

**CABINET
17TH FEBRUARY 2009**

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION – BUDGET CONSULTATION RESPONSES
RECEIVED UP TO 12TH FEBRUARY 2009 AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE VIEWS**

1. The report at item 4(c) on today's agenda contains details of responses received to the budget consultation up to 6th February 2009. The consultation period ended on 12th February. The following responses, including the Talking Together event held at the Dolphin Centre on 10th February, have been received between 7th and 12th February.
 - a. Open public consultation – emails, letters, telephone, leaflets, on-line forum
 - b. Petition and letters regarding proposed closure of the Mayor's Charity Shop
 - c. Petition from Heighington Parish Council regarding proposed closure of public conveniences
 - d. Petition from the Friends of South Park regarding the proposed closure of the Aviary
 - e. Letter from Unison
 - f. Talking Together, Dolphin Centre, 10 February 2009
2. The responses are attached at **Additional Information I to VI**. Responses have been summarised in similar format to that previously used and detailed individual responses are also attached.
3. Resources Scrutiny Committee concluded their consideration of the draft Medium Term Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Plan 2009-13 on 10th February 2009. The Task and Finish Review Group's recommendations to Resources Committee were endorsed by the Committee and are attached at **Additional Information VII**.

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Additional Information I

Open Public Consultation – emails, letters, telephone, leaflets, on-line forum

1. Consultation responses prior to Cabinet on 14th January agreeing proposals are reported in **Item 4(c), Annex C**
2. Open consultation responses received after 14 January Cabinet meeting, by 6 February are also reported in **Item 4(c), Annex D.**
3. Responses received between 7 and 12 February are summarised in Table 1 and individual responses are reproduced below.
4. **Table 2** is a summary of ALL open public consultation responses received between 15 January and 12 February

Table 1 – Summary of Budget Consultation Responses Received between 7 and 12 February

Number Received	Comments from Residents via	Aviary in South Park	Mayors Charity Shop	Pedestrian / Cycle Training	Public Conveniences	Head of Steam	Car Parking Charges	Eastbourne Complex	Other Specific Services	Total
23	Emails	11	1	5	5	1	2	3	7	35
20	On-Line	14	3	1				2		20
10	By Post	3	2	1				1	5	12
53	Total	28	6	7	5	1	2	6	12	67

Individual Responses

Resident Comments via E-Mails

I am responding to the proposed budget cuts as a resident of Darlington, a parent of 2 children, a part time casual member of staff working as a cycle training instructor for the council, and as a member of the Friends of South Park.

Cycle and Pedestrian Training

I am shocked to see figures of £45 per child for cycle training and £17 per child for pedestrian training proposed as new charges.

Assuming £45 relates to level 1/2 training amounting to 5 sessions over 7.5 hours, this works out at £9 per 1.5 hour session. There is no way parents are going to pay that kind of money, whether they have it or not. The end result will be the demise of cycle training in Darlington, which would make a mockery of the town's attempts to encourage us all to use our cars less and walk and cycle more. Charging anything for training will put barriers in the way of the very children who need it the most - the types of children who are allowed out on their bikes alone and potentially grow up to be the teenagers who plague our town riding without any consideration for others.

How does charging for training fit with us being a Cycle Demonstration Town and 'LocalMotion'? As your corporate plan states "The council has a key role to play in promoting healthy lifestyles..." as opposed to putting barriers in the way.

I believe parents will be even less likely to pay for pedestrian training, after all we are all pedestrians and parents will simply think they can do it themselves for nothing.

Aviary in South Park

As a member of the Friends of South Park, I know from surveys we have carried out in the past that visitors do not want to lose the aviary, it is well loved and a definite attraction for visitors to the park whether young or old. It may not be the best looking but it does bring a lot of pleasure to children and adults and is a unique feature of the park (a Unique Selling Point, if you like) which no other park in Darlington or near by can boast.

