



Policy and Resources Committee
17 January 2022

Public questions and responses

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PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE 17 JANUARY 2022

Question One

From Jonathon White to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson:

The council has £114m in reserves. The budget gap is £27m. **What is the justification for the Council holding such a substantial reserve when local needs in Wirral demand expenditure to maintain services and jobs?**

Response from Councillor Janette Williamson:

All of the reserves held are used towards the cost of services but none of these can be used to support the budget gap. All of the reserves that make up the total are earmarked or ring-fenced for specific one-off items that will need to be funded which have been previously agreed either via Cabinet or Policy and Services Committees. At the Council Policy and Resources Committee on 1 December, a new 5-year Medium Term Financial Strategy was approved which specified that no one-off reserves will be used to support the Council's budget due to the unsustainable nature of this type of funding. This is something that is advised by the Council's Auditors, Grant Thornton who have previously commented "We do not consider that this is a sustainable position and action is needed to set a budget that is not reliant on reserves" and that "The Council will need to put in place clear plans to reduce its future recurring service expenditure and move to a balanced revenue position that does not rely on its reserves"

In response to a supplementary question the Director of Resources confirmed that the reserves were kept under constant review and none had been identified to pay off any of the capitalisation directive. It was unsustainable to use one off funding to balance the Council budget.

Question Two

From David Bird to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson

Has the Council abandoned any attempt to mirror the 'Preston Model' of Community Wealth Building?

Response from Councillor Janette Williamson:

I can give an assurance that Community Wealth Building has not been abandoned on Wirral. Since the Community Wealth Building Strategy was agreed in February 2020, considerable progress has been made and Wirral is becoming a national leader in Community Wealth Building. The Strategy was further endorsed by the

Policy and Resources Committee in 2021 with cross party support. I have worked very closely with Preston on ensuring the Community Wealth Building is here to stay, it will grow and is embedded in everything we do. Probably because the Strategy was launched nearly two years ago it might have appeared to residents that it has fallen off the radar but I can assure you it hasn't and I can give a commitment that we will continue as a Community Wealth Building Council to make sure that it is there and that it does underpin everything we do.

With regard to the community bank not being able to go ahead just yet I have expressed my disappointment in that but it certainly will not stop us in going from strength to strength with community wealth building.

Question Three

From William Phillips to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, to be answered by the Chair of Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, Councillor Liz Grey:

I am one of the lead co-ordinators for Liverpool City Region COP-26 coalition. I was left deeply confused by the Council's proposed cuts to the Climate Emergency actions for the period of one year, especially given that Wirral Council declared a climate emergency in 2019. **If this proposal were to pass how does Wirral Council plan to deal with the fact that climate emergency will not take a year break and the issues that these actions were planned to combat will have grown and become more expensive?**

Response from Councillor Liz Grey :

The proposal we have been given to suspend the climate emergency fund has, like the other proposals, not been decided yet and all the proposals will be voted on at Budget Council on 28th February. I can assure you that we will be prioritising all issues in the Wirral Plan 2026 and the climate emergency is a fundamental part of this.

Question Four

From Claire Hetherington to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, to be answered by the Chair of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee, Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

My question relates to the budget proposals for Adult Care and Health. I'd like to know what is meant by the following rather obscure terms that many ordinary people like myself, and perhaps even a few Councillors, would struggle to understand:

- "Demand mitigation",
- "increased efficiency requirement for 2022/23",
- "a range of case reviews,"
- "demand management approaches"

- "care provider market shaping".

I would very much appreciate a translation of the above into plain English, and an explanation of how this will achieve the estimated £3.89m saving.

Response from Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

Demand Mitigation - Every year we assess the likely new demand coming into social care. This is then forecast as a budget pressure within the Councils budget planning process. Demand mitigation is responding to this expected pressure by supporting people in ways that reduce the total expected cost. An example would be supporting people in extra care housing in lieu of residential care this is lower cost and offers higher levels of independence. This does not mean rationing in any way, shape or form.

Increased efficiency requirement for 2022/23 - This means that social care must support people more effectively with the resources that are available to it. For example year on year we have been reducing reliance on expensive residential care by offering alternative support at home, including assistive technology.

A Range of case reviews - Everyone that receives social care support is entitled to an annual review. Reviews are used to ensure that the care package fits the needs of the person and ensures that they are helped to be as independent as they can be. Most care packages are arranged after a period of illness in hospital. A review is needed after the person gets better to ensure that they are managing okay but often less support is needed at that point.

Demand Management – see demand mitigation.

Care Provider Market Shaping - The Council has a duty to ensure that there is enough care at the right price in place to meet people's needs. We have a team of commissioners that plan for the Borough and work closely with providers to undertake this work.

