

COUNCILS UNDER PRESSURE

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It has been long reported about Council planning departments struggling under the pressure of a significant increase in applications yet facing budget cuts.

I have written on numerous occasions about the concern about resourcing of planning departments in councils. I recall times when I was a planning officer and felt overwhelmed at times at the high workload. We are now regularly hearing of officers have caseloads well in excess of 100. That is completely unsustainable and gives officers little chance of offering satisfactory let alone good service.

We all know that excellent service costs money. Unfortunately for Councils, their income is controlled by the Planning Application Regulations which are set by Government. The last increase was in 2017, which was the first in five years. The reality is application fees are insufficient to cover the actual cost of determining a planning application. Despite the government PPG stating:

“Planning-related fees were introduced so that users of the planning system, rather than taxpayers in general, meet the costs incurred by local planning authorities in deciding planning applications.”

In 2017, the government toyed with the idea of allowing councils to set their own application fees. Presumably spooked by the prospect of Councils seeking to charge much higher fees, the 2017 regulations

allowed for a general increase of 20%. With inflation averaging 2.9% since 2017 (BoE), the increase has slowly been eroded.

With little prospect of the government looking at fee structures again, Councils are having to turn to other strategies to either bolster their financial resources or cut costs.

Some Councils (Mole Valley etc) have taken steps to limit the workload to ensure officers focus on the delivery of determination of applications. This is through the removal of pre-application services. This is an extreme step and has other consequences for a crucial stage of the development process.

“A well-functioning pre-app service can reduce the risk for developers and promote positive placemaking by councils.”

We are aware that some councils have brought in consultants to manage pre-application submissions. While the service may be efficient, it does raise concerns about whether officers, when determining applications, will have much regard for such advice. Similarly, Guildford is currently utilising Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) for minor applications to increase fee income and cover the cost of external consultants.

We have also seen Councils charge administration fees for invalid applications. While this is unlikely to cover the costs of validation services, it does act as a deterrent to missing documents.

Are these going to solve the problems faced by planning departments? Unlikely.

Everyone recognises the need for additional funds but until the government bolsters local government budgets or allows another increase in application fees, Councils will be left fiddling around the edges to deliver the crucial service of planning service.