



UNISON Scotland response: Planning Performance and Fees. February 2020

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members in planning teams across Scotland's local authorities. We are able to collate members' work experiences in order to contribute to improved policy making. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on planning performance and fees.

Response

UNISON has been raising concerns about problems in planning departments for some time. We published papers based on surveys of members about the issues as long ago as 2013. Many of the current "performance issues" in the system are caused by budget cuts and staff shortages. Local government budgets have been decimated. UNISON's series of Damage reports¹ allow readers to hear directly from a range of workers in local government about the pressures they are under trying to maintain service levels under austerity.

Staff levels across planning have departments decreased by approximately 20% compared to 2009. Local government budgets continue to be squeezed. Planning revenue spending has fallen 21%² since 2010/11: one of the largest reductions in local government. Not only have posts been lost but as it is senior staff who tend to volunteer for redundancy there is a loss of experience and expertise. Many local authority planners already feel that they are overpowered by the resources that big developers can bring to bear when trying to get approval for their plans. The pay freeze means that the declining value of the staff's pay in comparison to the planning and legal consultants wielded by the developers also undermines their morale in an already highly pressured situation. Planners often feel under siege with individual members of the public, community groups and developers placing pressure on them as individuals. They report that communication is often very hostile and aggressive towards them personally. All of these combine to make it very difficult to recruit and retain staff adding further pressure to the workloads of remaining staff.

Members are therefore concerned that increasing the links of funding to performance risks an unstoppable downward spiral where problems caused by budget cuts lead to more budget cuts and therefore worse performance.

Changes to the fees structure

Members generally welcome the proposed changes to the fees structure mainly as a route to increased resources for their teams. Many favour "full costs recovery" where those using the planning system pay the full cost of the process. On major developments the work done by local government officers e.g. planners, roads, environmental health is in effect as a public subsidy to the development industry as the application fees never match the costs incurred by the local authority.

There is a general feeling that the changes to the charging regime could have been bolder and could have brought more opportunities to raise income to fund planning teams. There are some areas where fees could be higher still in order to cover the cost of

¹ <https://unison-scotland.org/campaigns/public-works/damage/>

² Improvement Service: National Benchmarking overview report 2018-19 page 11

the service. So members supported the removal or the raising of some of the maximum fees proposed.

Charging for *Local Reviews* is popular among members. This is currently a free service but carries significant costs for the local authority including time for a manager and two senior planners and committee support staff. Members felt that they needed more detail regarding charging for the E-planning site for example what service the helpline will be offering e.g. website specific only or Scottish government legislation and regulations?

There was support for the proposed minor reduction for smaller scale householder works if higher charges are placed elsewhere. This is proportionate to the work involved and the relative wealth of those making the applications.

There is considerable scope to simplify the fees structure, including the merging of some categories, the removal (or considerable reduction) of tiered fees within categories and more consistency in fee levels across the categories. This would significantly simplify the system and reduce errors to benefit customer service. A simpler system is also easier and cheaper to collect.

UNISON also welcomes the inclusion of the various discretionary charges. There was a request for more clarity on the acceptability of charging for other services by planning authorities e.g. for pre-application advice. The allowance for such discretionary charging could be more explicit. Each council should be able set their own fee levels to take account of their circumstances and the level of service that they will provide.

UNISON believes there needs to be more and much stronger statements included which clearly state the role of planning decisions and charges in achieving emission reductions targets. It is not clear, for example, how the proposed charges for oil and gas exploration sit alongside the Scottish government's Climate Change Act and Climate Emergency declaration. UNISON would also like to see stronger links to the government's health and wellbeing outcomes in the new regime with, for example, the possible waiving of fees to encourage change of land use for more allotments and community growing spaces to support increased local food production.

Conclusion

UNISON welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation regarding planning performance and fees. We are generally supportive of the proposal but feel that the government could be bolder in terms of ensuring that businesses in particular contribute more towards the costs of their developments to local authorities and the wider community. Planning teams must be properly resourced. Punishing perceived poor performance with further budget cuts risks a downward spiral of performance. It will not drive improvement.

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January 2020

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