The savings are based upon what we would have expected to spend providing traditional responses compared to how we use resources to support people to be as independent as they can be. In order to deliver this service reviews of individual care packages will help to ensure that every person supported by social care has the right resource to support their independent living needs but also makes best use of the resources available to the Council.

Question Five

From Nicola Chambers and read out on her behalf, to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, and to be answered by the Chair of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee, Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

In assessing and identifying services and asset removal/reduction has the Wirral Health Inequality plan data been incorporated to allow for consistent,

transparent and equality of impact so that identified cuts do not disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups for example based on age/disability/race and also adversely affect local communities already identified as deprived with greater incidence of childhood obesity, and societal pressures known to contribute to compromised mental health and well-being - unemployment and therefore financial access to services, poor housing, crime & anti-social behaviour, illness, substance dependency?

Response from Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

Detailed analysis of the potential impact of budget proposals on specific communities and individuals has not been conducted at this stage. As the proposals move forward into consultation on the specific changes that will be required then Equality Impact Assessments will be conducted in all cases as appropriate before they are firmed up post consultation by the Service Committees. Services and asset removal is not the way in which we will be looking to manage the necessary cuts that unfortunately have to be made in the Adults Social Care budget.

Question Six

From Mel Guilfoyle and read out on her behalf to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, and to be answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron:

I would be grateful if you could inform me as to what consideration has been given to the impact closing local libraries will have for families where children do not have a designated room for their studies. This generally will effect children in more deprived areas of the borough where academic achievement is already below the national average, where children often have to share bedrooms and finding space and quiet to do their homework can be difficult. Libraries currently provide a suitable environment for older children to study, use the internet and get support from staff. It also offers to many younger children stimulation and support around speech and literacy.

If you remove these services are you going to provide additional support for those children in order to avoid negatively impacting on their academic achievement and chance to thrive in adulthood?

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron:

A key priority in the Library Strategy for the next five years is to “support reading attainment in areas of need” so this point is extremely valid as the progress and success of the service will be measured by such indicators.

Recent data indicates that the current baseline usage for age groups 13-17 and 18–24 year-olds represents 3.24% of current users. Whilst this does not indicate a high level of need amongst this demographic, the new model and Library Strategy is

dedicated to ensuring we increase engagement and provide a service based on current and future need.

Whilst there are 11 physical sites that are not considered as part of the new model, we have ensured that geographic coverage and accessibility of libraries remains for all that wish to use them.

The sites identified within the preferred option (Option 3) of the report to be considered by the Tourism, Communities Culture & Leisure Committee on 18th January, are well situated and located to provide sufficient geographic coverage across Wirral whilst taking into consideration areas of greatest need and/or those impacted by multiple barriers to access (e.g. car ownership, low income, deprivation)". The sites are also predominantly situated in areas with high densities of active borrowers.

We have also used a mapping tool to ensure that secondary and further education establishments are still within acceptable distance to a physical library site to support access from potential users in this demographic.

Closer working links with the Schools Library Service will also be developed as this service is vital in ensuring that literacy requirements of children are supported and where possible attainment gaps are addressed.

Finally, we want to emphasise that we will use the forthcoming consultation, if agreed, to identify need across this age group and how we as a Library Service can better serve and engage potential users. Where any impact is identified we will ensure that sufficient and effective mitigation is developed.

Question Seven

From Liam Hartzenberg to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson and to be answered by the Chair of the Economy Regeneration and Development Committee, Councillor Tony Jones:

Our Town Halls have been identified as strategic assets within Wirral's regeneration plan, however decades of poor maintenance and lack of vision means these buildings do not meet the needs and challenges of a future regenerated Wirral. Their poor management has resulted in low use, pitiful income and a disconnect with the public. On both Town Halls the Council have been led blindly to throw good money after bad, completely missing a wider number of excellent uses and partners the Council could work with to see these community buildings as catalysts to regenerating their local areas and become self-sustaining community assets.

Any fire sale of our Town Halls would be down to poor management, public officials and Council paid consultants would have you believe that these and many of the assets discussed here are of low use, low consequence and a liability to the balance sheet. Now is the time for these buildings to be seen as strategic community owned, community run, community enablers, and not dispose now think later assets.

Will the council ensure that this mismanagement ends, and these buildings are properly consulted on with community groups, will the Council seek viable community focussed alternatives that fulfil the potential use of these assets and ensure their sustainable future?

