



Subject:	Review of Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) fees
Date:	20 th March 2026
Reporting Officer(s):	Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.	
Insert number <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	This report sets out proposals for a small operational change and inflationary uplift to Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) fees in the short term alongside a proposal for a longer term review of PAD fees in the coming financial year.
1.2	The report was noted by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 17 th February 2026.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	The Committee is asked to agree the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) the proposed increased PAD fees set out at Appendix 1. (ii) the small operational change set out at paragraph 3.13. (iii) a fundamental review of PAD fees over the next financial year.
3.0	Main Report
	<u>Background</u>
3.1	The Council's Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service is a discretionary service, which provides opportunity for customers to discuss their planning proposals with the Planning Service before they make a planning application.
3.2	As the Committee is aware, the planning application process can be complex. PADs provide opportunity for issues to be identified early, thereby helping to improve the quality of application on submission, in turn leading to better outcomes on the ground as well as more efficient and timely decision-making. PADs also provide applicants with a degree of certainty as to whether their proposals are likely to be acceptable, with the caveat that the process does not bind the Council to a final outcome, with the planning application subject to consultation with the public and technical consultees, and the potential for the decision to be made by the Committee following the democratic process.
3.3	Customers can use PADs to establish: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whether their proposal requires planning permission. • the main issues and planning policies relevant to consideration of their proposal. • the Planning Service's initial assessment of the proposal and how the proposal can be improved to increase the chances of planning permission being granted. • the information that they will need to submit with their planning application (in accordance with the Council's published <i>Planning Application Valid Checklist</i>). • the application process and likely timescales for a decision.

Best Practice

3.4 PADs are universally accepted as best practice in the industry, particularly for more complex proposals, and form an important part of the “front-loading” of the planning application process to support timely decision making and secure better outcomes on the ground. PADs are advocated by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) through the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI (SPPS) and [Development Management Practice Note 10: Pre-Application Community Consultation \(and Pre-Application Discussions\)](#).

3.5 PADs also form an important part of the Council’s published “10 Operating Principles” that support an efficient and effective Development Management service, and the Planning Service’s aim of *helping customers get a timely planning decision that benefits the city*.

3.6 Operating Principle 7 states:

‘We provide a Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service so that issues can be identified at the beginning of the process, before the application is made. This leads to better quality planning applications which should be determined in a more timely manner...’

BCC charging for Pre-Application Discussions

3.7 Belfast City Council was the first council in Northern Ireland to charge for PADs in 2017. It is understood that some but not all NI councils have since introduced charging for PADs. Endorsed by the Committee, PAD fees were introduced in recognition of the significant level of resources that the Planning Service expends in providing its PAD service and significant demand for the service from customers.

3.8 PAD charging was informed at the time by engagement with applicants, agents, developers and other customers. It also formed part of the business case for employing two additional staff in the Development Management team.

3.9 PAD charging has since become culturally embedded in the planning application process in Belfast. The Planning Service remains acutely aware of the importance of providing high standards of service and advice in delivering a charged PAD service.

3.10 The Council’s PAD fees were originally set in March 2017 and are provided at **Appendix 1**.

3.11 Projected income from current PAD and PPA fees is £100,000 pa. Actual PAD income for previous years is set out in **Table 1**, below.

Year	Actual PAD Income	Number of PADs
2021/22	£88,200	85
2022/23	£82,400	76
2023/24	£70,200	62
2024/25	£66,000	56
2025/26 (pro rata)	£92,900	58

Table 1: PAD income and the number of PADs per year since 2021/22

Review of PAD fees

3.12 it is recommended that the original 2017 fees are subject to an inflationary uplift from 2026/2027, applying the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

3.13 In addition, a small process change is proposed. The current charges including two PAD meetings at no additional cost for all PAD categories other than for Largescale Major proposals which include one meeting. It is proposed that the process for Largescale Major proposals is brought in line with other PAD categories so that they also include two meetings at no additional cost, to simplify the approach and recognising that it is unlikely that the largest category PADs would only ever involve one PAD meeting, due to their scale and complexity. The base fee for a Largescale Major proposal is proposed to be increased to cover the cost of the additional meeting.

3.14	PAD fee exemptions for householder proposals, commercial proposals of less than 200 sqm, community and proposals by non-profit organisations (i.e. fee exempt for planning applications) would remain. There would continue to be no charge for PADs for these proposals.
3.15	The general public can continue to avail of the free Duty Planner service which operates daily and provides opportunity to discuss householder and small-scale proposals with a planning officer.
3.16	The revised PAD fee proposals are set out at Appendix 1 . It is considered that these small changes may make it more likely that the Council will achieve the £100k income target for PADs.
3.17	It should be recognised however that the Planning Service has evolved and improved its PAD service over the years. Since early 2024, following feedback from customers and informed by learning from the lean systems redesign experimentation project (2022 to 2024), the PAD process has been streamlined and targeted with the process more tailored to the specific requirements of the applicant and proposal. A new series of PAD principles relating to delivery of the service have been introduced, aimed at providing efficient, proportionate and more timely feedback to customers. These will be published on the Council's website alongside updated customer guidance on the PAD service.
3.18	A more fundamental review of PAD fees is therefore considered timely given the evolution in the delivery of the PAD service. It is recommended that a more comprehensive review is undertaken during 2026/27, informed by planned feedback from the new Belfast Planning Partnership with planning agents; and further development of internal processes following further roll-out of the learning from the lean-systems redesign project.
3.19	A further report on the review and its conclusions will be brought to Committee in late 2026 / early 2027.
3.20	The implementation of the proposed new PAD fees at Appendix 1 will need to tie in with the annual update of regional planning fees for planning applications in the NI Planning Portal, expected towards the end of April or early May 2026.
Financial & Resource Implications	
3.21	The realisation of PAD income remains an important income stream for the Council's Planning Service. Planning application fees are set regionally by DfI and overall income falls

	substantially short of the annual cost of delivery of the Planning Service. The proposed new PAD charges will help support the Planning Service's overall costs and service delivery and will help to achieve the income target of £100k per annum.
	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
3.22	There are no equality or good relations / rural needs implications associated with this report.
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 – BCC current and proposed revised PAD fees

