that respect will assist with the appropriate provision of that service to all sections of the community.

5. Budgetary Framework

- 5.1 The budget necessary for running this scheme on a permanent basis needs to cover the cost of providing an additional staff resource within the development management team. The recruitment of a permanent member of staff will cost in total £43,000 per year and this is therefore the minimal level of income required to fund that cost.
- 5.2 At the current level of demand for pre-application advice, the income received from the revised scheme exceeds the costs of providing the service on a permanent basis such that should that pattern continue there is sufficient income in the longer term for the scheme to be self-funding.
- 5.3 When considering the appropriate level at which to set the charges for pre-application advice, officers were mindful of the need to ensure that there is full cost recovery whilst also setting charges at a level which encourages customers to access this service. In doing so, the proposed charges were benchmarked against the wide range of fees set by other Local Planning Authorities and were set at a level which falls broadly within the mid range of those charges.
- 5.4 It is intended that that the level of charges will be reviewed on a regular basis, including prior to October 2017 in time for the annual setting of the Council's schedule of fees and charges.

6. Risks

- 6.1 There is a risk that over future years, the level of income received may reduce such that the service is no longer able to be self-funding. However, given the income received over the trial period, and the nature and scale of the development proposals likely to be coming forward within the District in the foreseeable future, the likelihood of that being the case is considered to be low. The charges will in any case be reviewed annually.
- 6.2 Should Employment Committee not support the recommendation, there is no capacity to continue to offer pre-application advice without any increase in the resourcing available within the team. Such a position would result in lost opportunities to proactively influence development proposals at an early stage.

7. Alternative Option(s) considered

- 7.1 It is considered that the previous operation of this aspect of the development management service did not provide an appropriate level of customer service or contribute as effectively as it could to the delivery of increasingly good development across the District. For that reason, the only alternative to providing additional capacity within the team would be to cease providing any pre-application advice as there is no capacity to offer a free service.

8. BACKGROUND

- 8.1 Pre-application advice is a key element of the provision of a rounded and effective development management service.

- 8.2 The provision of such advice is important in providing developers with an appropriate steer as to the acceptability of their proposals prior to the submission of a planning application. It is also useful in identifying at an early stage, schemes where there is little or no prospect of success thereby potentially preventing significant expenditure on the part of an applicant directed at schemes which are not acceptable.
- 8.3 It is widely acknowledged that the benefits of effective pre-application services are generally welcomed within the development industry and that developers are willing to pay for that service subject to it being provided in a timely and transparent manner.
- 8.4 The successful implementation of this scheme relies upon additional staff resource within the Development Management Team. This will build in sufficient capacity to ensure that pre-application work is undertaken in a focussed and timely manner.
- 8.5 This approach was agreed on a trial basis by Executive for a year to establish whether the scheme is successful and whether the level of income derived will be such that in the longer term the scheme will become at least self-funded. If the scheme was not successful, then the alternative was to cease any pre-application advice as there is no capacity to offer a free service.
- 8.6 The outcome of that trial was that the income received exceeds that required to fund a permanent Planning Officer post to provide an appropriate level of resource to deliver this service in an effective manner on a permanent basis.