

Policy and Resources Committee	
Meeting Date	17 June 2026
Report Title	PlanX Software - approach to Service Charge
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Head of Service	Joanne Johnson Head of Place
Lead Officer	Carly Stoddart Digital Improvement Manager
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. That the Committee recommends to Full Council that the service charge for PlanX is applied in accordance with paragraph 2.9 of this report.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

1.1 The Planning Service has recently been successful in its bid to receive £23,500 of funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to purchase a subscription to PlanX, a bespoke development management platform which helps accelerate the digitisation of planning data and services, with benefits for customer service and staff time. PlanX provides Local Planning Authorities with the ability to offer digital services to customers utilising open data giving more accurate and quicker responses to customer queries in accordance with the Government's Local Digital Declaration, that is supported by Swale Borough Council as signatory, and the principles of the Council's own Data Quality Standard.

1.2 The Planning Service has chosen to use the PlanX platform as it simplifies planning processes for customers, using open-source data which can:

- Reduce confusion
- Improve access to services and information
- Increase self-service access to information
- Reduce reliance on phone and in person support
- Reduce waiting time
- Result in more efficient use of resources by allowing greater focus on planning activities
- Improve transparency

It would also enable the Planning Service to align with neighbouring and other Local Planning Authorities in Kent such as Maidstone, Canterbury and Medway who are also either already using or are in the onboarding process for using PlanX.

1.3 To enable continued use of services delivered through PlanX in future years, the platform includes a service charge paid for by the customer which contributes to the maintenance of the platform and to discounts on the annual subscription going forward. The service charge is set up so that it would be applied to submitted

applications and/or service requests, such as requests for pre-application advice and requests to submitted amendments or further information in relation to live applications, that have a fee of £100 or more. For example, a request for pre-application advice for householder development proposal would be the current fee + the service charge. A proportion of this service charge is then applied as discount towards the renewal of the annual subscription. The Council can choose to opt in or opt out of this service charge.

- 1.4 The application of the service charge would make a significant contribution to the annual subscription cost, enabling continued provision of digitally supported services for our customers in accordance with our commitment to improving digital service delivery. This aligns with the Corporate Plan as it would enable the Planning Service to operate more cost effectively and deliver services in a transparent, responsible and efficient way.
- 1.5 This report sets out the benefits of opting in to the service charge.

2 Background

- 2.1 As part of their commitment to delivering the ambitions of the Digital Declaration, MHCLG works with Councils and industry experts as partners through the Open Digital Planning (ODP) community to develop products that are designed to improve the delivery of planning services through digital transformation. PlanX has been developed through ODP by Local Planning Authorities along with the product development company, Open Systems Lab (OSL) as a platform to deliver a wide range of services using open data provided by the relevant Council to a set standard that is consistent with other Local Authorities.
- 2.2 MHCLG is supporting the implementation of PlanX to assist Councils with the delivery of multiple digital services in a transparent, efficient and effective way for customers. The services created within the platform utilise spatial data provided by the Council to the required standard that is consistent with other Councils, allowing planning constraints relevant to a specific property to be checked. This improves the current situation for the customer as it provides for a more accurate, location specific response to enquiries in one place, as well as allowing connections and links through to other follow up services that the customer may like to follow.
- 2.2 Having received the grant funding from MHCLG, the Council is currently in the onboarding process for the implementation of PlanX. As part of that process, the Council needs to decide whether it opts in or opts out of applying the service charge. The annual subscription for PlanX depends on the size of the Council (based on the number of applications received last year) and whether it opts in or out of applying the service charge. Currently, the costs are as follows:

Table 1: Opt-in to Service Charge

Initial subscription fee	£15,000
Service charges	A service charge of £40 + VAT is applied on applications that have a service fee of £100 or more. Some of these service charges count as a discount towards the next renewal cost of PlanX. The more people using the services, the less PlanX costs. Ultimately, the goal is for PlanX to be able to pay for itself.
Estimated renewal costs	Depending on the number of service charges collected, it is estimated that the future renewal cost might be: £8,400 - £8,900 This is based on latest available data from planning authorities using PlanX.

Table 2: Opt out of Service Charge

Initial subscription fee	£25,000
Service charges	Authorities can choose to opt out of service charges for a £10k fee in addition to the subscription cost. No discounts will be applied to any future subscriptions.
Estimated renewal costs	With service charges opted out, no discounts are applied. The renewal cost will be: £25,000

- 2.3 By opting into the service fee, the subscription fee for subsequent years is substantially lower than when opting out given that the service charge contributes to a discount. The Council is to use £15,000 of the £23,500 MHCLG grant to pay for the first year subscription and would then be able to use the remaining £8,500 grant money towards all or a substantial part of the second year subscription fee.
- 2.4 For the purposes of moving towards obtaining funds to maintain the annual subscription after the first year, officers are seeking to transfer the Council's existing fee charging pre-application advice service as one of the initial services to be delivered through the PlanX platform, with other fee paying services to follow. This is to be provided alongside guidance services, such as 'find out if you need

planning permission' which are free of charge to the customer. By introducing a fee charging service early on and opting into the service charge, it allows for funds to be built up contributing to a larger discount towards the subscription fee the following year. Whilst it is acknowledged by officers that the pre-application advice fee paying service alone will not generate enough of a discount to cover the entire cost of the subscription next year, this will be supplemented as stated above using the remaining £8,500 from the MHCLG grant.

