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REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 5 November 2013

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	A Brighthouse (Chair)	
	Councillors	S Foulkes S Williams E Boulton J Crabtree P Doughty G Ellis R Gregson	K Hodson M Johnston P Kearney A Leech D Realey M Sullivan KJ Williams
<u>Cabinet Members:</u>	Councillors	G Davies P Hackett B Kenny	C Meaden H Smith
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillor	P Gilchrist	

24 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

25 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2013 be approved.

26 BUDGET OPTIONS

The Council's Marketing and Engagement Manager gave a brief presentation on the ongoing 'What Really Matters?' Budget Consultation process, which sought the views of Members, staff, residents and businesses upon a range of savings options that had been proposed by officers for consideration by the Cabinet, to address a budget gap of £27.5m. The consultation had launched on 16 September 2013 and had followed a similar format to that used last year. He indicated that some 200 consultation events had been held to date and there had been direct engagement with in the region of 20,000 residents, with over 50 permanent engagement points. To date, over 5000 completed

questionnaires had been received, with over 1000 from members of staff. He provided an indication of response levels by Constituency, which were in the process of being evaluated. He assured Members that every comment made would be read and categorised, and published with the results following the close of the consultation exercise on 6 December 2013. The results would then be presented to the Cabinet on 10 December, with a recommendation to the Council on 16 December 2013.

The Labour Group spokesperson referred to comments that had been made by the Chair in a recent leaflet circulated to residents, which questioned the value of the consultation exercise. He sought clarification from the Chair that he was now satisfied with the process in the light of the officer presentation.

In response, the Chair expressed his personal view that the consultation had only limited value, as it was essentially self-selective by those who chose to engage with it. It could not be taken as being fully representative of the views of the people of Wirral but nevertheless, he believed it to be a significant improvement over the exercise undertaken in 2012/2013.

Members noted that the value of the budget options was in excess of the savings required, in order that the Cabinet would be able to respond to views expressed as part of the consultation. A Scrutiny Review had been undertaken by a Task and Finish Group upon the 'Impact of the 2013/2014 Budget Options and Potential Options for 2014/2015' (see minute 27 post).

It was agreed that in the light of the officers' comments upon the following Regeneration and Environment budget options, the individual views expressed by Members should be referred to the Cabinet for consideration –

Environmental Health Modernisation

£235k

- That a quality service should be maintained and the officers do all that is possible to maximise income.
- That consideration should be given as to whether charges could be made for the star ratings awarded to eateries.
- That measures should be put in place to ensure that there is no risk to public health as a result of the saving and that statutory obligations would continue to be met.

Floral Pavilion – Review of Operations

£400k

- That a detailed and thorough review should examine all existing activities to ensure the efficient operation of the facility to ensure it is in a position to operate and compete in a commercial environment, without reliance on a subsidy paid by the Council.
- That there should be an increased use of new and online technologies and, in view of assurances from officers, a booking fee should be introduced.
- There should be a greater exploration of additional income streams to maximise the use of the venue.
- That any proposed parking charge to be introduced in New Brighton should have regard to the potential impact on the Floral Pavilion.

Improved Memorial Service **£95k**

- No comments were made.

Birkenhead Kennels **£40k**

- No comments were made other than the potential for friction between paid staff and volunteers working together, which would have to be monitored.

CCTV Monitoring **£420k**

- That the proposed option be supported, as it seeks to avoid duplication of CCTV monitoring activities being undertaken by the Council and the Police and Fire and Rescue Service Control Room.
- Assurance was sought that the Police and Fire and Rescue Service were committed to the proposal and had the resource to undertake additional monitoring.
- Assurance was also sought that incidents in Wirral would continue to be addressed promptly, with response times not adversely affected.

Review of Williamson Art Gallery and Birkenhead Priory **£400k**
Wirral Transport Museum **£124k**

- Assurance was sought that all artworks had been subject to valuation.
- In response to a question, the officers confirmed that no consideration had been given to the sale of any of Wirral's cultural assets.
- That, in order to retain our 'museum' status and to ensure for the care of the collections, it was essential to have a curator in post.
- In response to a question from a Member, the officers proposed to provide a briefing note to Members on the arrangements in place regarding artwork on tour.
- In response to concerns expressed by Members in relation to the challenging target and ambitious timescales, the officers indicated that the savings identified for the Williamson Art Gallery may be realised over a longer time period. If so, a further report would be presented.
- Clarification was sought that the Transport Museum buildings and collection would remain in the Council's ownership.
- Members commented on the role of volunteers at the Transport Museum and highlighted their professionalism and competency.

Heritage Fund **£40k**

- Members supported the proposed saving option and noted that although a saving of £40k would be realised, the option would allow the retention of a budget for the continued funding of activities, £12k having been spent in 2013/2014 (£5k on a bus and transport event and £7k for heritage open days).