The figures quoted for savings to be made if it is closed can be disputed (see forum comments from Paul Place and others) and nobody from the council has provided a breakdown of the figure quoted. I believe the majority of users of the park want the aviary to remain open. It is a free facility which brings pleasure to many. Surely there are other options to consider - how about asking for donations from visitors on Fireworks display night to help pay the running costs? It is the one night when the birds have a tough time with all the noise and commotion and I'd be happy to make a donation in this way.

Public conveniences

I have been meaning to contact the council for some time on the state of the public toilets in Cockerton. I regularly visit Cockerton to shop and use the library with my 2 children. We dread needing the toilet when we are there since they are in a poor state of repair, look disgusting, and we actually feel scared going into them in case of what we might find. If they were brought up to a 21st century standard then I'm sure residents would use them. There is no alternative toilet except for visiting a pub which I am not prepared to do with young children. Closing the toilets altogether should not be the solution - we need toilets in Cockerton otherwise less people will visit to use the shops, library, etc. Why doesn't the library have a public toilet?

Your proposal seems to be another case of the council running down a facility so that it can then say it will cost too much to maintain and renovate and therefore must be closed. Cockerton is a thriving shopping area, which must be benefiting from visitors from West Park and other areas, the parking is free which is a major bonus, but the toilets are an eyesore and an embarrassment which must be addressed without resorting to closure.

Eastbourne Gym

How can the council state it has a key role to promote healthier lifestyles and then propose cutting the opening hours of this gym. It is in just the kind of area of town where you should be promoting health and fitness and encouraging residents to use the local facilities. How many residents know they can turn up and pay for a one-off session? What are you doing for the increasing number of unemployed in the area to help them to get fit? Isn't this just the time to be offering reduced rates to encourage people to use the facilities more not less. If someone can walk to the gym they are a lot more likely to use it, than have to travel into town to the Dolphin Centre.

Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to express my great disappointment at hearing that shutting the aviary at South Park is being considered for cost saving purposes.

As a family we regularly go to South Park to visit the aviary specifically every week and my one year old son loves watching the birds and listening to the noises they make. It makes Darlington unique compared to so many places in Britain. Surely we should be maintaining the aviary as opposed to keeping open services that are not being utilised fully, such as, Eastbourne Sports Complex at low visitor times. Especially when there is alternative provision at the Dolphin Centre. Where can adults and children enjoy the pleasure of such beautiful creatures without travelling great distances or paying high entrance fees at zoos?

Having moved to Darlington 3 years ago I have found South Park to be a wonderful community place and taking away its greatest attraction/feature in times when the government is encouraging the public to experience fresh air and the world around us is a huge loss for the present and future generations of Darlington.

Teaching outside of Darlington I know children who would love to have access in their local area to an aviary but instead of the educational, community and pleasure value the council is more concerned with a financial saving...a saving that is much less than the other suggestions put forward in the budget proposals.

If the aviary is closed it will be a great travesty!

Please can you confirm receipt of my views/comments

Thanking you in advance

DL3 0GD

Dear Sir/Madam

I wish to add my comments regarding the proposals for the new 2009 budget.

School Improvements

I have 2 children both attending the infants and juniors

I would like to see improvements at both Mowden Infants and Junior Schools, the schools were both built in the 1960's and now a bit long in the tooth. They both need internal and external work doing. Here are some examples.

New toilet facilities
Separate Classrooms
Removal of steps at Mowden Juniors
External Painting on both buildings
New Fencing

Of course a new more modern school would be a good idea and merging the two schools together. Other schools are getting new buildings so why not Mowden.

Waste Proposals

I think we should invest in wheelie bins for every household in Darlington. We are the only authority in the area without them. Black bags are horrible and smelly and so unsightly and they make the streets look untidy on collection day especially in the heat they start to smell and they attract vermin and other animals when being stored once full and awaiting collection. So come on DBC spend the money on improving our waste collection and lets have proper bins.

I hope you will consider my proposals

Many Thanks
Mowden Resident

Below are my comments on the proposals.

1. Head of Steam – reduce the entry charges and increase range of goods for sale.

At the prices charged and the lack of interest for children it is a once only visit.