Response from Councillor Tony Jones:

There are no current proposals to release Birkenhead or Wallasey Town Halls as part of a “fire sale”. Birkenhead Town Hall has seen significant investment over the years in line with its heritage status and is currently being used for a number of Council services as well as being a venue for weddings and other social occasions, covid permitting. Whilst detailed work has not yet been undertaken the Town Hall is likely to play an important heritage role within the extensive Regeneration projects underway in Birkenhead. Wallasey Town Hall falls within the Seacombe corridor and work is currently being undertaken to realise the opportunities of this asset within a wider regeneration framework and ambition for the area, there is a very strong focus on community use but with elements of potential commercial income generation.

The Chair had agreed that responses to the following six questions would be posted on the Council website, the questions having been read out at the Committee.

Question Eight

From Carl Davies to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, to be answered by the Chair of the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, Councillor Liz Grey:

“Can I ask how in light of the fantastic work done by the Parks and Countryside department during specifically the Covid-19 pandemic, the upkeep and maintenance of the Parks and Countryside for us to walk and have our daily exercise and have some fresh air in a safe environment. **How can you cut the budgets and stop maintenance in up to 20 parks?**”

Response from Councillor Liz Grey:

Thank you for your question concerning the 2022-23 budget proposal relating to our Parks and Countryside Service. Firstly, I would agree that our Parks and Countryside Service did a fantastic job during the COVID Pandemic and our open spaces provided a much needed lifeline for our residents. I would also say that during the pandemic many of our teams also worked hard to support our residents and local businesses. Furthermore, as we have returned to more business as usual our residents need and want the full range of service we offer such as Leisure Services, Highways, Adult Services, Children’s Services, Anti-social Behaviour Team and every service in between. We as Members value all of these services but the Council has a current budget gap of over £27m and we have to make the hard choices to find proposals to bridge this gap or face government intervention. Putting it straight, Wirral Council cannot afford to provide the same level of services next year that it has this year. However, please be reassured that the proposals contained in the

report, including those for Parks, are areas for consultation and no decisions will be made on these proposals until Budget Council on 28 February. We as Members who want to do the best for our residents, will not take any decisions lightly and no decision will be made until we have exhaustively worked through the options to agree what proposals we must agree to that both meets the financial requirements to meet the budget gap but which impacts the least on the lives of the residents and communities we serve.

The purpose of this report, which the committee will discuss tonight, is at this stage to consult on these proposals to understand the various views and impacts on what proposals have been submitted by Officers. Therefore, I would like to thank you for your response on this proposal and I will ensure that the views you have made are included as part of the consultation process. Should it be necessary to accept this option I will ensure that the Officers involved in the implementation of this option work closely with Members, Voluntary Groups and Friends' Groups to determine what solutions there may be to minimise the impact of this proposal and how better we can support our precious biodiversity through the development of new arrangements and agreements with our residents and communities.

Question Nine

From Anne Litherland to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, to be answered by the Chair of the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, Councillor Liz Grey:

I am member of the Cool Wirral Partnership working with my parish of Holy Apostles and Martyrs, Wallasey and Faiths4Change in a Wirral wide faith group. We are working to reduce our carbon footprint and engage our communities to do the same. Wirral Council have been a leader within the country by engaging faith communities in this urgent task. **I want to ask how the council can postpone initiatives like this in the face of the real Climate Emergency?** We have a moral duty to act as faith groups but also to urge you to act too on behalf of the poorest in our communities both here in Wirral and overseas who are suffering now and will suffer more in the future. The climate will not wait for a year, the change is here and now and getting worse every day. Leaving it a year will exacerbate the problem. Relying on outside finance will not be achievable in the year, especially with a new lead officer in post finding her feet.

Response from Councillor Liz Grey:

As I have said in a previous response, the proposal we have been given to suspend the climate emergency fund has, like the other proposals, not been decided yet and all the proposals will be voted on at Budget Council on 28th February. I can assure you that we will be prioritising all issues in the Wirral Plan 2026 and the climate emergency is a fundamental part of this. I would like to reassure you that we take very seriously our environmental work with faith groups and I can promise you that this work as part of our commitments to the Cool Wirral Partnership will continue.

Question Ten

From Phil Simpson to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson, to be answered by the Chair of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee, Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

I strongly object to the proposals to cut what amounts to £3.6m to the Adult Health and Social Care. These cuts are focusing on targeting the most vulnerable people in our society, yet again. Therefore, I wish to submit the following question to committee. The proposal for budget savings in Adult Health and Social Care could see a saving of £3.6m. I assume that there will be a saving on administration costs, but the majority of it will be incurred by the users of the service, the most vulnerable people within our society. **Can you please provide more transparency and detail to show where £3.6m of savings is to come from?**

Response from Councillor Yvonne Nolan:

Social Care savings relate to supporting people to maintain their independence, to provide new ways of supporting people to get back on their feet after a period of illness, and to keep them supported in their own homes wherever possible.

