

# Strategic Planning, Sustainability and Transportation Committee

11 April 2017

Is the final decision on the recommendations in this report to be made at this meeting?

**No**

## E-Planning – Parish Copies of Applications

<b>Final Decision-Maker</b>	Rob Jarman
<b>Lead Head of Service</b>	Rob Jarman – Head of Planning (MBC)
<b>Lead Officer and Report Author</b>	Ryan O’Connell
<b>Classification</b>	Public
<b>Wards affected</b>	All parished

### **This report makes the following recommendations:**

That the Committee note the decision to remove hardcopies to parishes will be implemented with effect from 1 April 2018. With parishes provided with hardcopies only, from June 2017 to 31 March 2018; and

That training will be offered to parishes on the use of the website and electronic facilities (such as subscriptions) and offered support with bids to National Lottery funding to help Parishes manage the transition to electronic planning.

### **This report relates to the following corporate priorities:**

- Keeping Maidstone Borough an attractive place for all
- Securing a successful economy for Maidstone Borough

### **Timetable**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Strategic Planning Sustainability & Transportation Committee	11 April 2017

# E-Planning - Parish Copies of Applications

## 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of how the implementation of the decision to remove hardcopies from parishes will be handled, having taken into account the feedback from the Committee at its previous meeting.
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## 2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Mid Kent Planning Support is in the process of delivering its electronic planning project. This is part of the original vision for the service agreed by the council and is driving changes to achieve an efficient and modern planning service.
- 2.2 The most efficient way for applicants to submit, and MKPS to receive, applications is via the planning portal (i.e. electronically) as they are entered into our systems automatically which in turn is good for the general public and other organisations as the information is made available via the website easily. We currently receive 70% of applications through the planning portal. The more applications we drive through this route the better for turnaround times, cost and transparency. With the exception that all printing requirements fall on the Council for applications submitted this way. In order to maximise efficiency it is therefore crucial that we reduce the printing requirements in MKPS.
- 2.3 Copies are provided to parishes as historically the planning process was done entirely with paper applications. The planning register was kept in paper format and the regulations governing planning were geared towards paper submission. Crucially this included a requirement for applicants to submit 4 copies of an application (since reduced to 3 copies) in hardcopy. One of which went on the register and another was provided to parishes.
- 2.4 However, planning has evolved over time and since the turn of the century electronic planning has accelerated in its use across the country. Regulations now specifically refer to electronic submissions and communications and applicants have the option of submitting electronically via the national planning portal. There is no requirement for applicants to submit hardcopies of applications any more if they submit them electronically.
- 2.5 Alongside the submission of applications, the process of consulting on applications, with statutory and discretionary consultees, has also moved to an electronic process. All consultees with the exception of parishes are required to look at applications electronically and then provide us with their views. Those consultees do not receive support from MBC in order to discharge their duties to input into the planning application process.
- 2.6 Many other planning authorities have ceased the provision of hardcopies to parish councils as part of the shift towards electronic planning, delivering efficiencies and the national trend towards more interactions and

involvement online. This is applicable to all areas of planning, including the handling of appeals with the planning inspectorate.

### 3. Printing Costs and Savings

- 3.1 The production of hardcopies of planning applications for parish councils is a significant proportion of the printing requirements of MKPS and the aim is to reduce Maidstone’s proportion of print cost by an estimated £20k, plus the postage of Maidstone’s parish copies costs of around £4k a year.
- 3.2 It was also envisaged that MKPS would drive paperless process improvements across the planning service as a whole. Implementing significant change across two planning departments and MKPS is difficult and requires clear outcomes to be identified for staff and customers. If printing reductions are not delivered this significantly undermines one of the key outcomes and puts the programme of change at risk including associated savings, performance improvements and service delivery for customers.
- 3.3 In the short term if the changes to printing and postage are not delivered then planned savings from running costs will not be deliverable. MKPS would need to find a reduction of £42k in costs from staffing only (roughly 2 FTE of Planning Support Officer posts) without a reduction in workload from printing. This would reduce service resilience and impact performance.

### 4. Barriers, Issues and Feedback

- 4.1 The main barrier identified by parishes in 2014 was poor quality broadband and lack of facilities in meeting venues for some parishes. This is an issue that has also been raised elsewhere nationally and has not prevented parishes from responding to consultations. There are a number of solutions available to this that will be discussed with those parishes where this is an issue.

