Briefing Note on the Transition to Electronic Communication.

Public sector funding is under significant pressure and Shropshire Council is seeking to reduce costs by £74m over 3 years.

The Development Management Service is contributing to these savings by reducing its establishment by 20% in terms of cost and staff numbers. This process will be completed by May 2011.

Planning fees do not cover the cost of processing an application – the average planning fee is approximately £480 whereas the average processing cost is twice that.

All aspects of expenditure are being reviewed and the cost of consultation is one of these.

Headline figures

Shropshire Council received 3300 planning applications last year and a further 1700 applications that do not attract a fee but for which there is still a processing cost, i.e. listed building consent, prior notifications, protected trees.

The basic cost of consulting on these applications is £41,000 – this is the cost of the materials only and does not include staff time in associated printing.

As an average this works out at £12.50 per application and does not include labour costs in printing plans submitted to the council electronically to the Council via the planning portal. These account for about 45% of all applications.

Parish and Town Councils receiving paper consultations can use these headline figures to calculate how much it costs per year for a Local Authority to print and post each application to them. This value could in turn be used to invest in IT equipment as a one off fee to allow for electronic consultation.

For example if a large Town Council were to receive 100 consultations every year, at an average cost of £12.50 per application, this would cost **£1,250.00.** This could cover the majority of cost of a Laptop, Standard Microsoft Office license and projector which could then be used year on year at little or no additional expense.

New Ways of Working

Having identified the funding pressures we want to work with Parish & Town Councils to find new ways of working and electronic communication is one of these. With some investment in equipment, larger Councils such as Shifnal will quickly benefit from the electronic communication.

Shrewsbury Town Council has already signed up and now received no paper copies from Shropshire Council. The Clerk, Helen Ball has the following comments:-

Shrewsbury Town Council has since the start of 2011, stopped receiving paper copies of planning applications. Now we receive an electronic alert which looks very similar to the front page of the planning application. We also continue to receive the daily alerts of planning applications and decisions and we receive the weekly lists also.

We clearly benefit from E-planning in a number of ways:
   Having 50+ planning applications to consider every 3 weeks we were struggling to find space to keep such records and were finding that we needed to dispose of them within 6 months of receipt.
   50 planning applications every 3 weeks generates a lot of paper and together with the added costs of envelopes and postage there are considerable costs and subsequently savings associated.
   We process all of our planning comments through Public Access, which significantly reduces the processing time and recently we have been trialing the new Public Access system which we feel will reduce our processing time by between 50-75%.
   We now keep minimal records on our own planning register, relying on Public Access; our view is why should two public bodies keep the same information in two different places.
   Members engage with the system better. They are easily able to look at any comments already received, which in turn helps them to make material comments. In trialing the new system, they also welcome the direct linkages to the Council's mapping system.
   We still can request hard copies of applications. We do look at all the applications and make a judgment call on whether any applications would merit a paper copy. We now have a process whereby the "office spare" is sent to us and once we have finished with it, it is sent back to Shirehall

Our sector needs to embrace e-technology and this alongside email, facebook and twitter are things that we need to move towards. We can constantly argue that we haven't got the technology to support these types of initiatives; ultimately we will be left behind if we do that, this to the detriment of our residents and ratepayers. We also need to look at collective ways of working together so that our mutual processing costs can be driven down; we see this process is a significant contribution to driving down those costs.
Regards
Helen Ball

Ian Kilby
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