



2016/17 Budget Proposals

Scrutiny Report of the Regeneration and Environment Policy & Performance Committee

January 2016

VERSION 1

CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Income / Resource Management.....	4
2.1. Garden Waste Service Fee Increase.....	4
3. Delivering Differently.....	5
3.1. Parks & Community Partnership Working.....	5
3.2. Pest Control.....	5
4. Service Changes.....	6
4.1. Winter Service – Grit Bins.....	6
4.2. Highways Maintenance Works.....	7
4.3. Road Safety.....	7
Appendices	
1 – Attendance.....	9

1. INTRODUCTION BY THE CHAIR

The Regeneration and Environment Policy & Performance Committee has carried out a review of the budget proposals under its remit and followed the process set out by the Coordinating Committee on 10th December 2015.

It was agreed with the Party Spokespersons that all six budget proposals which are out for public consultation would be scrutinised as they were all considered significant in either the savings provided or the value of the service. To ensure there was sufficient time for appropriate scrutiny to take place, the scrutiny of these budget proposals was carried out through two dedicated workshops held on the 11th and 18th January 2016.

This report outlines the proposals that were scrutinised and has captured the relevant comments and suggestions from Members for further consideration. I would like to thank all officers for their time and support in delivering both works shop sessions.

Councillor Mike Sullivan

2. INCOME / RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

2.1 GARDEN WASTE SERVICE FEE INCREASE (£196k)

Summary of Proposal

This proposal would implement an increase in the subscription charge for collecting garden waste from residents' homes. The service currently costs £35 per year per household with the proposal for this to increase to £40, with a £5 discount for residents who subscribe online. This increase amounts to around 10p per week. The garden waste service was launched in its current form three years ago, and around 40,000 residents now buy the service from the Council. Since the service was launched there has been no price increase. This service is entirely optional, and people are able to dispose of their garden waste in a number of different ways; including composting and Household Recycling and Waste Centres.

People who are dissatisfied with the increased charges could choose to cancel their subscription or use a different method to dispose of their garden waste. The Council will publish, as part of ongoing communications campaigns about waste and recycling, detailed information related to the options residents can take should they not wish to continue receiving the service.

Committee Members' Comments

- A concern was raised about a potential drop-off in subscribers which may see an increase in the use of household bins for garden waste. This would increase the cost to the Council of disposal through landfill operators. However, Members acknowledged the marketing campaign carried out this year by the Council to promote the garden waste service and inform people about the consequences of putting garden waste in household bins. The promotion campaign had helped increase subscription levels to the highest level in 3 years. Members also noted the promotion campaign emphasised that the cost for each collection by the Council is only £1.67.
- Members commented that the online discount may disadvantage the elderly and most vulnerable who are unable to access the internet. It was suggested that the Council could consider a discount for garden waste subscriptions for residents aged over 65 years. Members did acknowledge, however, that take-up of the online offer was 90% and that people can go online at various Council buildings.
- Members commented that there is a potential risk of an increase in fly tipping across Wirral should the increase in charge be applied and subscription levels drop off as a result.

3. DELIVERING DIFFERENTLY

3.1 PARKS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP WORKING (£180k)

Summary of Proposal

This option would involve a focus on income generation and increasing pride and community involvement in local areas, resulting in less maintenance, clean up and support being needed from the Council for parks and open spaces. The proposal has a target of £180,000 in 2016/17.

Committee Members' Comments

- Members fully endorsed the proposal and some of the early ideas that have been developed by officers to generate income, including various concessions, general events and garden shows.
- Members agreed that Wirral needs its environment and parks to be attractive as this is crucial to the tourism pledge and people choosing to live in Wirral.
- Members commented that it is important that the service should align itself to the major events that take place across the peninsula and that these events should be promoted more widely to raise resident awareness.
- Members commented that there is an opportunity to become involved in identifying further opportunities for community partnership working and enhancing the offer.

3.2 CHARGING FOR THE PEST CONTROL SERVICE (£30k)

Summary of Proposal

The Council delivers a comprehensive pest control service for residents, businesses and organisations. Parts of the service are provided at a cost, and some other elements are currently provided for free, including treatment services for rats and cockroaches. This proposal would see the Council begin to charge £50 to landlords, business and those residents who take up the service. The budget proposal seeks to generate £30,000 in income to provide a near cost-neutral service by the end of 2016/17.

If this budget option was approved Council customer service staff would be trained to provide general advice on where to go to get advice on home treatments and what alternative private pest control companies operate in Wirral. The Council will also make sure it provides accurate and helpful information to residents on how to mitigate any risk of pest and rat problems.

People who are dissatisfied with the increased charges could choose to self-treat or opt to use the wide range of commercial businesses, large and small, that offer pest control services in Wirral.

Committee Members' Comments

- Members were concerned over the Council's response to those residents who may not be able to pay for the pest control service. Members highlighted the need for due consideration to be applied to how these residents would be treated before a charge is applied. It was suggested that Wirral should investigate the approach taken by other local authorities.