- 2.5 As set out in the table 1 above, the result of opting in to the service charge would mean there would be an additional £40+VAT (£48) added to the existing fee for any fee charging service. This service charge is a fixed charge applicable to any fee that the Council has set at £100 or more. The service charge does not adjust relative to the overall fee for the applicable Council service.
- 2.6 In relation to the pre-application advice service, this would mean the service charge would be added on to most categories for pre-application advice as set out below in Tables 3 & 4 (Existing Pre-application advice and post-decision advice fee schedules).

Existing Pre-application advice and post-decision advice fee schedules

Table 3: Pre-application advice fees, inclusive of VAT.

Householder Pre-App – £360.00 Site visit at officer discretion Minor Developments Pre-App – £989.50 A minor development is one where any of the following applies: • Includes between 1 to 9 dwellings. • Covers up to 0.5 hectares. • Commercial development less than 1,000 square metres Major Developments Pre-App – £3,545.50 A major development is one where any of the following applies: • Includes between 10 to 49 houses or flats. • Covers between 0.51 to 2 hectares. • Commercial development between 1,000 to 4,999 square metres Large Major Developments Pre-App – £5,395.50 A large major development is one where any of the following applies:

- Includes 50 - 249 houses or flats.
- Covers between 2.1 to 5 hectares.
- Commercial development between 5,000 to 9,999 square metres

Strategic Major Development Pre-App - £6,500 + Discounted PPA (see separate fee schedule for PPAs)

- Includes 250+ houses or flats.
- Covers more than 5 hectares.
- Commercial development of 10,000 square metres or more

Other Fees

Listed Building (householder) – written advice only – you will pay £150.00.

Heritage & Urban Design attendance at meeting (PER HOUR) – £260.00

NB: the Listed Building and the Heritage and Urban Design fees are in addition to those above, however written advice will continue to be provided on a case-by-case basis.

Any other advice not set out above – meeting and or written at officer discretion - hourly rates– price on application.

*** Parish Councils, Voluntary Organisations, National Charities or Charities that are not ‘not-for-profit’** will be charged at 50% of the above pre-application advice fee

Design Review – To be advised at the time of request

Admin Fee – An admin fee of £75 will be applied to any refund that may have been agreed due to exceptional circumstances.

Table 4: Post decision and follow-up pre-application advice fees

Advice	Suggested Fee
Follow up advice – minor amendments to a proposal following initial advice.	Hourly rate – to be calculated at submission and worked out depending on the amendment or can be invoiced after and could be charged at an hourly rate or part thereof
Post decision advice – refusal	50% of relevant pre-app fee
Amendments to an approved scheme	Hourly rate – to be calculated at submission and worked out depending on the amendment or can be invoiced after

	and could be charged at an hourly rate or part thereof
Discharge of conditions	Hourly rate – to be calculated at submission and worked out depending on the number of conditions and what they cover or can be invoiced after and could be charged at an hourly rate or part thereof