**Table 1**

<b>Barriers to working electronically</b>	<b>Possible solutions</b>
Do not have broadband connections in the places where the meetings are held	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If parish own premises, and broadband is available, install</li> <li>• If don’t own, collaborate with owner to share cost and install</li> <li>• Could move meetings to alternative venue that has broadband</li> <li>• Could download documents (laptop, USB stick, or CD) prior to meeting and work offline at the meeting</li> <li>• Could purchase a mobile accessible dongle so that internet can be accessed during the meetings as / when required</li> </ul>
Cost of purchasing PC/laptop, screen, projector and broadband connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The case is based on how much can be saved in admin, printing, postage &amp; storage costs</li> <li>• Parish councils could collaborate to jointly purchase equipment</li> <li>• Neighbouring parishes could share equipment, hold meetings on different days</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could bid for funds, the equipment could also benefit other community groups</li> </ul>
On-going cost of maintaining the equipment and broadband rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could hire out the equipment</li> <li>• Could share the facilities and equipment with neighbouring parish</li> </ul>
Some parish clerks and councillors lack the IT skills to process the information into a parish meeting format / download the documents / know what is the best way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could request guidance from MKPS</li> <li>• Could request help from any parishes that have the skills</li> <li>• Could request training from any IT literate local residents</li> <li>• Could buy in training</li> <li>• Could buy in training with neighbouring parishes to share cost</li> <li>• Could use online tutorials for information and training</li> </ul>
Some parish councillors don't have access to broadband at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could use the parish equipment</li> <li>• Could use the public library</li> <li>• Could use neighbours' / friends' / other councillors' computer</li> </ul>
Broadband speed can be slow in some parishes, some locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could set up parish meetings to work off-line</li> <li>• Could allow plenty of time for downloading documents</li> <li>• Could only download some of the documents</li> </ul>
Having to set up the equipment for the meetings at the venue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should only take 5-10 mins to set up once practiced</li> <li>• Use online tutorials &amp; internet search for instructions</li> </ul>

4.2 A version of this report was considered by SPS&T Committee on 7 February 2017. The committee raised the following main issues with the proposals:

- This would create a burden on parishes for printing where they relied on volunteers and a limited number of paid hours
- Practical issues such as, it was not possible to get a group of people, including the public, round a small screen to look at applications
- The timing was unfair on parishes as they had already supplied their precept requirements to MBC for 2017/18 and could not therefore raise additional revenue to deal with this issue.
- Not all parishes had sufficient technology/broadband to be able to adapt to this change.

4.3 The committee originally requested to take the decision on ceasing printing of parish copies themselves, but given the delegation to officers were unable to do so. This report is therefore going back to committee to inform them how the committee's views have been taken into account.

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## **5. DECISION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

- 5.1 The committee's views have been taken into account and have changed the proposed implementation of ceasing the provision of hardcopies of applications to parish councils.
  - 5.2 The timetable has been adjusted such that copies will cease entirely from 1 April 2018. With an interim arrangement from June 2017 where thin files, plans only, will be provided to parishes.
  - 5.3 There are many positives from working electronically and having the equipment necessary to display applications. Training is therefore proposed to help parishes maximise the benefits of Public Access, and working electronically with planning.
  - 5.4 National Lottery funding is available for parishes to bid for as well, whilst this is for parishes to determine whether they want to or not, we will discuss the possibility of helping them with any bids should they wish.
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## **6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK**

- 6.1 A consultation was carried out with parishes in 2014 which demonstrated that parishes could adapt to operating electronically only for planning applications, but some individual parishes may need bespoke support.
  - 6.2 The feedback from the committee meeting on 7 February 2017 is set out in the body of the report and has been taken into account in the new implementation.
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## **7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION**

- 7.1 KALC will be informed of the changes and a letter sent to parish councils to inform them that hardcopies of applications would cease, and set a date (1 April 2018). Parishes will be notified of training sessions that they can book onto to be run before thin files start in June 2017. Communications will remain open with parishes up until 1 April 2018 in case bespoke support can be offered (for example helping with bids for funding, or further training).
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## 8. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Implications</b>	<b>Sign-off</b>
<b>Impact on Corporate Priorities</b>	An efficient planning service impacts on all corporate priorities	Head of Planning and MKPS Mgr
<b>Risk Management</b>	There are always risks arising from implementing changes the main risk mitigation approach being to allow time for parish councils to adjust to the change with advanced notice.	Head of Planning and MKPS Mgr
<b>Financial</b>	One aim of this change is to deliver savings towards each Council's MTFS.	S151
<b>Staffing</b>	Staff time would be saved in reducing printing of parish copies. This would then be considered alongside other savings delivered in the MKPS Improvement plan for realisation as actual savings through reduction in FTE.	MKPS Mgr
<b>Legal</b>	There is no legal requirement for parishes to be provided hardcopies of applications but the changes need to be practicable and made in accordance with the parish charter.	MKPS Mgr
<b>Equality Impact Needs Assessment</b>	The change is being applied to parishes and is not considered to disproportionately impact on any particular group. Specific requirements for hardcopies of documents will be dealt with under the usual means of access for those with disabilities or difficulties accessing the electronic planning register.	MKPS Mgr
<b>Environmental/Sustainable Development</b>	Printing less documents produces less paper and print waste.	MKPS Mgr
<b>Community Safety</b>	None directly	
<b>Human Rights Act</b>	None directly	
<b>Procurement</b>	None directly	
<b>Asset Management</b>	None directly	

## **9. REPORT APPENDICES**

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

None.

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## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None.