Give a special or free entry to Darlington residents

Change the name back to North Road Railway Museum. Head of Steam means nothing apart from possibly the name of a pub.

2. To close the Aviary is penny pinching in the extreme. To a lot of small children it is their first contact with birds close too.
3. Stop throwing money at the council estates with totally unnecessary refurbishments, road repairs and street furniture.

In other areas of the town the roads are desperately in need of repair.

4. Cancel permanently the yearly fireworks display. The cost compared with the return, damage to the south park and pollution of the atmosphere makes the repeating of this event totally unsupportable.
5. Stop this ridiculous "Sea side " in the market event. It is a total waste of money and effort.
6. Stop these special event markets. (I.e French markets.)I do not know how much they pay to have a stall but I doubt if it covers the cost of providing the stalls. and clearing up after them. It also takes custom away from the long suffering stall holders in the market and other shops. The number of additional people it brings to the town is I would think negligible. In fact a lot of people like myself keep out of the town centre when such events are on.

7. Reconsider the proposed demolition of part of the recently refurbished (at great cost) Arts Centre to increase the size of the Sixth Form College. Darlington needs a building such as the Arts Centre to accommodate the various groups who use it.
8. The cost of heating the Arts centre could be greatly reduced if a modern system had been included in the refurbishment. In most of the rooms the temperature is uncontrollable. Even with all the radiators turned off the large feed pipes make the rooms too hot.

Regards

Here's one way the council could have saved money.....

In sugar hill park they constructed three completely pointless gateway arches

I say pointless because they aren't attached to anything :

There aren't any fences going around Sugar Hill park - the boundaries are made out of shrubs and bushes except for a small section, maybe 30 feet long, which is opposite Holy Family school, which has been renewed at the same time as the archways were built. (However, this is only because the stream runs through the park at this section.)

Nor are there any gates attached to the arches!!

So, although they look very elegant, they serve absolutely no purpose at all - I know myself and many other residents living nearby would have preferred if the money had been spent elsewhere, such as cleaning all the broken glass from the paths in the park, or sweeping up all the dog dirt off the pavements

Regards

I am disappointed that the toilets at Cockerton are to be closed. The shopping centre is used a lot by the older person who will miss the facility as I will.

Decisions like this help to keep people at home, instead of using the shops, and getting out and about.

We need more public toilets not less, I can only hope that the council can keep the facility open.

Dear DBC

I was somewhat taken aback to see that the closure of the South Park Aviary is being sold on the basis that it would save £35,000. The actual cost of running the aviary (if you include half of one of the gardeners posts) is approx £12 - 14,000). As this post is unlikely to be cut the actual saving of closing the aviaries is approx £4 - £6,000 p.a. and quite possibly less than that.

The £35,000 assumed that certain new strategies and measures would be implemented and these never were. In fact the aviary is now well run without the need for these (i.e. a full time member of staff / more vets inspections / higher maintenance budgets etc etc).

I have kept a dignified silence since leaving South Park but I'm afraid that I cannot sit by and watch DBC pull the wool over the public's eyes by claiming that closing the aviaries will save

£35,000 either now – or in the future if these additional measures are seen as absolutely essential to run the aviary. If they were they should have been implemented nearly 2 years ago.

Despite some problems that having the aviaries have caused in the past a great deal of work was done by park staff and others to correct this. The aviaries are a big attraction in the park. I visit regularly with my 3yr old son who loves them.

It would be a great shame to see them go. Perhaps closing down the second Bowling Green might be a good option as this would save some money and staff time.

I do hope DBC do change their minds about this and respond to the huge amount of public pressure that is being mustered and I urge you to be a little more open and honest about the actual savings that will be made.

Kind regards

Can we object to the parking charges as the 3 for 2 offer makes parking your car for a short stay cheaper than using the bus - this can't fit in with the Local Motion campaign never mind in curing congestion etc,etc.