New initiatives include the development of Extra Care Housing schemes across the Borough providing homes with built in support as part of the package at a cost much lower than residential care. We have invested significantly in assisted technology to help people remain safe in their homes. Our community equipment services now provide 24 hour delivery services to reduce falls and help people manage at home. Our social work teams are working with people and their families to ensure that the latest models of care are considered every time a person needs help.

The savings will therefore come from a review of care packages ensuring that the way people are cared for continues to support them to live independently. There will be no direct cuts, however we do expect people to be supported in the most effective way and for resources to be used to maximise people's independence.

Question Eleven

From Dr Rhona O'Brien to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson

In the absence of economic risk assessments and equality impact assessments (in addition to a proposed increase in Council Tax), it would appear that budget proposals for 2022-23 are expecting Wirral residents to pay more for less. **Can this committee justify why council salaries and severance payments have almost doubled in the period 2016-2021 whilst cuts to public spending are being proposed?**

Response from Councillor Janette Williamson:

It is not the case that the Council's salaries and severance payments have almost doubled in this period.

Figures taken from the HR payroll system confirm that the Council's total salary bill, excluding on-costs was £84.943m in 2016 and £70.585m in 2021. The number of full time equivalent (fte) staff employed in 2016 was 4,186 compared to 3,666 in 2021. The Council applies any nationally agreed pay awards to staff salaries on an annual basis. The total value of severance (redundancy) payments was £2.081m in 2016 compared to £1.113m in 2021.

Question Twelve

From Ian Seddon to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson and to be answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron:

The proposed closure of the Europa Pool Fun Pool has been laid out in documents in terms of cost savings. What sort of review took place to consider the health benefits of children using this pool, particularly during the school holidays and the fact that many families cannot afford to go away on holidays, making this pool an important place for children to be able to go to. **Was consideration given to the detrimental effect this will have on children's wellbeing which surely overrides any cost considerations?**

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron:

Thank you for your question relating to Leisure Services. This presentation of the budget option relating to the Europa Pools fun pool was set against significant pressures across the service and is a result of the fact that the authority cannot continue to try to deliver the same services that it provided 10-plus years ago and must "cut its cloth" accordingly in its approach to how it delivers services to take out recurrent costs.

These will mean some very difficult decisions on areas such as leisure but allows the authority to lay the groundwork for the council to provide fewer but much more high-quality services, all within its financial means, in future years and to allow for investment in those areas.

The costs to operate the fun pool at Europa are disproportionately high in every respect. The requirement for additional staffing, coupled with the 24/7 need to heat, chemically treat and manage the pool environment all mean that financially the operation is not sustainable. The pool is predominantly only occupied during school holidays and for some periods at weekends meaning that for 39 weeks of the year there is significant underutilisation. Staffing, energy and utilities costs generally are also expected to increase substantially in forthcoming years and this will only add to the financial subsidy.

The service has been able to utilise the space to create an enhanced fitness facility and will be introducing a range of affordable junior sessions (particularly during school holiday periods) both in the fitness facility and additional first floor space. The service will also explore delivery of fun sessions within the competition pool, both at

Europa, the Guinea Gap Leisure Pool and other sites. Whilst this will not replicate the fun pool, the aim is to make the facility as user-friendly and accessible to all users across the Borough.

There are 6 other Council operated other pools currently available across the Borough (excluding Woodchurch) and the service has been successful in accessing additional funding for holiday activity programmes for all young people across Wirral which is expected to continue and expand in 2022/23.

We appreciate that for some families affordable activities during the summer holidays are important. To make sure children and young people don't miss out we have for the last two years been running a wide range of schemes over the summer funded from the national Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. Further funding for this year has already been announced with a commitment for this funding to be available each year until at least 2025. The schemes being put in place provide a wide range of holiday activities as well as supporting families who need that additional support with the extra costs of food over the summer.

Question Thirteen

From Susan Kirkham to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson and to be answered by the Chair of the Economy Regeneration and Development Committee, Councillor Tony Jones:

Will the green space at Upton roundabout be protected from being sold to become a car park? This area not only absorbs some of the pollution but it also allows people to walk slightly further away from the busy road and avoid the worst of the noxious fumes. It is beneficial for physical and human health to be in and near green space. Selling it off would therefore have a double negative impact on local people's health.

Response from Councillor Tony Jones:

The request from Lidl to purchase this piece of land was considered by Policy and Resources Committee on 7th October 2020. Committee resolved to dispose of the land, but also, in accordance with legal requirements, to place notices informing of the decision to dispose of open space and also to appropriate the use of the land. The notices prompted a significant response from the public against the proposed disposal. The Council has not at this stage confirmed a sale with Lidl in light of this response. Should the sale be confirmed, Lidl will be notified and they will then progress their planning application for their scheme.