- Members were informed that where residents had a rat infestation that was affecting the community and they failed to take any action, Wirral Council has legal powers to serve notice requiring the owner or occupier to carry out a treatment. However, Members were concerned about the recovery arrangements for any pest control charge where the Council did work in default and suggested that consideration be given to these arrangements prior to implementation.
- Members acknowledged that Wirral has an experienced and highly skilled pest control service. Officer concern over the future viability of providing a free service with current staffing levels was noted. Members were concerned that if a charge was not implemented, there may be a risk of losing the valuable resource leading to uncertainty over the Council's compliance with its public health obligations.
- Members noted that Liverpool City Council previously implemented a charge for the removal of rats but residents did not take up the service, resulting in the decision to revert back to providing a free service. Members agreed that consideration to applying a charge could be made on a trial basis to determine the uptake and a report could be provided to Members at an appropriate date.

4. SERVICE CHANGES

4.1 WINTER SERVICE – GRIT BINS (£30K)

Summary of Proposal

The Council maintains 298 roadside grit bins. 100 of these bins are in locations which are appropriate to effectively support the gritting routes, with an additional 198 being installed at the direct request of residents through community grant funding. This budget proposal will see the Council remove the 198 roadside grit bins funded by the Area Forums, or would require communities or constituency committees to fund filling of the 198 bins which are not the Council's priority grit bins. This option looks at a £30,000 saving to the Council, primarily based on labour and transport costs as well as the cost of refilling the salt up to three times each winter.

Committee Members' Comments

- Members had a concern regarding the legal obligation of the Council in relation to accidents occurring through not keeping ice and snow off roads and footpaths. Members were informed that local authorities do have responsibilities but is not an absolute requirement that 100% of all roads and pathways have to be treated. To comply legally, Wirral has to have a policy and as long as the policy is deemed reasonable by the courts, and is adhered to by the Council, liability does not fall to the Council.
- Members were concerned that this proposal considers the use of constituency committee funding to retain the bins not considered a priority, but there was no clarity on what funding would be made available to constituency committees in future years.
- It was suggested by Members that communities could fund the filling of grit bins if they were left in place, but acknowledged that maintenance of the bins would need to be considered. Members were informed that the Council may have some spare bins that could be used as replacements if required.

4.2 HIGHWAYS MAINTENANCE WORKS (£200K)

Summary of Proposal

This proposal would see the Council use only Government grant – and not council revenue funding – for preventative road maintenance. The proposal would not stop road and pavement maintenance, but would limit the amount of funding invested in it to just the amount required to ensure legal and safety obligations are met from Revenue budgets. Removal of funding for preventative maintenance would realise a saving of £200,000.

Committee Members' Comments

- Members were concerned over the Council's ability to ensure that essential safety repairs continued to be carried out. Assurances were given that the remaining funding available would allow the Council to meet its duty under the Highways Act to provide a safe highway.
- Members commented that removing preventative maintenance could increase costs further down the line on repairs that the Council would otherwise have carried out. Members accepted that this is part of the strategy going to Cabinet about improving the Council's highways asset management systems, which could generate further savings or better utilisation of available funds.
- Members acknowledged the good condition of the roads in Wirral and noted that the Council will need to develop systems to manage the life cycle of its highways assets through investment in new software. Members were pleased that new funding arrangements the Government has put in around innovation could result in more funding being made available through demonstrating best practice.
- Street lighting was highlighted as an ongoing issue. In particular, there were comments around some street lights that have been inactive all winter. Members acknowledged that there is an insufficient budget to fix every street light but were assured that surveys are being carried out before prioritising those that needed to be fixed. Communication to Members will be improved to enable constituents to be updated.

4.3 ROAD SAFETY (£90K)

Summary of Proposal

The budget proposal seeks to remove school crossing patrols where there is already a signal – controlled pedestrian, pelican or puffin crossing in place. The Council believes that, due to the crossing facilities which are in place 24 hours a day, the demand and requirement for a school crossing patrol is greatly reduced. Before this option is implemented, a full risk assessment will be completed on every crossing site. The proposal will see the Council working with education and health partners; including schools to explore alternative funding – or stopping – the operation of school crossing patrols in those locations where a pedestrian crossing is also in place.

Committee Members' Comments

- In relation to risk assessments being carried out, Members were assured that the Council does have the resources available to ensure they are all completed. The age of children crossing roads would also be included in the risk assessment which was an initial concern to Members as examples of children as young as four going to school by themselves were cited.
- Due to fewer road safety officers being employed, Members highlighted the importance of additional road safety awareness provision for schools. Members agreed that the Council is going in the right direction by focusing resources more effectively through materials being provided to schools and schools providing additional support.
- Members stated that having a light-controlled crossing and a school crossing patrol at the same location may cause confusion for both pedestrians and motorists.

Appendix 1 - Attendance

Session 1

- Garden Waste Service Fee Increase
- Winter Service – Grit Bins
- Highways Maintenance Works
- Road Safety

Councillors

Michael Sullivan (Chair)

Steve Williams

Dave Mitchell

John Hale

Jerry Williams

Chris Spriggs

Adam Sykes

Tracey Pilgrim

Gerry Ellis

Officers

Rob Clifford Senior Manager (Highways and Transport)

Mike Cockburn Senior Manager Waste and Environment

Mike Lester Scrutiny Support Officer

Patrick Torpey Scrutiny Support Officer

Session 2

- Pest Control
- Parks & Community Partnership Working

Councillors

Michael Sullivan (Chair)

Steve Williams

Dave Mitchell

John Hale

Jean Stapleton

Officers

Colin Clayton Senior Manager Environmental Health

Mary Worrall Senior Manager Parks and Countryside Services

Mike Lester Scrutiny Support Officer

Patrick Torpey Scrutiny Support Officer