

Note: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the [PAS website](#).

Cheshire West and Chester Council – Pre-application support for householders

Summary   	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the disproportionate level of officer time used on householder applications post submission • Increase the take up for householder pre-application advice
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove charges for pre-application advice to householders
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages applicants to work with officers from an earlier stage • Provides an opportunity to higher quality schemes that are more likely to gain approval • Reduced the delays and costs associated with validation issues
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost/ benefit analysis showed the initiative to be beneficial, despite it seeming counterintuitive • It requires frontloading work, but this is generally offset by avoiding time that would normally be spent after submission on bringing the scheme up to standard

Introduction

Cheshire West and Chester Council found that a disproportionate amount of resource is used on householder applications post submission to ensure that they meet validation requirements; contributing to an already strained workload. This presents challenges to quality and delivery as the fee charged for householder application does not come close to reflecting the time that can be spent on them.

Previously, householder pre-application advice was charged for, the take up was low and a high proportion

of applications were invalid or refused. Applicants are generally reluctant to change their scheme following submission.

What they did

To address this, Cheshire West and Chester have stopped charging for pre-application advice on householder applications. The objective is to encourage applicants to work with officers from an earlier stage, before they are too advanced in their proposals. This early engagement also gives a stronger 'quality of service' message to applicants.

The new approach gives the service an opportunity to work with the applicant to create a higher quality scheme that is more likely to gain approval. The greater take up of the 'free' pre-application service has also reduced the delays and costs associated with validation issues. It requires frontloading work, but this is generally offset by avoiding time that would normally be spent after submission on bringing the scheme up to standard. In addition, the frontloading is likely to be more effective in improving quality as applicants are generally less resistant to making changes pre-submission (before they have paid the application fees and submitted final drawings etc.)

processing time helps to decipher the real benefits of providing (or indeed not providing) the service, which can be used to explain to others in the organisation to get them on board.

For now, in Cheshire West and Chester, the evidence suggests that this *is* working. The approach is delivering better schemes more aligned with the Council's objectives and is helping the Council to forge better relationships with its customers.

Results and Learning

Before removing the charge, a cost/benefit analysis was undertaken to compare the money received from the householder pre-application fees and the cost of work involved in resolving issues with householder applications. As the pre-application uptake was low, the money received from the fees does not cover the additional work often needed.

Removing the charge for pre-application advice seems counterintuitive in the current funding context and the team acknowledged difficulties in convincing those higher up in the Council to provide a service free of charge. This will be a discussion that continues as the approach is kept under review. Up-to-date evidence on the types of applications coming in and the