Arriva

I have read the proposals in detail and find that some of the cost cutting is quite a stab in the dark, with in some cases minimal savings i.e. closing the aviary at the South Park. This would be a saving of 35k but the aviary actually gives a lot of pleasure to a vast number of people, and, considering that it has been there in excess of 50 years would certainly be a big blow to the children of the area.

Closing public conveniences does look attractive, but as the term describes these are for the public to use, many have been closed over the years.

Its very annoying that over the last 18 months we have been hearing about the two massive overspends on the Town Centre pedestrian works and the Cross Town route that have been well documented. It would also be right to say that the shortfall equates to the approximate overspend. That's a coincidence.

All the talk of no one being held responsible as they have left the employment of the Council is rubbish, as, ultimately it is the Chief Executive, whoever that may be who is accountable. Once again the Council has massively messed up but it's the residents of Darlington who ultimately suffer and pay up!

Regards
DL1 4DQ

After all the recent bad publicity and rising crime figures surrounding the cemetery I propose for the cemetery to have CCTV installed. As administrator of the petition to have CCTV installed at the cemetery, a CCTV supply company said they can supply a system free of charge, but would need installing. There are over 1,200 signatures on the petition so far and it has only been running a week, we have set up a facebook page for people to join to air their views and there are over 3,800 members already within the first week, with a lot of comments coming through that their loved one's graves to have been targeted for theft and vandalism.

Please help get CCTV installed in the cemetery.

Thank you

It would be a terrible shame to close the aviary.

Do you have any idea how many people have visited the park to spend time at the aviary over the last 25 years?

I would imagine that the vast majority of parents in Darlington have visited the aviary with their young children numerous times and taken great enjoyment from one of the towns more endearing facilities. All four of my children had a marvellous time watching the antics of all the various birds and animals on show and were encouraged by their visits, to look after their own pets at home and to get to understand how to look after animals and be responsible in a number of different ways for their upkeep. This experience has given them a tremendous empathy for animals and they are much more rounded people for that.

I would not be averse to putting something into this project, perhaps in the form of £1 - £5 on the Council Tax and I am sure that the majority of people in Darlington that have experienced South Park aviary would feel the same.

The Mayors Charity Shop should remain open as it provides an excellent way of recycling items which might otherwise go to the tip. These items are purchased at reasonable cost and make money for local charities. I run a local group for the visually impaired and the donation we received from the fund made a huge difference to our activities.

I often take in items, and make purchases at the shop and find it is always busy. It is run by volunteers who work hard and are always cheerful.

Because of its location it is easy to drop off heavy items, which would probably not be taken to the other charity shops, in the town.

Other charity shops mainly give to specific groups, whereas the Mayors Shop targets many different local charities and the donations make a big difference to smaller groups.

Maybe any really essential repairs could be carried out and any work phased in over coming years. It is a very sad day if a shop that has made a real difference to local people might have to close down.

Please find some way to keep it open.

Dear Councillors

It was with great shock that I read of plans to close South Park Aviary as part of your cost cutting exercise.

I fully appreciate the economic climate which we find ourselves in but I do not believe that the way forward is to cut back on services which have for many years provided additional added value to the community. What Darlington has is an immense sense of pride in its market town heritage with South Park acting as a jewel in the crown of the towns appeal you visitors from outside the borough. The aviary provides an important visitor attraction for children and adults alike and is a key component in the South Park package.

I'm particularly concerned that the Council feels the need to cut back on funding for the park in general and as a key stakeholder you have a duty of care to ensure it remains a top level attraction. As one of the oldest parks in the North East, it has attracted millions of pounds of outside funding and as a resource for the people of the Borough it must be maintained.

I feel this move would be a hugely unpopular move and requires some creative thinking about budgets. There is huge potential to attract funding and sponsorship into the park to cover these sorts of costs and this should be explored in more detail before a decision is made that will leave a huge void for the 1000s of visitors and residents who engage in the park each week. You should look at other councils who have actually increased spending on public spaces such as park's to give residents something to be proud of despite the credit crunch!

