

Report of	Meeting	Date
Director of Partnerships, Planning and Policy (Introduced by the Executive Member for Planning and LDF)	Executive Member Decision	16 January 2014

NOTIFICATION OF DECISIONS ON PLANNING APPLICATIONS – CESSATION OF NOTIFICATION LETTERS TO CONTRIBUTORS (THOSE WHO COMMENT ON APPLICATIONS)

PURPOSE OF REPORT

- To approve the cessation of the notification of decisions made to those who comment on planning applications.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

- That the notification of decisions on planning applications to those who have made comments ceases immediately;
 - That officers be authorised to make the necessary changes to systems and procedures as outlined in this report, and manage the outstanding applications not yet determined or withdrawn by the operative date in accordance with this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF REPORT

- Following a review of procedures within the service, it is considered that it is expedient to cease the notification procedure where those who comment on planning applications are advised of the outcome of the application. This will result in annual savings of about £1,200.

Confidential report Please bold as appropriate	Yes	No
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Key Decision? Please bold as appropriate	Yes	No
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Reason Please bold as appropriate	1, a change in service provision that impacts upon the service revenue budget by £100,000 or more	2, a contract worth £100,000 or more
	3, a new or unprogrammed capital scheme of £100,000 or more	4, Significant impact in environmental, social or physical terms in two or more wards

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

(If the recommendations are accepted)

- To assist in the promotion of e-channel services and thereby reduce costs and assist in ensuring a sustainable financial position for the Council.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

5. An alternative option is not to cease the activity. However, benchmarking demonstrates that other Councils have taken the same approach with little impact on service delivery and reputation. The action will also support the migration of service delivery via e-channels.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

6. This report relates to the following Strategic Objectives:

Involving residents in improving their local area and equality of access for all		A strong local economy	
Clean, safe and healthy communities		An ambitious council that does more to meet the needs of residents and the local area	/

BACKGROUND

7. The Council determines approximately 1,100 planning applications per annum. Current practice is that anyone who makes a comment on an application (known as a contributor) is notified of the outcome i.e. whether the application is approved, refused, or withdrawn. This process is known as 'Decision Notification'.
8. If the contributor has provided an email address, this is recorded into our systems and the decision notification is issued electronically, but if there is no email address, the decision notification is issued as a hard copy letter. This activity therefore requires staff to expend resources in the form of time and materials in generating and printing letters, stationery and postage.

REVIEW

9. Current Practice

10. At the neighbour notification stage, neighbours are sent a hard copy of a letter, which details how a planning application can be viewed, how to make comments and so on. This letter also promised that if comments are made they will not be directly acknowledged or responded to, but that if they do make comments, then the outcome of the application will be notified to them. If an application is determined or withdrawn, each contributor is notified of the outcome, either by email (if an email address is provided and recorded) or by hard copy letter via post.
11. A benchmarking exercise has revealed that other local planning authorities (e.g. Blackburn, Burnley, Blackpool, South Ribble, Wyre, Lancashire County Council) as well as an external provider (Urban Vision) have already ceased this activity, with others only issuing electronic decision notifications to those who provide email addresses (e.g. Pendle).
12. The table below shows Decision Notification data since April 2011, which demonstrates an increasing migration to e-channel, but an average of about 1350 units per annum are still processed as hard copy distributed by post – this is generally using the standard TNT contract at second class rates. A positive aspect is that the proportion of email notifications is generally increasing, currently averaging at about a third.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Email</i>	<i>Email % age</i>	<i>Post Units</i>
2010/11	2139	389	18%	1750
2011/12	2027	588	29%	1439
2012/13	1620	774	48%	846
3 year total	5786	1751	30%	4035
3 year average	1929	584	30%	1345
2013/14 Estimate	2348	967	41%	1381
4 year total	8134	2718	33%	5416
4 year average	2034	679	33%	1355

13. Current Costs

14. The review found the following costs, based on 1,350 units per annum.

Cost Area	£	Total Cost
1 sided printed letter i.e. printing	£0.004	£5.40
Single sheet of A4 paper	£0.045	£60.75
Std letter size envelope	£0.0482	£65.07
Postage Second Class	£0.47	£634.50
Staffing (33.75 hours pa)	£13.03	£439.76
Total per annum		£1,205.48

15. Risks

16. The risks include an increase in complaint/enquiry handling and avoidable contact from customers who expect a notification of the decision, as well as reputational risk. However, current policy on neighbour notification does not allow for any response to be made by the Council in response to comments made, and therefore the approach could be considered as consistent. Moreover, other local planning authorities have made this change and their experience of the realisation of this risk is minimal.
17. The Planning Service will amend initial neighbour notification letters and web pages to highlight the new approach, and explain how interested parties can monitor the progress and outcome of the application process using e-channels and the front office. If the application is determined by the Development Control Committee, those who have commented on the application will be notified of that event, either by hard copy letter or by email. Customers will be directed to use the website/My Chorley function to register for updates on planning applications.
18. The service will need to manage the approach in notifying applications received before the operational date, but where the decision has not yet been made. Officers estimate at any one time there are approximately 200 applications 'on hand'. Officers will need to exercise their discretion in deciding whether to advise those who have commented that we will no longer inform them, or alternatively to continue to inform those who have commented in the current way. Such discretion will take account of the nature of the proposal and nature of comments made.

19. Conclusion

20. In the context of the Council's approach to increasing the range of services delivered via e-channels, to reduce costs, to respond to cuts in public sector funding, and ensure a more sustainable financial future, it is considered appropriate to cease this activity.

IMPLICATIONS OF REPORT

21. This report has implications in the following areas and the relevant Directors' comments are included:

Finance	/	Customer Services	
Human Resources		Equality and Diversity	
Legal		Integrated Impact Assessment required?	
No significant implications in this area		Policy and Communications	

COMMENTS OF THE STATUTORY FINANCE OFFICER

22. The proposal is in keeping with the Council's direction of travel to promote e-channel services and thereby reduce costs, and to ensure a sustainable financial future.

COMMENTS OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

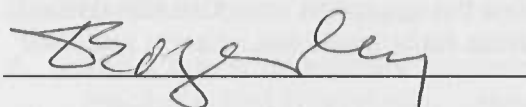
23. No further comments to add to this report.

LESLEY-ANN FENTON
DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS, PLANNING & POLICY

There are no background papers to this report.

Report Author	Ext	Date	Doc ID
Jennifer Moore Head of Planning Services	5571	10 January 2014	***

Following careful consideration and assessment of the contents of this report, I approve the recommendation(s) contained in Paragraph 2 of the report in accordance with my delegated power to make executive decisions.



Dated: 16 January 2014

Councillor Dennis Edgerley
Executive Member Planning & LDF