

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-070-2013/14
Date of meeting: 3 February 2014



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Planning

Subject: To seek authority for a £75 000 project to convert to electronic format approximately four million images of historical microfiche planning records.

Responsible Officer: Peter Millward (01992 564 338).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That authority be granted to fund a £75 000 project to convert historical planning microfiche records containing approximately four million images to electronic format, to avoid significant deterioration and/or loss of important historical planning records; and**
- (2) That this funding will be partly met by £20 000 from the 2013/14 and £20 000 from the 2014/15 Document Archiving Budget in Planning and Economic Development, with the balance of £35 000 will be provided as an additional DDF funding item for the 2014/15 Document Archiving Budget.**

Executive Summary:

Planning and Economic Development has in place long term plans to progressively reduce its dependency on accessing microfiche records via a slow singular manual process utilising one suitable microfiche reader in Planning and Economic Development.

A recent project to convert over one million pre 1974 historical planning images was carried out in 2012/13 and officers across the directorate are now able to access these records quickly and easily from any location on any council computer at any location which is a significant step forward compared to the previous slow and cumbersome access procedure for accessing these specific microfiche records.

The remaining 71 000 microfiche jackets contain over four million images which are now over thirty years old and there is a very real risk of deterioration and loss of these important historical planning records. The continued handling and exposure to light of these microfiche records may well result in the loss of important and significant historical planning information.

There is a high level of interest in this important historical planning information by members of the public within the District. The conversion of these records will also assist Planning and Enforcement Officers to make better informed decisions as well as support research by other sections such as the Forward Planning Team and Contaminated Land Section.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

These microfiche records are over thirty years old and in many instances have been exposed to light this in turn reduces their recommended shelf life. In addition the current system in accessing this microfiche information is cumbersome, slow and only accessible via one single officer at a time. Conversion of these records will enable easier access by officers across all areas of planning along with easier access for all other sections of the council.

Other Options for Action:

To do nothing will mean that the Directorate may well lose valuable historical planning information. In addition current access arrangement to view these records is a very time intensive process which requires a significant staff resource to access these records.

Report:

1. This forms an essential element of the progress plan, item 7 submitted to Planning Scrutiny Panel on 10 September 2012 that details EDRMS (Electronic Records Document Management Systems) development in the proposed Appendix One of the Planning and Economic Development Business Plan 2014/15.
2. There is a need to support and improve business processes within Planning and Economic Development to promote faster ways of working and this will significantly improve access to the records contained in the 71,000 microfiche jackets that comprise of over four million historical planning images.
3. Specifically officers across the directorate and the council will be able once this project is completed, be able to access these records by opening the individual files and clicking on the relevant document/thumbnail. This is as compared to the current arrangement where only a single officer is required to manually load individual microfiche on a single microfiche viewer, a process which is noted for being inordinately slow.
4. These microfiche jackets are all over thirty years old and there is a risk of deterioration and loss of valuable historical plans/documentation. Currently these microfiche have already been excessively exposed to light and there are contamination concerns due to frequent handling of these microfiche records particularly master copies.
5. This proposal will assist in taking steps to convert to electronic format nearly all the remaining microfiche records for Development Control with the exception of Building Control records.
6. With Electronic Planning records now available online with most planning information available on a twenty four hours seven days a weeks basis, there is a need to make available on request in electronic format both within the council for professional reasons such as Enforcement and Contaminated Land but also to facilitate faster responses to public requests for information.
7. It is planned that if agreed this project will take approximately eight months to complete due to the volume of microfiche jackets to be converted to electronic format.

Resource Implications:

This cost of this is proposed to be financed utilising £40 000 from the Document Archiving section of the Planning Services Admin CSB Budget for two years covering 2013/14 and 2014/15 with the remaining £35 000 as DDF funding.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The legal & governance implications have been taken into account by integrating this with actions as part of the Business Plan 2014/15.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

The development of the Electronic Record and Document Management System ERDMS supports carbon friendly sustainable development and the retention of these records will assist us in our responsibilities to protect the special character of the district and retain the existing rural character of the Green Belt.

Consultation Undertaken:

Finance.

Background Papers:

Progress Report on Electronic Records Document Management Systems Planning and Building Control Services - Planning Scrutiny Panel 10 September item 17.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management:

The implications of this been included in the Planning and Economic Risk Register and is covered in the Business Plan 2014 Appendix 8 and 9 (updated August 2013 - Risk 4 - Inability to achieve measurable progress with the Directorate Electronic Records Management (ERDMS) progress plan).

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
N/A.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
N/A.