Best regards
DL3 9NT

I read with interest your article in the Town Crier about the budget proposals for Darlington Borough Council.

What caught my attention the most was the increase in parking charges in Darlington Town Centre, for many reasons:

Firstly, since the 'regeneration' of Darlington Town Centre many smaller shops have struggled with a loss of business. This has not improved since the credit crunch. Increasing parking costs will only put people off instead of encouraging them to come to the town. The '3 for 2' deal is good, but unless meeting someone for coffee or lunch, could you really spend 3 hours in Darlington, due to the lack of shops? Also with places like Teesside Park not so far away (moreso for car users) with free parking, it becomes much more tempting to spend those couple of pounds on petrol to go elsewhere.

Secondly, £1 an hour is what you pay in somewhere like Newcastle to park your car (granted, not in the big multi storeys but definitely in the smaller car parks). Don't get me wrong, Darlington is a nice place to shop but you cannot compare it with the shops in Newcastle, so why are parking charges so high?

It was a shame when free parking in places like Grange Road and Northumberland Street was scrapped and i imagine that also contributed to businesses suffering.

Would it not be possible to introduce disc parking to Darlington, a choice popular in places like Northallerton or Richmond? Or if you must charge, make it free from 4-4.30? This way people not working in the town centre could pop into town on their way home from work without having to pay £1 to pop into the shops - instead of going to the big supermarkets with free parking? I think a lot of people would agree this was a good idea, I work out of town and if i could get parked in the town at the end of the day for free i would pop in much more, instead of rushing to my local retail park at lunchtime. Yes there is free parking near the college for example but after a day at work who wants to be adding more time onto the end of the day?

I understand these ideas won't be saving money for the council but will hopefully in these tough economic times keep the shops going which ultimately must be making money for the council with rent/council tax - which is better than the shops being closed.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I hope you will take my views and ideas into consideration Regards

Whilst I agree with your other proposals, I feel that it would be wrong to charge for the cycle and pedestrian training in schools. Parents may well feel they cannot afford to pay towards the cost, and this could cause the training to be withdrawn. It is so important nowadays for children to be safety conscious on our busy roads that the training service must continue.

Olympic street

I use the south park daily and get much enjoyment seeing the birds in the aviary, so why does something that is educational have to be taken away when you purposely built a education center in the park. You will be taking away enjoyment not only from me but all the small children who like to see the birds as well. So please don't close something which is part of the south park.

I wish to object to the proposed closure of Heighington Toilets.
They are an important facility used extensively by many people.
Bus drivers find them helpful on their long drives up to Tow Law
Council workers who are working in the area are aware of the toilets and as there are no similar facility in the area, they are used often.
Road Contractors, Northumbrian Water, Telephone engineers Gas fitters and Northern Electric people all know of this facility and all use it
Visitors to the church, to our fetes, to our many events, to our Remembrance Day Services, tourists - ALL are appreciative of the service that the that the toilets provide

And then we have people with diabetes who find the toilets invaluable

And on top of these people we have the local residents themselves - parents with children, patients who have come out of the Doctors having e=waited for some time, and then we have the people getting off the buses and so it goes on.

Loosing our toilets is yet one more facility that is lost to the village.

I would suggest that we stop Talking Together which will more than cover the cost for our village Toilet.

Regards

I think some of the proposals for cuts are reasonable, the main one I take issue with is the proposal to either cut, or charge for, pedestrian and cycle training in schools.

This is a very important part of children's education, in terms of safety, responsibility, health, sustainability, community, etc. In my opinion it should be part of the national curriculum and centrally funded. As it is not, then the council should definitely provide it. By ending this provision you run the risk of increasing road accidents, increasing traffic as parents will be more likely to drive their children to school, thus increasing children's health problems and pollution.

The suggestion to charge parents, especially for the pedestrian training, is completely unworkable. How can you deny such an important aspect of education to some children because their parents either can't or won't pay?

