

Committee:	Scrutiny Committee	Agenda Item
Date:	7 July 2009	4
Title:	Review of fees and charges Report of the Working Group	
Author:	Colin Rockall Interim Change Manager	Item for decision

Summary

- 1 The working group (comprising Councillors Alan Dean, Wells and Yarwood) has concluded its work on reviewing the various fees and charges made by the Council – with particular reference to ensuring equality of treatment in concessionary charging.
- 2 The group has identified a number of apparent inconsistencies in the setting of charges and the granting of concessions and has formulated recommendations for consideration by the appropriate Committees of the Council.

Recommendations

The working group recommends that:

- the Community & Housing Committee be invited to consider and act upon the views relating to pest control services set out in paragraph 4 below;
- the attention of the Environment Committee be drawn to the working group's comments on burial charges (Paragraph 4 below)

(Note: This issue may be affected by the proposed transfer of amenities to Saffron Walden Town Council);

- the Chief Finance Officer be asked to prepare a draft corporate pricing and concessions policy for consideration by the Finance & Administration Committee and that
 - the policy provides for a standard level of discount of 50% for those on state benefits;
 - no specific discounts be granted on the basis of age

(Note: It may be appropriate for the above proposal to be the subject of some form of public consultation);

- charges for services should be set on the basis of full cost recovery; and
- the attention of the Community & Housing Committee be drawn to the need to review the approach by which leaseholders of Council owned properties are charged for maintenance and other costs.

Background Papers

Uttlesford District Council: Budget Book 2009/10

Impact

Communication/Consultation	Some charges are subject to statutory requirements regarding consultation.
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	Additionally, the working group has sought information from neighbouring Councils and has consulted with representatives of appropriate voluntary organisations within the district.
Community Safety	None specific
Equalities	Concessions should meet requirements for equality and this has been a key consideration in the Working Group's considerations.
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

Services and charges

- 3 The Council's fees and charges are set out in the budget book, a copy of which is sent to every councillor.
- 4 The information obtained for the working group shows that charges are broadly in line with those of our neighbours. However, the following table highlights some key issues (mostly relating to environmental health) that have come out of the review. The working group considers these should be referred to the relevant Committees for attention and appropriate action:

Service	Current position/Comments	Views of the working group
Micro chipping of pets	Charge - £24 (Some concessions) This service is also available through pet shops and vets.	Invite Community & Housing Committee to consider whether the Council needs to continue to provide this service.
Pest control	Differing charges for the various services. It is not clear what the rationale is for the level of charging.	The Council should have a corporate framework for setting charges.
Rats in domestic premises	No charge at present – decision of the Community Committee in January 2008. Among other councils there is a mix of no charge and charges, but discounts for those on benefits.	The question of charging should be reviewed – as part of the work of the group set up recently to review the pest control service. The working group believes that charges should be made unless there is a sound reason

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		not to do so.
Squirrels	Charge - £62 per hour. New charge introduced 2008/09. Some consultees suggested that squirrels can be harmful to some asthma sufferers.	The group questions the need for an hourly charge and believes that a fixed charge is a simpler approach.
Burials	Some consultees felt that the charging structure is unduly complicated	A simpler, flat fee structure is favoured, based on cost and market forces.

Concessions

In terms of concessions, the review found that, whilst there are concessions for some services, there is no rationale behind them. The percentage discount varies from one service to another and the terminology for qualification is not consistent.

Currently concessions are:

Service	Concession
Micro chipping of pets	£24 fee reduced to £19 for over 65s and those on means tested benefits
Mice	£54 fee reduced to £36 for over 65s and those on income support
Flies, fleas, ants, bed bugs etc	£62 fee reduced to £36 for over 65s and those on income support
Additional treatment for insects	£30 fee reduced to £15 for over 65s and those on income support
Wasps per nest	£54 fee reduced to £36 for over 65s and those on income support
Burials	Higher charges for non-residents of Uttlesford. No charge for interment from stillborn to 16 years
Bulky waste charge	Exemption for those on council benefits but no concessions for over 65s

5 The working group favours a standard level of discount and suggests 50% discount for those on state benefits. This is the terminology used by some neighbouring authorities.

6 The working group also questions the need for concessions for over 65s, who are not necessarily those in most financial need.

Other issues

7 The working group is concerned to find that some services (e.g. pest control and building surveying) result in a net cost to the council taxpayer and recommends that charges be fixed at a level, so as to avoid 'making a loss'.

8 It is important that there is a transparent process for setting fees, with consistency in the way that charges are calculated and concessions are granted. The working group proposes that the Chief Finance Officer prepare a draft corporate pricing and concessions policy for consideration by the Finance & Administration Committee.

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- 9 The working group's attention has also been drawn to the need to review the approach by which leaseholders of Council owned properties are charged for maintenance and other costs. It is suggested that this matter be referred to the Community & Housing Committee for consideration.

Risk Analysis

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	Implementation of recommendations regarding concessions.
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.