

Pre application Advice Service

Comments from users and providers

Users - Suggestions for improvements

- Response timescales need to be consistently applied and adhered to and refund if not met.
- Deal with simple enquiries/questions for free
- Engage in more verbal or face to face discussion/ for City Centre enquires deal with them on site in meetings
- Treat all enquiries e.g. householder query to major developments equally
- Remove the charge for asking if permission is needed
- Give enquiries the same priority as applications
- Allow submission electronically through the Planning Portal
- Provide a tiered level of service and fee structure
- Reduce the planning application fee if a 'Pre-App' leads to one.
- Speed up time from receipt to registration
- Provide a VAT receipt for payment

Staff - Benefits of the Service

- The fee system introduces effective prioritisation
- The fee offers some modest compensation for the staff resource incurred.
- We receive a financial contribution towards Directorate services that help facilitate acceptable development.
- The introduction of a charge has filtered out the more 'frivolous' enquiries.
- There is a shared record of the advice given
- It encourages joint working at an early stage
- It requires more information from the client so it is possible to prepare and this should lead to better feed-back
- The cost of the service is at least partly borne directly by those benefitting from it rather than the taxpayer
- The service appears to be well received by applicants

Staff - Issues

- There can be delays in getting pre-apps to DCSD officers
- Since Support Services has been transferred out of the DM section, delays between a pre-application request being submitted and it reaching this team appear to have increased
- The formal process puts a further strain on limited staff resources. Planning applications get priority so pre-applications get left behind.
- Some inconsistency in our approach to charging, depending on which section first received the enquiry
- Some consultations are sent directly to the DCSD team without any consideration by the DM officer. This can be unhelpful, as it is DM officers who will determine any subsequent application
- The problems arise when we have to consult other busy council departments and we have to arrange site visits etc
- In MDPI there is sometimes uncertainty on the role of initiating scheme or only giving advice on payment of a fee
- Developers are sometimes tempted to jump into a planning application and negotiate from there- effectively getting a pre application service for free
- Overall less advice is given out as fewer people (customers) engage in the formal process
- Formal comments take longer to produce so minor issues can take more time than necessary and become prioritized above other work
- The lead officer is not readily identifiable on the form.
- Occasionally DM officers circumvent the internal system so pre-apps are not logged with DCSD, though we have given the advice. This can lead to duplication of effort with DM officers acting only as a “post box”.
- In a few cases pre-app advice on listed building or within conservation areas has been given solely by DM, which can result in conflicting advice on the actual application
- The difference between a Query and a Pre-app consultation needs to be clarified – often the same work is involved as the information submitted has not been adequate to assess scope of proposals at the stage of contact. The forms ask for quite a lot of information and sometimes the scope of the project is unclear.

- Some technical issues with closed cases still showing on the system.
- Some non-strategic projects are going through the MDPI team
- There is inconsistency in the way clients are being treated i.e. some are being offered free pre app consultations
- Some organisations still expect advice to be free or are not aware of the system yet.
- The fee structure can be read in different ways. Clients are usually redirected to DM.
- There is often a follow up with non planning staff, which should perhaps be recognised in the fee structure. A scale of charges not a fixed price should be incorporated.
- The actual time spent by officers on each case is not recorded and this varies widely between cases

Staff - Suggestions

- Clarify whether Development Management should own the process or whether it is to be directed to different sections as appropriate.
- Have a “teach in” to explain the fee structure and answer questions on anomalies.
- Review the form and guidance notes, and include a box for internal use where the lead officer’s initials are recorded
- Speed up initial processing systems
- Provide advice on quick simple queries without charge and verbally to reflect the limited time available, and channel more involved queries or pre apps through the pre application process.
- Create processes and communication to redirect queries to a more appropriate section quickly. And assess those already in the system for this reason.
- Define what the fee can be charged for (e.g. repairs advice?)
- Engage major client organisations (e.g. Minster, York Museums Trust, York Conservation Trust) to establish pre application working arrangements.
- Introduce categories for distinct advice on listed buildings and on highway matters where no subsequent planning application is required.