And to expect schools to pay out of their budgets is unfair as they are already stretched. The council currently do a good job providing this vital service, it doesn't cost that much and I believe it should be maintained.

I agree with raising parking charges - as well as raising extra revenue, hopefully it will encourage more people to leave their cars at home, benefitting the environment and people's health.

DL1 2YF
As per Town Crier invitation to comment

Proposals as per Town Crier

- 1 Yes close Head of Steam during the week
- 2 Yes reduce the opening times of Eastbourne Sports Complex
- 3 No Keep aviary Open for the young kids and tourists. Years ago this was looked after by volunteers.
- 4 No Keep Public toilets open for obvious reasons A stupid idea to close them.
- 5 Yes Reduce regen. work
- 6 Yes reduce Highways planning
- 7 No Keep Mayors charity shop open. Find a sponsor to do any repairs.
- 8 Yes Increase the car park charges to £1 Forget the silly bargain statement and make it a simple £1 for 3 hours.
- 9 Yes Stop the cycle and pedestrian safety at schools. It's a parental responsibility and in any case do the kids go on to make some meaningful use of the training that has been provided?
- 10 **Examine the hierarchical structure of the Directorate and get rid of some of the dead wood. In particular those who cause some much debt to the council tax payers.**
- 11 **And why do we need so many personnel (61) employed by the council who earn over £50k per year.
Try a restructuring exercise and then the council tax payers may get some value for money. Not like the "empire building" we have at present.**
- 12 **Cut out some of the frivolous and cosmetic projects that have no benefit whatsoever to the council tax payers. Afterall it's their money being wasted.**

Dear Sirs,

The government is putting money into fitness initiatives. The TV runs constant adverts advising us to keep fit so Darlington Council want to close a gym. Eastbourne Sports Complex is the best kept secret in Darlington; most people I speak to don't know it's there.

I go to Pilates and my husband goes to the gym twice a week, not everyone wants to go in the evening and I'm sure if you advertised this excellent facility it would be bursting at the seams.

Don't close it down but advertise it more and give a better range of facilities during the week, it has free parking and friendly staff, ideal for senior citizens and mums with children at school

On reading the latest Town Crier magazine I was horrified to see that you are considering closing the South Park aviary. I have a 2 year old son who loves to go and see the birds at the park, as do a lot of my friends' children. So much money has been spent on the park in recent years (and may I say you've done a great job so far) it would be a crying shame to lose the aviary which is a wonderful attraction and we should be proud to still have this feature which used to be so common in parks such as ours. Once these items of interest disappear then people's enthusiasm for coming to the park will diminish and you will end up with another unused area of town. Surely the children of the area are worth spending £35,000 on (although having visited the 'talking together' area on your website this figure appears to be under question.....).

Regarding the Eastbourne Sports Complex I find it incredible that with the town's Local Motion initiative you are even considering closing any sporting facility. I know we have the Dolphin Centre which is a wonderful asset but the services provided there are not always fit for purpose. For most of last year I attended a Pilates class there and regularly we were 'shoved' into a squash court for our session as the Central Hall was unavailable - and heaven forbid we should ever have been allowed regular access to the Studio - that would be far too perfect a venue for use. I have started attending a similar class run by the same instructor but at the Eastbourne

Sports Complex. Granted the centre is not in a particularly tidy area of the town and I have to travel further to get there, but the room is perfect for use and the staff give you a warm welcome (as do Dolphin Centre staff). Until the Dolphin Centre can comfortably accommodate it's current users - and then allow for the extra patronage that will result from closing other, smaller centres - places like Eastbourne must be left to function. Incidentally, I was unaware of the existence of the Eastbourne Complex until the Pilates instructor told me about it, perhaps if it was advertised more it would be better used and could generate more income for the town?

Thank you for giving people the opportunity to comment on your proposals. I hope that you take my comments into consideration and that Darlington continues to be a safe and happy place to live.

Kind regards,

I understand that a petition concerning the possible closure of public toilets in Darlington is to be presented to the Council today. I attach (and paste below) a letter in support of that petition.

