

Scrutiny Board (Safer and Stronger Communities)

2013/14 initial Budget Proposals of the Environment and Neighbourhoods Directorate

Observations and recommendations of the Scrutiny Board

Introduction

The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board agreed to consider the initial 2013/14 budget proposals of the Environment and Neighbourhoods Directorate that are relevant to the Scrutiny Board. In view of the need to report its findings in January, the initial budget proposals were considered during the Board's December meeting but also during a working group meeting on 8th January 2013, to which all Board Members were invited to attend.

Board Members received an extract from the Budget report to Executive Board on 12th December which sets out the initial 2013/14 budget proposals of the Environment and Neighbourhoods directorate. The Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods and the directorate's Head of Finance attended the Board's December meeting and working group meeting.

This report presents the agreed view of the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board. The Board has requested that these comments are incorporated into the report to go before Executive Board in February 2013 in relation to the 2013/14 budget proposals.

Observations and Recommendations

In delivering this budget, consideration was given to the individual budget pressures and savings of the Environment and Neighbourhoods Directorate, as outlined within the Executive Board report on 12th December 2012. Further clarification was sought on a number of areas. In conclusion, the Board made the following observations and recommendations:

Proposal to remove the subsidisation of allotment services

The Scrutiny Board identified allotment provision as an area of interest as part of its work this year. In line with the proposal to eliminate the subsidy on this service, the Scrutiny Board notes that income would potentially need to increase threefold.

Increases in allotment rents have previously been kept in line with inflation and this could change significantly depending upon what model is put in place to increase service income. Allotment charges have also previously been agreed via the Allotment Working Group (a consultative group representing allotment holders), with a full years notice given to plot holders of any planned increase. Such consultative practices would therefore need to be considered in terms of the directorate's ability to achieve the savings anticipated for the 2013/14 financial year.

Whilst the Scrutiny Board supports the principle of removing subsidy of this service, it recommends that the Executive Board investigates whether a phased approach in

terms of any proposed charging increases would be more appropriate. Linked to this, further effort should also be given to building capacity for more plots to become self-administered in the future.

The Scrutiny Board acknowledges that Leeds City Council is not the allotment authority for the whole of the metropolitan district as responsibility also lies with relevant Parish and Town Councils to develop further land for allotment use. In view of this, the Scrutiny Board has already requested further mapping of all allotment provision across the city with a view to exploring how best to meet existing demand for allotment plots.

Recommendation 1

That the Executive Board investigates whether a phased approach in line with proposals to remove subsidy of allotment services through increased charges would be more appropriate. Linked to this, further effort should also be given to building capacity for more plots to become self-administered in the future.

Proposal to remove the subsidisation of bereavement services

Whilst Leeds is equal highest with Liverpool for cremations, it is third highest for new burials, some £888 lower than the highest core city, Birmingham. However, the Scrutiny Board acknowledges that when these charges are put into context of overall costs of provision, this service is being subsidised by the Council (the net cost of the service in 2011/12 was £576k).

The Scrutiny Board appreciates that difficult and sensitive financial decisions are now required, which includes removing the subsidy on bereavement charges. However, it maintains that this should remain a non-profit service and a balanced approach should be taken across the service when reviewing charging increases. Linked to this, more effort is needed to actively promote the availability of hardship grants for those in financial need.

Recommendation 2

That the Executive Board ensures that the bereavement service remains a non-profit service and that a balanced approach is taken in removing the subsidisation of this service through charging increases. Linked to this, the Council should be actively promoting the availability of hardship grants for those in financial need.

Closure of Middleton and Gotts Park golf courses

Traditionally the Council has played a key role in promoting health and wellbeing through leisure and sporting activities, enabling wider access to sporting facilities through affordable pricing structures.

In acknowledging that the Middleton and Gotts Park golf courses are running at a loss (in 2011/12 the deficit at Gotts Park was £86.3k and the deficit at Middleton was £103.3k), the Scrutiny Board appreciates the need to address these costs and review the sustainability of these courses.

However, linked to the proposal for closure, the Scrutiny Board recommends that more detailed evidence is brought back to the Executive Board to demonstrate that all other viable options, such as charging increases and asset transfer opportunities, aimed at reducing the expenditure for these courses have been thoroughly appraised and consulted upon.

Recommendation 3

Linked to the proposal for closure of Middleton and Gotts Park golf courses, the Scrutiny Board recommends that more detailed evidence is brought back to the Executive Board to demonstrate that all other viable options, such as charging increases and asset transfer opportunities, aimed at reducing the expenditure of these courses have been thoroughly appraised and consulted upon.

Maintenance of Bowling Greens

The Scrutiny Board learned that the Council remains committed to maintain existing Bowling Greens but is exploring opportunities to reduce costs (the cost to the Council equates to a subsidy of £133 per bowler). In line with this, the Scrutiny Board particularly welcomes the proposal to explore opportunities for transferring on-going Bowling Green maintenance to some of the existing bowling clubs that have a high number of active members.

However, the Scrutiny Board was surprised to learn that some Bowling Greens continue to be maintained by the Council despite having no members. In acknowledging that Leeds has more Bowling Greens than any other core city and the need to maintain these at such a high standard, the Scrutiny Board recommends that the maintenance of unused Bowling Greens is also brought under review.

Recommendation 4

That the maintenance of any unused Bowling Greens is brought under review as part of the wider proposal to reduce the expenditure of Bowling Greens across the city.

Weedspraying contract

Whilst acknowledging that the retendering of the weedspraying contract has resulted in a saving of £100k, there were some concerns raised by the Scrutiny Board about the performance quality of the new service and the potential for additional costs to be incurred through remedial works. To mitigate this, the Scrutiny Board reiterated the importance of having robust contract monitoring processes in place.

Reduction of agency staff within the refuse collection service

Whilst acknowledging the additional budget pressures resulting from the recruitment of longstanding agency staff, this move is welcomed by the Scrutiny Board.

The Scrutiny Board acknowledges the uniqueness of this service in terms of its reliance on agency workers to provide immediate holiday and sickness cover for refuse staff. However, the Board also emphasises the importance of balancing this need appropriately and to continue addressing longstanding issues in terms of

driving down sickness levels within the service and reducing the number of missed collections. Such issues will continue to be monitored by the Scrutiny Board.

Disposal of commercial waste and the collection of bulky household waste

In acknowledging that the Council has been subsidising businesses by paying for the disposal of their waste via Household Waste Sites, the Scrutiny Board is pleased to note that the existing ban on the acceptance of commercial waste at all Household Waste Sites will now be actively enforced.

The ability to meet demand for bulky household waste collections has also been a longstanding issue for the Council. Whilst this service has traditionally been free to the public, the Scrutiny Board acknowledges the need to now consider an appropriate charging system for the collection of bulky household items. The Board is particularly pleased to note that the Council will also aim to work more closely with Third Sector organisations to recycle and re-use more of the items that are collected in order to divert it from landfill.

However, in line with the above proposals, the Scrutiny Board also emphasised the need for the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods to ensure that the monitoring and enforcement of fly-tipping remains adequately resourced.

Recommendation 5

In line with the proposals for the disposal of commercial waste and the collection of bulky household waste, the Scrutiny Board recommends that the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods ensures that the monitoring and enforcement of fly-tipping remains adequately resourced.