

7 January 2014

By E-Mail

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Comments by the Scottish Property Federation on the Pre-Application Advice Service in Edinburgh Consultation Document

1. The Scottish Property Federation (SPF) is a voice for the property industry in Scotland. We include among our members; property investors and developers, landlords of commercial and residential property, and professional property consultants and advisers. We have some 130 corporate members.
2. The SPF is happy for the Council to publish our comments and to share our views with other public authorities.

General Remarks

3. Before considering the specific questions relating to charging for a pre-application service we would be interested to know if the increases in planning fees from April 2013 were re-directed to the benefit of Edinburgh's planning service. We understand that the motivation for the proposals to charge for a pre-application service are to an extent motivated by a perception of a revenue gap between planning fee income and the cost of the planning service. If the evidence is that increased fees are not being directed to the benefit of the planning service they are derived from then we feel that we would have to caveat our comments below and in other planning consultations differently.
4. We have not completed the questionnaire but we have addressed some of the questions that are of most concern to our members as follows:

Question 6 - Our proposal is to provide a basic level free service called the Bronze Star Service. This may include one meeting and one written response. Further meetings will attract a charge.

Do you agree the principle of charging on this basis?

We would have to report that previous discussions with members have been largely negative about the prospect of paying for a pre-application service, or for pre-application meetings. However, this is not entirely uniform as is reported below.

Question 7 - If no, can you provide reasons?

In previous years the notion of pre-application service charges has had a negative response from our members. It has been suggested on occasion by some of our members that they might be content to pay for such a service at a modest level, but they do have strong concerns that there would be no actual tangible improvement in service.

There is concern about the sanctity of advice that will be received under the service. Members have noted experience of advice given by the Council changing following subsequent internal discussion and on some occasions a difference of opinion over what was actually agreed at pre-application meetings. The Council would have to be clear and upfront when issuing pre-application advice that was chargeable because the service expectations of applicants will certainly increase as a result of being asked to pay for advice.

A key concern of our members is that the new service should not be seen as a hindrance to new development being attracted to Edinburgh. Members already often pay very considerable costs 'up-front' on major planning applications, sometimes running into £100,000s. We feel that these costs are often forgotten by those who argue for major increases in the level of planning fees or other related charges. The service must be able to demonstrate that it will add value to the planning application service (for applicants) and therefore contribute positively to delivering sustainable development and the improvement of the efficiency of the planning service.

Question 8 - The proposed levels of charges are set out in the consultation document. Do you have views on whether they are set at the right level?

In the context of very large scale major developments our members have suggested that the proposed fees could be acceptable, depending on service received. However, we do draw the unfavourable comparison between the fees suggested for the Gold service and the level of fees that have been adopted by other Scottish planning authorities for pre-application meetings. We note that the proposals would be optional. In addition we do have concerns that this is likely to result in a much reduced service compared to for those who opt not to pay. They also are concerned that should the planning fees be increased in the future by the Scottish Government, then planning applications could be considerably higher in Edinburgh compared to other parts of Scotland and the wider UK for like-for-like applications. Our members are strongly of the view that the pre application fees should be reviewed if there is a subsequent rise in fees as set by the Scottish Government.

Question 9 - The City of Edinburgh Council is committed to providing a high standard of pre-application advice. However the costs are not met. Please indicate which solutions you would support:

- **reduce the pre-application service to concentrate only on major development**
- **improve the Council website so you can find the information without approaching the Council**
- **provide a basic pre-application advice service with more detailed advice available under a voluntary agreement at cost**

Our members would clearly support any move to improve the Council website to allow information to be found without approaching the Council. Our members may also support a basic pre-application advice service with more detailed advice available under a voluntary agreement at cost with the caveat set out in response to 8 above.

Question 11 - If you do have to pay for pre-application advice, what would you expect as part of your response?

Our members are strongly of the view that any chargeable advice issued by the Council should be definitive, clear, upfront, and timely. It should not be subject to change following internal discussion therefore any agreements made at the pre application meetings should be final. Ultimately there would need to be a tangible improvement in decision making times.

5. The SPF would be pleased to explain our comments in further detail if that would be helpful.

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