

**Committee: Scrutiny**

**Agenda Item**

**Date: 9 December 2008**

**6**

**Title: Review of fees and charges: Interim report from Scrutiny Working Group**

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**Item for decision**

### **Summary**

1. A small working group is undertaking a piece of work relating to the various fees and charges made by the Council – with particular reference to ensuring equality of treatment in concessionary charging.
2. This interim report explains the progress made to date and the group's proposals for further work. In seeking to develop a consistent approach to charging and to the granting of concessions, the working group is looking to develop a pricing and concessions policy, seek benchmarking information from a selection of authorities of a similar type and nature to Uttlesford and undertaking consultation with representatives of appropriate voluntary sector organisations.

### **Recommendations**

3. That the Committee notes the interim report of the working group and confirms the suggested approach to further work on this subject.

### **Background Papers**

4. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author.
  - "Positively Charged" – Audit Commission, Public Services National Report, January 2008.
  - Uttlesford District Council Budgets 2008/09

### **Impact**

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	Some charges are subject to statutory requirements regarding consultation. The working group intends to undertake consultation in reviewing the Council's approach to concessions.
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Community Safety	None specific
Equalities	Concessions should meet requirements for equality.
Finance	Fees and charges provide an important part of the Council's income.
Human Rights	None specific
Legal implications	The level of charges for some services is subject to statutory provisions.
Sustainability	Some services for which charges are made have an impact on sustainability.
Ward-specific impacts	District wide
Workforce/Workplace	None specific

## Situation

6. At its last meeting, the Committee agreed that a small working group should undertake a piece of work relating to the various fees and charges made by the Council – with particular reference to ensuring equality of treatment in concessionary charging.
7. For the first time, fees and charges at Uttlesford have been brought together and have been referred to the appropriate Committees for consideration of the proposed 2009/10 charges during November. A further report on the outcome of these reviews will be presented to full Council on 16 December as part of the budget process. Whilst this is a considerable advance on previous practice, the working group believes that there remains work to be done to ensure consistency in the way that charges are calculated and concessions awarded.
8. Examples include the fact that some concessions relate to those in receipt of benefit; some to those service users over 65 years of age; and some to children. However, arguably similar services provide no concessions at all. The working group believes these areas require more detailed work – for instance, the development of an approach to concessions which assesses those services where the Council might wish to encourage use and those where there is a justifiable social reason for allowing a reduction in charges to apply.
9. The working group has met on two occasions and has had the benefit of information from two neighbouring councils who are embarking on a similar exercise. Information from these councils and informal contact with a number of district councils suggests that there is a general lack of corporate and consistent approaches to the setting of fees and charges, something which was also highlighted in a national report from the Audit Commission earlier this year.
10. A Council may make different choices when applying the principles of charging to those existing services where it has discretion. Charging has the potential to make a significant impact on how the Council can achieve its strategic objectives. Beyond its financial importance, charging also has potential to be a significant policy instrument to help Councils achieve their service and strategic objectives, for example:
  - By setting charges high the Council can discourage use of scarce resources;
  - By structuring charges in different ways, particular patterns of use can be encouraged;
  - Increasing price per unit consumed encourages small scale consumption;
  - Decreasing price per unit consumed encourages greater consumption.
11. In seeking to develop a consistent approach, the working group would like to invite the views of external agencies, particularly those representing the voluntary sector.
12. The working group seeks the Committee's views on an approach, to be completed well in advance of the review of charges for 2010/11, which will involve:

- The development of a pricing and concessions policy
- Benchmarking information from a selection of authorities of a similar type and nature to Uttlesford
- Consultation with representatives of appropriate voluntary sector organisations.

### Risk Analysis

13.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
The Council fails to ensure equality of treatment in its fees and charges	2 There is a need to address current shortcomings	2 The Council would fail to meet requirements on equality	Action proposed in this report and implementation of final recommendations in due course
Arbitrary removal of concessions raises public concern	1 The working group proposes an open and measured approach to the review	2 Loss of public confidence in the approach to fees and charges	Open and transparent public engagement

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.