

 **How we're working to secure a better environmental and financial future, thanks to our chargeable services.**

REDACTED in Sustainable Development's Commercial Team, looks back...and forward.

"It's going to be a great challenge!"

That was my initial thought on day one in my new job, as I was briefed about our soon-to-be-launched commercial offer. Fast forward almost two years and I have to say my prophecy has come true, but not entirely as I expected.

Like any new idea, it makes sense to 'dip your toe in', rather than diving in headfirst. That's what we did with our Discretionary Advice Service (DAS), offering customers planning advice before they submit a proposal formally to their planning authority, and our Pre-submission Screening Service (PSS) for wildlife licence applications. Before launching our full service in April 2013, we offered a limited trial period to test the waters.

Over the next 22 months the team fine-tuned the service, using staff and customer feedback. For example, we originally offered a small number of hours of 'free advice' within DAS, to encourage customers to come to us. We've gradually reduced this to a service which 'scopes out' what the customer wants advice on, then the advice itself is all chargeable. This has brought a greater number of smaller projects into the service.

Embracing a commercial culture

Our customers told us they were willing to pay to access our advice, but the idea of charging didn't immediately receive universal support within Natural England. This is understandable really; as an organisation we've always been proud to give high quality, impartial and free advice. There were some concerns that a move towards charging might be perceived as a shift towards 'supporting development', with us working for, rather than with, our customers. Thankfully, that criticism has rarely been directed at us.

With ever-tightening budgets, charging for services can help to secure environment benefits in an economic climate where everyone is constantly reassessing priorities and being asked to 'do more with less.'

As well as enabling us to assign dedicated staff to major infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2 and major energy proposals such as the Navitus Bay offshore wind farm, we can make a real difference at a smaller scale too.

Making a difference

REDACTED used our Discretionary Advice Service to get involved in discussions with a developer proposing an onshore wind farm. This was to be less than 750m from The Wash Special Protection Area and Ramsar.

Their advice helped to influence the decision to reduce turbine numbers from 12 to 5. They are now focusing on the mitigation proposals, which could provide up to 20 hectares of habitat for the large numbers of marsh harrier, dark-bellied brent goose, golden plover and lapwing using the site - all of which are notified features of The Wash SPA. Their advice will also help South Holland District Council to undertake their Habitats Regulation Assessment.

Elsewhere, a Discretionary Advice Service contract enabled **REDACTED** in the Thames Valley Area Team, to engage with developers proposing 400 new housing units near Newbury, Berkshire.

The proposal risked causing increased levels of disturbance at a nearby SSSI, but by entering discussions with the developer's consultants, the local authority and the local Wildlife Trust **REDACTED** negotiated a substantial increase in greenspace within the development and funding for a part-time warden, to raise awareness of the importance of the SSSI and its designated features.