Reducing Parks and Countryside Maintenance

£850k

- That the maintenance of parks and open spaces was fundamental to leisure activities in Wirral and a reduction could have a detrimental impact on tourism.
- That a more balanced approach should be adopted by reducing maintenance in all parks, rather than a complete withdrawal of maintenance in those parks identified.
- That the officers should give consideration to the suitability of sites for an asset transfer or community partnership approach with local residents groups.
- That Wirral's beaches should be excluded from the savings option, and that maintenance, and removal of spartina grass, should continue.
- That more initiatives should be undertaken to encourage the public to have pride in Wirral's beaches and our parks and open spaces, and to take away litter.
- In response to concerns expressed by Members about the potential impact on Wirral's beaches by a proposal by Peel Holdings to dredge the River Mersey, the officers proposed to circulate a briefing note to all Members on the latest position.
- Concern was expressed about additional costs that could be incurred by the Council as a result of the savings option (e.g. health issues arising from unclean beaches and anti-social behaviour in overgrown parks and open spaces).
- That the officers should identify further disused sites that may be put to public use.

Street Lighting

£85k

- Officers agreed to address concerns that were expressed in relation to the procurement restrictions being in place, which could prevent the use more efficient lighting technology and adversely impact on the Lighting Strategy.
- That, with many residents being in fuel poverty, it was not acceptable to expect residents to provide or improve their own lighting on their premises to reduce dependence on public lighting.
- That the officers should investigate and compare the costs and potential savings associated with new LED lighting technology against dimming the existing conventional lighting.

Highways Winter Maintenance

£85k

- Members noted that there was no need for grit bins to be removed and that salt could be provided to them at the request of residents who were able to self help with gritting, particularly in more severe winters and in those areas of the Borough with steep roads.
- It was noted that the provision and suitability of locations of grit bins, based on local requirements, could be better addressed by the Constituency Committees.

Coastal Defence and Highways Maintenance

£25k

- No comments were made.

Restructure of Housing Strategy, Standards and Renewal Team £206k

- Concern was expressed by Members that a reduction in the staffing levels of the Housing Strategy and Standards and Renewal Team could leave the Council without the expertise required to react to changes in national policy or future Government initiatives to secure economic growth and attract investment in Wirral.
- However, Members noted that at the present time, of the seven posts to be deleted to achieve the level of savings, five had already left the employment of the Council on a voluntary basis.

Car Parking Charges

£100k

- Some comments were made that parking at the locations identified should continue to be free, with the exception of new Brighton, where parking charges could be imposed during the day but could be free in the evening so as not to have a detrimental impact on the operation of the Floral Pavilion.
- That, if parking charges were imposed at the locations identified in the savings option, they should be set at a reduced level so as to mitigate the impact on those residents who used those car parks on a regular basis.
- That, if parking charges were imposed at those locations, there would be a requirement to undertake repair works at some sites to bring them to an acceptable standard.
- That the officers should explore the use of modern technology so as to ensure the most cost effective and convenient method of collection.

Members also gave consideration to whether there were any other areas within the Regeneration and Environment Committee's remit where savings could be identified for consideration by the Cabinet.

The Vice-Chair expressed views –

- That representation should be made to the Government to request that LTP funding should not be ring fenced, so as to give greater freedom to local authorities as to how they used the money to meet local need.
- That representation should be made to Merseytravel to explore the possibility of securing funding to subsidise the winter gritting of bus routes.

Resolved –

- (1) That the range of views expressed by Members in respect of the various savings options be referred to the Cabinet for consideration.**

- (2) That the officers be requested to investigate the suggestions for additional savings/income identified by the Vice-Chair.

27 **SCRUTINY REVIEW: IMPACT OF 2013/2014 BUDGET OPTIONS AND POTENTIAL FOR 2014/2015**

The Chair presented a Scrutiny Review: Impact of 2013/2014 Budget Options and Potential for 2014/2015, which had been undertaken by a Task and Finish Group comprising Councillor Alan Brighthouse (Chair) and Councillor Paul Doughty.

Members thanked Councillors Brighthouse and Doughty and the officer support for the significant work they had undertaken on behalf of the Committee, but were disappointed that the second largest political group had not been represented at any of the six meetings that had been held.

The Chair advised that, given the timescales, it had not been possible to review all of the budget options for 2013/2014 in detail, or the potential options for 2014/2015. However, the Group had focused on the most significant options and had made a number of observations and recommendations.

Resolved – That the Scrutiny Review be referred to the Cabinet for consideration of the recommendations alongside the views expressed by Members to each of the Budget Options (see minute 26 ante).
