

PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE 15 FEBRUARY 2022

Question One

From Keith Marsh to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

“If the proposed closure of Brackenwood and Hoylake courses is agreed and goes ahead at full council on 28th February, what assures can the council give that they are in a position to act swiftly enough to agree transfers of operators on 1st April. Other operators will want to take over the courses during the height of the golf playing season to ensure that they accrue funds to keep them going through the winter period when the courses are less profitable and have lower footfall. **If the council is unable to move quickly enough for a 1st April transfer to happen, what support can they give to new operators so that they do not have to shoulder the financial burden of either having to take over a course during less profitable times as new operators or taking over the course following a period of closure when the course has been left fallow?”**

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

If the council agrees the budget proposals on 28 February, the relevant Director following discussions with Senior Leadership Team, will make an operational decision whether to suspend the provision of the service on 1 April pending a formal decision by the Tourism Committee. Once the consultation on the courses concludes, the relevant committee will either decide to keep the courses closed on a permanent basis to deliver the budget saving or decide on an alternative proposal.

If the committee decides on an alternative proposal, which may include the transfer of the courses, the Committee will task the relevant Director to progress this, however the Committee would need to identify how the saving is to be made within the relevant budget. The timelines for which cannot yet be determined. If a proposal is then agreed that the courses will be operated by a third party, this will be at no cost to the council.

Question Two

From Daniel Keane to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

“If the proposal does not go ahead and the council retains the golf service in house for all 4 courses, what plans will it introduce to ensure that the service reduces or eliminates the golf subsidy. Given that in 2019 the council made a commitment following a full scrutiny review into the service of golf to invest using capital money into the courses to bring them up to a standard over the next 8 years, that is

presentable and in my view attractive to people using the service thus having the potential for increased income. **Will the council hold itself to that commitment in improving the quality of its service given two STRI commissioned reports that clearly indicated the issues several years ago?"**

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

Irrespective of the outcomes of the budget proposals, and following an exercise to compare Wirral's Golf fees and charges with those of other municipal providers of Golf, the service is proposing to introduce a new pricing model that will seek to reduce the subsidy. This includes those users accessing the service through the Invigor8 scheme.

Some capital investment on Golf Courses has already been undertaken including the improvement of some greens and Health & Safety work as identified in the STRI reports. The criteria for Capital spend include a requirement to demonstrate that the return on investment will cover the repayments of Capital Borrowing. Whilst some degree of increased income may be achieved through course improvements, the general decline in golf participation in recent years, impacts of seasonality, price increases and an oversupply of courses on Wirral may mean that increased usage may not be guaranteed. The Council cannot therefore commit to invest in courses, from which there will not be a level of return to cover the cost of investment.

Question Three

From Robin Clarke to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

"Will the council commit to having a transition period between the council operation and the operation changing to an alternative operator to ensure continuity of service for the people of Wirral and the clubs and societies that use both Hoylake and Brackenwood?"

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

The relevant Director, following discussions with Senior Leadership Team, will make an operational decision whether to suspend the provision of the service on 1 April pending a formal decision by the Tourism Committee. If the director takes this decision, there will be no continuity of service within the transition period.

Question Four

From Jackie Watts to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

"What assurances can the council give that if the proposal isn't agreed and Brackenwood and Hoylake remain open and in council control, that in 12 months' time these courses will not be under the same level of scrutiny again

with all the uncertainty that this brings to residents, clubs, societies and the general public that play and use these courses?”

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

No assurances can be provided to this effect.

Question Five

From Ann Edwards to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

“Brackenwood Golf Club leases their clubhouse from the council and has spent thousands of pounds to upgrade and redecorate various part of the building follow the confirmation last year that the courses were not due for closure. **What support will the council offer to ensure that if the courses close and no alternative operator can be agreed that Clubs with leases with the council will not be expected to pay the remainder of their leases should they be forced to close as a golf club through no fault of their own?”**

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

If a decision is ultimately taken to close golf courses then negotiations will be entered into with the Golf Clubs in relation to termination of the leases.

Question Six

From Anne Litherland and read out on her behalf, to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron

“I took part in the Have Your Say consultation on the Tennis Centre but have realised since then that there was no mention of the gym, or alternative provision for those who use the gym in this consultation. **As the gym is used extensively by the local participants in the Weight Management programme, what will happen to them when the gym closes?”**

Response from Councillor Helen Cameron

Thank you for your question. The final designs for the tennis centre are still being worked through with the design consultants and we have recognised that the need to retain a fitness facility would provide benefits to the final offer and the delivery of our programmes and could likely be considered / potentially retained independently of the design for the broader gymnastics and soft play proposal.

