

## **Review of the Operation of the Planning Service at the Edenbridge Local Office**

### **Summary**

This report proposes the closure of Planning Service at the Edenbridge Local Office on the grounds of very low demand and inefficient use of Officer time.

### **Background**

The Council maintains a local office at Edenbridge, which provides a planning service with an Officer present one morning a fortnight. The office is also used on a weekly basis by Benefits.

The present level of service was introduced in response to a report to Environment Select and Cabinet in December 2007 at which time the Swanley service was closed in view of the low level of use (12 visits over seven sessions) and the Edenbridge service was reduced from weekly to fortnightly (based on an average of nine visitors per session). There are no other local offices in the District.

Since then use of the Edenbridge service has declined and to date in 2011/12 there has been an average of only 1.78 visitors per session with no visitors at all in the last four sessions (see appendix for details).

The decline is almost certainly due to increased use of the internet to obtain planning information. The majority of people who have visited were making pre application enquiries, a service that is no longer offered at the main office without appointment and a significant proportion of these people are not from Edenbridge. Only a few enquiries are for planning history searches or from people just wanting to look at live applications. There is no evidence of any concentrations of enquiries from particular groups.

Attendance at the local office diverts a significant amount of Officer time from other work and can no longer be justified in view of the low level of attendance.

### **Proposal**

To cease providing a planning service from the Edenbridge Local Office at the end of the calendar year.

### **Options**

The alternative is to keep the office open but this is not recommended due to the lack of any significant customer benefit based on the very low level of use and the cost and planning officer time involved in maintaining the service.

### **Key Implications**

#### Financial

Development Services currently contributes to the salary of the receptionist who works also provides support for Benefits. This would cease and the annual saving the Development Services budget is £2,100.

#### Resources (non financial)

Closure would enable more effective use of staff resources

#### Sustainability Implications

Given the very low number of users and the availability of information on-line, there is no evidence to suggest that the closure of the office will result in any significant increase in the number or length of journeys by people accessing Council services

#### Equality Impact

There is no evidence that the use of the office is focussed on any particular group or consequently that its closure would adversely affect any particular group. Edenbridge Town Council also make plans available at their offices.

#### Risk Assessment

Given the very low number of users it is not considered that there are any significant risks associated with closure.

### **Appendix: Data on Use of the Edenbridge Local Office in 2011/12**

#### **2011**

20/1 - 2 visitors

3/2 - 2 visitors

17/2 - 1 visitor

3/3 - 2 visitors

17/3 - 2 visitors

31/3 - none

14/4 - 2 visitors

28/4 - cancelled - Easter/royal wedding week

12/5 - 2 visitors

26/5 - 2 visitors

10/6 - 1 visitor

24/6 - none

7/7 - 2 visitors

21/7 - 2 visitors

4/8 - 3 visitors

18/8 - 1 visitor

1/9 - 2 visitors

15/9 - 3 visitors

29/9 - 2 visitors

13/10 - 2 visitors

27/10 - 1 visitor  
10/11 - 1 visitor  
24/11 - 1 visitor  
8/12 - 2 visitors  
22/12 - 2 visitors

**2012**

5/1 - 1 visitor  
19/1 - 6 visitors  
2/2 - no visitors  
16/2 - 5 visitors  
1/3 - 2 visitors  
15/3 - no visitors  
29/3 - 2 visitors  
12/4 - 2 visitors  
26/4 - 4 visitors  
10/5 - 1 visitor  
24/5 - 1 visitor  
7/6 - 2 visitors  
21/6 - 2 visitors  
5/7 - 2 visitors  
19/7 - 2 visitors  
2/8 - 1 visitor  
16/8 - 3 visitors  
30/8 - no visitors  
13/9 - no visitors  
27/9 - no visitors  
11/10 - offices closed (receptionist away)  
25/10 - no visitors

**76 visitors in 45 sessions. Averaging 1.68 visitors per session.**