

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
4 DECEMBER 2012

44. BUDGET OPTIONS

The Committee received a presentation from Jane Morgan, Policy Manager, Chief Executive's Department, on the process of the consultation and the progress made on Stage 2 of the consultation to date. Jane Morgan reported that over 70 budget options had now been published and the savings identified were 25 per cent more than what was needed, giving Members and the public a real choice as to where they should be made. She also went on to outline the role of Overview and Scrutiny members in the process.

Jane Morgan then responded to some questions from the Committee and informed the meeting that a variety of community groups representing the elderly had and were being engaged in the consultation and that she would feed back the suggestion about marketing the consultation in as many post offices as possible.

At the suggestion of the Chair the Committee then considered the 18 budget options relevant to its own remit in turn.

1. Libraries (and One Stop Shops)

Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services, introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that it was the intention to try and keep an open environment within libraries rather than introducing separate rooms. There would be less change in smaller libraries and staff were being trained in giving first level advice. It was acknowledged that a large number of people did not have internet access but there were over 200 personal computers available in libraries for the public to use. The proposed closure of libraries between Christmas and New Year would mean just one library remaining open, if more were to remain open then the saving would be reduced.

There were certain charges for some library services and these were reviewed each year. There was a need to ensure a balance of any increase in charges for certain services not adversely affecting the income being received.

The Chair, in summing up, expressed the Committee's continuing support for the department in maintaining an excellent library service in the face of reducing resources.

2. Dog Kennels

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he referred to the advantages of being part of a Merseyside consortium with several other neighbouring authorities and the fact that the kennels at Halewood did have spare capacity. He did share concerns at the short term nature of dogs being at the kennels before being put down and wanted to give the greatest opportunity for dogs to find a new home. The Council kennels currently had a rehoming rate of about 80 per cent. He had spoken to the RSPCA who had kennels

at Cross Lane in Wallasey and consultations were ongoing with the Friends group. The problem of the logistics of travel to Halewood would be explored during the tender process if this option was to proceed.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor S Williams, it was –

Resolved (4:2) – The Committee expressed all Party concern that people could be put off having to travel to Halewood to collect dogs and that officers investigate the logistics of this.

3. Environmental Health

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option which proposed an investigation into collaboration with Cheshire West and Chester in order to establish a Mutual to deliver regulatory services.

4. Trading Standards

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option which proposed a reduction in the staffing level within the Trading Standards Teams by one Fair Trading Officer and a Senior Trading Standards Officer.

5. Pest Control

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option which proposed reducing operating costs of the service whilst continuing to increase income. Responding to comments from Members he stated that most local authorities didn't charge for rat infestation treatments and in Wirral the number of infestations had shown a gradual decline. Members congratulated those in the service for the high quality of the service provided.

6. Community Patrol

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option which was a terms and condition option for staff across the Council.

7. Dog Fouling

Rob Beresford, Head of Regulation, introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he informed the Committee that the current team of 10 officers was far in excess of what other local authorities had. Over 200 £50 fixed penalty notices had been issued with a very high payment rate. This amount could be raised to £70 if the Council was to adopt different legislation but the Council would have to undertake specific consultation.

It was suggested that the Council could look at dog free zones.

The Interim Director of Technical Services suggested the need for a more unified approach to enforcement regimes covering a range of services.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Fraser, it was –

Resolved (unanimously) – That officers look at mechanisms for a more co-ordinated approach to the subject of enforcement on Wirral.

8. Car Parking Operations

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that the proposed ‘all day’ charge of £2.50 would be introduced at all Council car parks, including those which were currently free and those around Council offices. The current pilot of ‘free after 3pm’ would also cease.

Members commented upon the cost of setting up ticket machines and collection of more monies from machines where there were currently none and that the introduction of charges could drive away trade from some shopping areas.

The Chair, in summing up, registered the Committee’s concerns over the impact of charging for car parking in areas where it was currently free and also at the proposed cessation of the ‘free after 3pm’ scheme.