Canon Philip Thomas

***St Michael's Church,
c/ The Vicarage
East ~Green
Heighington
Co. Durham
DL5 6PP
Tel.01325 / 312134***

To the Chief Executive,
Darlington Borough council,
Town Hall
Darlington.

Re: Public Lavatories in Heighington

Dear Sir,

I write to support the concerns of petitioners resisting the suggestion that the public lavatories in Heighington should be closed. I was not a sponsor of the petition but support it from my particular perspective as Vicar of Heighington.

Apart from routine services, the church also organises regular social gatherings (at least twice a week) with average attendances of between 30 and 50, and occasional concerts, exhibitions, conferences and school visits where more than 100 people are often present. These occasions attract members of the general public and not just churchgoers, for whom toilet facilities are often necessary. The nature of such events mean that older people or families with young children are involved which often makes that necessity especially urgent!

There are also 'occasional offices' – funerals and weddings – at which guests have often travelled for some distance and require access to toilets.

A few years ago the Parochial Church Council considered whether it would be possible to provide a lavatory in or adjoining the church. With the statutory requirements of caring for a Grade 1 listed building this proved to be virtually impossible, but the main reason for not pursuing this further was the fact that public toilets are situated close to the main church gate – actually situated within the curtilage of the churchyard.

I could say that on numerous occasions, when guests or visitors have been directed to the public toilets they have remarked that their existence speaks well of the local community, and the Local Authority which cares for them. Being in the area I know that the people waiting at the bus-stop, passing motorists and lorry drivers – and sometimes a Vicar in a hurry - also appreciate their 'convenience'.

I hope the petitioners seeking the continued provision of public toilets in this village are successful in their plea.

The Rev Canon, Dr Philip Thomas,
Vicar of Heighington

Dear Council Members,

The aviary at South Park has given pleasure to many small children over the years. In fact it was a great delight to my children when they were young and they would ask especially to visit South park. Upon arrival the aviary would be the first place that they would visit. I was shocked therefore when I visited the park two days ago to find that the council were thinking of removing it in a petty cost cutting exercise. I would have liked to come to the meeting but did it was at too short notice.

I, like others have heard that the figure quoted for it's upkeep is far in excess of what is actually spent upon the bills, and upkeep. I cannot comment on this but it does seem rather unbelievable. I wonder if the financial breakdown for this is available. I wonder also, if this figure could be reduced in any way, and the aviary saved by more realistic figures being applied for vets bills and food, upkeep etc.

I really urge you to think again before removing this very popular feature of the park.

Yours sincerely

I'm just writing to express my disgust at the most stupid decision Darlington Council have ever made in the fact they are hoping to save £30000 a year by closing our much love "animal section" in the south park! £ 30000 a year on bird seed!!!!!! As a child many a Sunny Day was spent looking at the beautiful peacocks and feeding the rabbits there and getting close up to creatures that would normally run a mile!!! Nowadays you can't even do that as there are no more rabbits and notices everywhere not to feed the birds. But please don't take it away the kids absolutely love it just pop down any day to see the little faces looking at the parrots etc. And what of the Millions of pounds they had to revamp it didn't realise that meant to take the best thing it had (the Aviaries.) Please if you don't do it for the children now leave it for the generations to come...

Resident Comments via On-Line Forum

Comment

As the Council have listed energy prices as being part of the reason for the need for cutbacks I would like to know what is being done to improve energy efficiency in its buildings. Examples of energy waste that I have noticed include the Town Hall meeting rooms that do not have thermostats in them causing the need for doors to be left open and fans to be employed and our premier visitor attraction, the museum, which was refurbished last year but does not have draft excluding on many of its doors and windows.

I think it is disgraceful that park visitors, in particular children, are to loose out for the sake of £35,000 a year. Surely there are other ways that this amount of money can be saved without causing such a permanent loss to the enjoyment and education of our younger generation.

The closing of the charity shop seems a very inconsiderate move to take especially at a time when the number of low-income earners is on the increase. If the present location requires maintenance then why not look to move it to one of the council's many vacant properties such as the old tourist info shop.