- 2.7 Whilst this will be an increase in cost for customers, it will make a significant contribution to improved self-service for all planning customers but particularly when used in conjunction with guidance services such as, ‘find out if you need planning permission’. Guidance services such as this enables a more comprehensive check of individual sites in one place on our website compared to the service the Council currently provides. Through the PlanX platform, relevant checks for the type of development proposed are made of constraints such as whether the site sits within a conservation area, is a listed building, if there is a TPO and if an Article 4 Direction is in place. Currently, customers would need to know to check these constraints and would have to make those checks in multiple places.
- 2.8 Should they wish to progress and continue the journey following use of a guidance service such as the ‘find out if you need planning permission’, the customer is easily directed to relevant onward services, some of which will be fee paying services, such as ‘apply for pre-application advice’ where the service charge would apply. Linking services in this way makes it easier for the customer to navigate through what can often be confusing and/or complex planning rules in one place within the Council’s website. The linking of services provides a more convenient and easier way of making requests and may also increase uptake of fee paying services such as seeking pre-application advice.
- 2.9 It is anticipated that in addition to requests for pre-application advice, all other fee paying planning services be delivered through PlanX where possible. These services would also be subject to the service charge as described above. It is recommended the Council’s website be updated to clearly state the service charge will be applied as an addition to the stated fee. This would need to be clearly stated in relation to each fee paying service as and when they are delivered through PlanX.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 That the Committee recommends to Full Council that the service charge for PlanX is applied in accordance with paragraph 2.9 of this report.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 To opt in and apply the service charge but adjust the existing pre-application advice fees and other non-statutory services with fees, such as the submission of amendments and further information, down by £48 for the current set fees. This would result in the service charge being absorbed into the existing fee total so ultimately although the customer would see a service charge applied, it would result in no change in terms of what they are currently paying. For the fees calculated by the hourly rate, this would need to be calculated upon request as is currently the case, but officers would need to minus the service charge from the total. This process would need to be clearly stated on the Council's website.
- 4.2 Officers have not recommended this option as the pre-application advice fees and other non-statutory services with fees have not been updated in this new financial year and currently remain the same as last year. The submission of pre-application advice requests for the period of 01/04/2024 - 31/03/2025 and 01/04/2025 – 31/03/2026 was stable at 141 and 140 requests across each of the two financial years respectively despite fee increases being applied within those years. On this basis it is considered that the application of the service fee to provide for improved, more accurate and efficient services is reasonable and justified. Not taking this approach would also create a budget pressure for subscription costs for year three onwards.
- 4.3 To opt in and apply the service charge but adjust the existing pre-application advice fees and other non-statutory services with fees such as the submission of amendments and further information, down by £48 for the current set fees for pre-app advice requests related to householder development only and for the submission of amendments and further information related to applications where the fee is currently under £299 only. The £48 that would be lost on these fees could be absorbed elsewhere by adjusting other fees. Again, this would result in the service charge being absorbed into the existing fee total for these smaller fee charging services so ultimately although the customer would see a service charge applied, it would result in no change in terms of what they are currently paying. There would be an increase in fees for larger application types.
- 4.4 Officers have not recommended this option for the reasons set out in 4.2, it is complicated and the service fee is linked to the use of PlanX rather than the value of the service.
- 4.5 To opt out of the service charge. This is not recommended as the Council would need to fund an additional £1,500 towards the first year subscription and would not benefit from any discounts on subscription fees for subsequent years. This would create an immediate budget pressure, as well as being required to fund the ongoing cost of £25,000 each year, which is currently unbudgeted.
- 4.6 To apply the service charge proportionately and relative to the different levels of fee within each fee paying services. Officers have not recommended this approach as it not possible under the PlanX payment structure.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 The proposal to opt in to the service charge has been discussed informally with senior officers.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The proposals would align with the Corporate Plan as it would enable the Planning Service to better operate within its resources whilst delivering the service in a transparent and efficient way.
Financial, Resource and Property	The proposal to opt in to the service charge means a lower subscription charge within the first year that is well below the £23,500 grant funding. Applying the service charge results in a discount to the following year's subscription which combined with the remaining £8,500 of grant funding means the subscription for year two will be either substantially or fully covered. It is anticipated that further fee paying planning services are introduced at the earliest opportunity during the first two years to ensure the use of PlanX becomes self funded. The improvements for customers in terms of access to more accurate information and for them to self serve leads to efficiencies in the use of officer time.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	The provision of a planning function and processing applications made to the Planning Service is a statutory requirement. However, other services such as the provision of pre-application and post-decision advice, are discretionary elements of the planning function that already occurs within Swale. In accordance with Section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003 and Section 3 of the Localism Act 2011, the suggested approach to opt in to the service charge to recover costs associated with this work is lawful and has no other legal implications. The contract will be procured via the GCloud framework which is compliant with Contract Standing Orders. The contract will be drawn up using terms and conditions which have been approved by Mid Kent Legal Services and Finance. The benefit of applying the service charge for use of PlanX will result in the annual subscription ultimately being paid for in future

	years, therefore not drawing on the Council's budget. The service charge is considered reasonable and proportionate. The use of PlanX and its use of open-source data contributes to the provision of digital services and improving accessibility. The PlanX product has been innovatively developed between the product developer and Local Planning Authorities to achieve faster, more efficient services. Improved and more accessible data provided in a format consistent across many Local Planning Authorities results in greater opportunities for customers to access a more cost-effective, inclusive and transparent Planning Service. The use of digital workflows supports NPPS objectives around public sector innovation and modernisation and resilience in digital infrastructure.
Crime and Disorder	There are no implications for crime and disorder.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	Opting in to the service charge for PlanX would not result in any direct implications in respect of the environment and the climate/ecological emergency.
Health and Wellbeing	There are no implications for health and wellbeing.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	There are no implications for the safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	There is a risk to the image of the Council arising from the introduction of a service fee that is adding more cost for applicants. However, the introduction of a fee for this service is comparable to the Planning Portal in terms of there being a service fee, difference being, the fee for the PlanX platform is that it is cheaper. It is considered that the benefits of opting into the service fee will outweigh the limited additional costs. The benefits of improved access to data and services may have positive reputational benefits. No Health and Safety issues are anticipated.
Equality and Diversity	None at this stage.

Privacy and Data Protection	None at this stage.
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7 Appendices

7.1 None

8 Background Documents

8.1 Local Digital Declaration
[Link: Read the Local Digital Declaration | Local Digital](#)