Question Seven

From Jonathon White to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson

“At the end of March 2022, Wirral Council is forecast to have £64.8m in reserves of which £13.6m is unrestricted general fund balances 'for a rainy day' and £51.2m are earmarked reserves. There is evidence available that at least £5m of reserves have not been used over the past few years and are no longer needed. **Can the committee outline clearly to me what the £51.2m in earmarked reserves is for please?**”

Response from Councillor Janette Williamson

A General Fund balance position of £13.6m forms part of the 2022/23 budget proposal discussion at this evening's meeting. The forecast position for the end of March 2022, however, is for a retained balance of £10.7m.

The General Fund balance is in place to support the financial sustainability of the Council and is held to absorb financial impacts that could be felt from emergency situations or other unexpected costs that may arise.

The individual earmarked reserves held for specific Directorate-related activity, along with the forecast position of each of them to the end of March 2022, are provided in the Quarter 3 Budget Monitoring report, which is shown in the papers for this evening's agenda as item 6. There are 48 earmarked reserves in question, with an approximate forecast value of £24m.

In addition to these Directorate-related earmarked reserves, the Council expects to hold £15m in reserves at financial year-end on behalf of schools.

The Council also holds organisation-wide earmarked reserves to manage government grants received as compensation for Business Rates reliefs applied to bills because of decisions made by Central Government, as well as funds received to support the response to the Covid 19 pandemic and grant monies received in respect of the Local Income Tax Guarantee, which relates to both Council Tax and Business Rates income. A reserve position is also maintained for insurance related matters. Approximately £29.6m is forecast to be held at year-end across these organisation-wide items.

Question Eight

From John Jones to the Chair, and answered by the Chair of the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, Councillor Helen Cameron and by the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, Councillor Wendy Clements

“With cuts being made to leisure centres, libraries and £200,000 in youth provision cuts **how do the council propose that these cuts won't impact the mental health of our young people even further, will we not see an increase in anti- social**

behaviour and further costs to the local authority and other services such as the NHS and the Police force?”

Response from Councillors Helen Cameron and Wendy Clements

Libraries

Library Service 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.

Shared programmes of work will be developed in targeted areas to support literacy and independent reading. This will be a primary role of the team of Librarians to support. For the five “non-staffed” libraries listed, which are in the more deprived areas, discussions will be held with the organisation where the library is co-located to ensure that space and I.T. facilities are available. These libraries will still be supported by staff on an ad hoc basis to ensure we meet the aims and objectives of the Library Strategy and to ensure that stock and equipment is up to date and in working order. This is the model that is about to be piloted in Secombe Children’s Centre.

Children’s Services

The reduction of £100k from the Council budget to The Hive Youth Zone is being offset by a £100k donation from local business regeneration. In the short-term this will mitigate against potential reduction of services for young people. In the long-term The Hive Youth Zone is increasing its own capacity for fundraising and will work in partnership with the Local Authority to increase external grant income.

In the 2021-22 budget setting process, the Council invested additional funding into its own Youth Services. Over £100k of this funding was allocated for weekend activity which was surplus to the core youth offer. The proposal is to cease the additional activity and protect the core neighbourhood offer, which will continue to deliver with the existing resource of highly experienced and skilled staff.

Wirral Youth Collective, a collaboration of organisations providing activity for young people, will continue to work together to secure funding from grant streams such as the Youth Endowment Fund, Violence Reduction Partnership and Safer Streets initiative to provide positive experiences and diversionary activities for young people.

Question Nine

From Councillor Jo Bird to the Chair, Councillor Janette Williamson

“Last year, Wirral Council was one of nine councils who asked the government for exceptional financial support loans. Repayments and interest on these capitalisation loans are to be repaid over 20 years. Wirral asked for around £20m loans for last year and this year.

As things turned out, the full amount was not required last year and only £6.5m was borrowed, and £6.4m is now proposed to borrow this year. At the time of making the decision to borrow, at Budget Council last year, Wirral councillors did not know what strings, conditions and interventions would be attached to these two loans. But we know now.

Some Councils like Nottingham and Peterborough have made political choice to not to take their second loan.

Any loan capital has to be repaid plus interest, usually from the Council's revenue income – which is a political decision that makes it harder to balance the budget without cuts to frontline services.

If as proposed, the Council drew down £6.4m of loan for this year, how much money next year, each year and in total would be taken out of revenue income as a result?"

Response from Councillor Janette Williamson

If the Council was to draw down £6.4m capitalisation for 21/22, the impact would be: 22/23 £457,300.

Total £8,309,163.

Each year from 2023/24 – 2041/42 is a different amount decreasing from £452,383 in 2023/24 to £378,847 in 2041/42.