[POST MEETING CORRECTION – following the meeting the Interim Director realised that he had inadvertently described in his verbal presentation a possible variant (charging for currently free parking) that was not included in the options before the Committee. He advised Committee Members by email accordingly. The agenda papers and consultation documentation had, however, described the correct option.]

9. Garden Waste Kerbside Recycling Scheme

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that the recycling targets were pooled for Merseyside so a fall in the recycling rate should not incur penalties for Wirral. The extra cost of more waste going to landfill would not negate the proposed charges. Officers had netted out the income to this proposal and a report would evidence these calculations which he would be happy to circulate to Members. There would be a need in the longer term to look at more sophisticated models for garden waste.

The Chair, in summing up, stated that it was valid for the Committee to register its concerns as to whether the benefits of introducing a charge would outweigh the costs of waste going to landfill.

10. Waste Charges

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he commented that currently if a bin was reported as missing on the day of collection then the Council would replace it but in future that would only apply if the bin had evidentially been damaged by the collection workforce. If a bin was destroyed by fire, or for any other reason a replacement bin was required then the householder would be charged for a replacement.

11. Highway Maintenance

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that he would circulate to the Committee a breakdown of the figures where savings were proposed in respect of maintenance of roads, footways, signage and street furniture.

12. Street Lighting

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option which would stop night time inspections (scouting) of lighting and, where it was safe to do so, switch off lighting. Some investment in equipment changes would be required to achieve a reduction in the energy charges and would be offset against savings in energy purchased.

The Chair suggested that the Department should consider, when replacing lights, that they were replaced with the most energy efficient luminaires available.

13. Highway Drainage

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that this proposal would lead to a reduced service in those areas not susceptible to flooding. He acknowledged that the inspection arrangements would need to be constantly monitored over future years due to changing weather patterns.

14. Street Cleansing

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that the proposal for a 6 month pilot scheme would be across the whole of the borough and mapping of the pilot area would be finalised once this option was brought forward for a final decision. He acknowledged the need for the pilot to be fair and that it wouldn't be targeted on areas where the results would be favourable to the outcome.

There were generally good response times in respect of those tourist areas, such as promenades, which were busier during fine weather but there did need to be a sharpening up of the response for next season.

15. School Crossing Patrols

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that it was a non-statutory requirement to provide school crossing patrols and this option would ask schools to pay. For those that did a service level agreement would be developed with the school but those schools that chose not to pay the patrol would be withdrawn. The proposal had been explained to the Primary Head Teachers' meeting and also to Secondary Head Teachers at a Schools Forum. In mitigating the effect of withdrawing the service 45 sites currently had a pelican crossing.

Some Members expressed their total opposition to the proposal as it was the responsibility of the Council to keep roads safe. A Member suggested that motor manufacturers could be approached to sponsor crossing patrols.

The Chair suggested that as the budget options were for savings of 25 per cent more than was required, this could be one that wasn't pursued.

16. Reduction of Parks' Maintenance

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated it was not intended that areas of parks and open spaces left for wildlife and wild flower meadows would be totally abandoned but rather that there would be planting and seeding carried out.

17. Withdrawal of Parks' Maintenance

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option. Responding to comments from Members he stated that the proposal to maintain just one bowling green in Birkenhead Park was because it held national events and due to the status of the park. Any funding which could be pursued from sports bodies would be sought if it could be applied to the outcomes the Council wished to achieve.

Members queried why golf courses should continue to be maintained at the expense of all but one bowling green leading to a feeling of marginalisation amongst bowlers. The possibility of gaining income from sports such as sand yachting should also be examined in conjunction with the Council's tourism officers.

The Chair suggested that any withdrawal of beach management would need to be undertaken in such a way that it didn't drive visitors away.

18. Modernisation of Leisure Centres

The Interim Director of Technical Services introduced this option which would have an impact on 21 fte staff.

Members suggested the need to maximise revenue from café facilities at leisure centres when in use for galas etc and also the possibility of negotiating with the trades unions over opening on bank holidays.

The Chair thanked all the staff involved in the budget consultation process.