

SPECIALIST ADVICE SERVICES FOR PLANNING

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' views on the arrangements for the delivery of Specialist advice to the Planning Division by the County Council from 2005/06.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At present, the County Council has two Specialist Teams of Officers that provide advice to the District Council on Archaeology, Listed Buildings and the Built Environment, particularly Urban Design.
- 2.2 The County has reviewed its arrangements for service provision and, whilst it is accepted that some functions will rightly remain the responsibility of the County Council, has concluded that funding for Specialist advice can no longer be justified unless District Councils make a financial contribution to the overall costs.

3 CURRENT SERVICES

- 3.1 There are three areas where Rochford receives advice from County Council Officers: Archaeology, Listed Buildings and Urban Design.

3.2 Archaeology

At present, the weekly Parish List of applications received is sent to County Archaeology, where the List is checked and a request made for further information in respect of all applications which will have a potential impact on the historic environment.

- 3.3 Archaeological advice is provided to Rochford's Planners and a brief detailing archaeological requirements may be prepared. The Archaeologists will then agree a written scheme of investigation, monitor work on site and publish funds and records.

3.4 Listed Buildings

A Specialist Officer is allocated to examine and comment on all Listed Building and Conservation Area applications. The Officer visits the Rochford Planning Department every week, discusses applications, visits sites and attends meetings with agents and applicants.

- 3.5 In addition, the Officer is available to provide on-going advice as works are undertaken to a Listed Building (35-39 West Street, for example).

3.6 Urban Design

An Architect/Urban Designer is available to comment on more significant Town Centre or larger housing schemes. Advice is provided at pre-application stage as well as during the assessment of applications.

- 3.7 In addition to these three specific areas of work, the County also maintains a comprehensive heritage conservation record (the Essex Heritage Conservation Record), which provides details of important sites and buildings.

4 SERVICE COSTS

- 4.1 The County Council has monitored the statistics for the last five years and concluded that for Rochford the full costs on an annual basis are as follows:-

Specialist Archaeological Advice	£ 6,379
Listed Building Advice	£12,360
Maintenance of EHCR	£ 2,866
Urban Design Advice	£ 3,424

- 4.2 The basis of the County Council's funding proposal from 2005/06 on an initial 3 year agreement, is for the costs of service provision to be divided on a 50 : 50 split between the two Authorities. On that basis, the annual cost to Rochford would be £12,014 (plus any annual pay increase).

5 DISCUSSION

- 5.1 There is no doubt that Rochford, along with other Districts in the County, has been able to use the Specialist services provided by the County Council to great advantage.
- 5.2 In Rochford, the availability of Officers specialising in archaeology, listed buildings and urban design has meant that such specialists have not been required as permanent posts within the Planning Department. The importance of specialist advice on these matters to the delivery of a planning service that seeks to protect the historic environment and provide new high quality development cannot be underestimated.
- 5.3 The County has made it clear that a decision has been taken to reduce the support given to District Councils for specialist services from 2005/06, unless there is a financial contribution that reflects the value of the service delivered.
- 5.4 As stated above, there is no doubt whatsoever that specialist advice is required, in order to deliver a quality planning service in Rochford. That

having been said, are there any alternatives to purchasing Specialist advice from the County Council?

- 5.5 It would, of course, be possible to employ a Conservation Officer and an Urban Designer in the Planning Department. These are though specialist areas of work and Members will appreciate that salary levels for such posts, plus on-costs, would be considerable. This is not considered a realistic option.
- 5.6 Another alternative would be to employ external Consultants, as and when required. However, the value of the service currently provided by the County Council is that all applications are automatically checked and input is then provided as a matter of course. There is no requirement to make arrangements to appoint Consultants. The expectation, as now, is that advice would be available as and when required.
- 5.7 Overall then, it seems that if Specialist advice is to continue to be provided to deliver the Planning service in Rochford, the best option would be an agreement with the County, as outlined in this report. Of course, in reality, the best option would be for County to continue to deliver these services to District Councils free of any charge, but that seems unlikely given the approach now made.

6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The County Council is proposing a three year contract for the delivery of Specialist advice. The cost in year 1 (2005/06) would be £12,014 plus 2.5% to take account of any pay increases. Therefore, the cost of the contract over three years would be as follows:

Year 1	£12,315
Year 2	£12,623
Year 3	£12,939

Total £37,877

- 6.2 No funding is currently available to cover the cost of this proposal and Members will need to consider whether to include provision in the Budget for 2005/06 and thereafter.

7 RISK IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Strategic Risk

The availability of specialist advice on archaeology, listed buildings and urban design is a key requisite for the proper protection of the historic environment of the district and to ensure that new development is of the highest design quality. The district council has a duty to ensure that it properly delivers the

requirements of planning legislation and policy advice on the historic environment.

8 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The planning system provides a framework of legislation and protection for the environment of the district. It is essential that appropriate advice and specialist input is available to enable the district council to fully deliver its obligations to protect and enhance the environment to the benefit of all residents now and in the future.

9 RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 It is proposed that, subject to Members comments, the Committee **RESOLVES** to include the costs for a three-year contract for the provision of specialist advice services to planning in the draft budget for 2005/06.

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Background Papers:

Letter from Essex County Council dated 13 May 2004.

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