Moore - I totally agree with your comment regarding the charity shop. It would certainly be the best idea to relocate it to another empty property.

don't know where they get this it takes £ 35,000 to run the south park aviary.

8 gup 5

I think it is a shame that the aviary is closing it gives people visiting the park such pleasure and it is always packed with children looking at the birds. Why not ask 'the friends of the South Park' if they would like to take over the care and feeding of the birds I'm sure the public would contribute and a rota could be organised for feed times. I live by the park and I'm sure that would be a welcome idea instead of just closing it.

I agree that the aviary shouldn't be closed, it would be a shame for the park and the public. In this day and age when we are being advised to embrace outdoor activities, keep fit etc it would be a loss to the community. its not like we have too many places to take kids in the local area(free of cost)and there are no zoo's or fun farms in Darlington so kids do enjoy the aviary, i know my daughter has done. Perhaps the council should look at how it is run and make use of volunteers to help in the maintenance of the park.

I agree with most of the proposals. Closing the Mayor's Charity Shop is a good idea, it's shabby and there are plenty of other charity shops

in the town. My objection is to the increased minimum car parking charges. It's particularly unfair if you have a doctor's surgery in town and you only need to park for 5 minutes.

Its totally wrong to close the south park aviary, what's £35,000 out of a total council budget of £260.1 MILLION!!.

Stop wasting money on projects that don't need to be done (and there are plenty) including cycle lanes 6 feet long that no one uses anyway! and speed bumps all over the council estates (i notice private housing roads with speeding problems don't get the same "safety traffic calming bumps" installed)

And why aren't cyclists riding bikes with NO LIGHTS, NO protective clothing (cycle helmets for THEIR OWN safety) and NO reflective clothing never pulled up and given a fine when riding around at night? I see plenty of them, but the police and the community officers never seem to spot them.

At the same time the council want to create even more little Hitlers and take over parking regulation from the police- whom we already pay for!

Use the wages SAVED from NOT taking over parking to keep the aviary - or is it a case of getting more income from tickets issued over trivial offences from the council managed "parking wardens"?? 🤨 - Another indirect tax from a labour run council determined to follow in its big brothers footsteps in central government and tax tax tax fine fine fine.

Even George Orwell didn't forecast it to be this bad.

Why does it cost £25,000 a year to run the Mayors Charity shop? surely as a "shop" it should be standing on its own two (or more) feet and paying its own way? That's what shops do, or they go bust- think Woolworths- so it shouldn't cost the rate payers or the council anything- it should be making money to donate to charity, otherwise all the council are doing is donating £25,000 a year of council tax payers money to a charity of the mayors choosing each year in the most expensive way possible, by running a LOSS MAKING shop and paying extra for the privilege of doing so???

On the subject of public toilets- just where are people supposed to go when in desperate need? Public loos are few and far between as it is- there was a lady in the Cornmill Centre recently asking when their toilets would open (this was at approx 11am last Sunday) the security guard said they didn't open till 12, when asked where the next public toilets were, he told the lady under the covered market- but that they no longer open on a Sunday anyway- so where exactly was this lady supposed to "go"??

No wonder the town centre is dying, i very rarely venture into town at all now, i refuse to pay extortionate parking charges and public transport is an even more expensive farce. (even when the bus does actually turn up).

As for those 80p solar powered parking meters in places such as Victoria Road (where parking used to be free) i have stopped using those shops nearby as i object to paying a council imposed surcharge (80p parking fee) just to pop in to buy a pastie at the bakers or fish and chips from the chippie or something from the fruit and veg shop which takes 2 minutes!

I was born and have lived in Darlington all my life and i still remember the days when it was an honour and privilege to be a councillor and not an EXTRA PAID job!! with massive expenses perks- people did it FOR FREE!! out of pride and a love for their town. And rates were a damn site less comparatively too.

Its all very well you lot in your ivory towers running up rate increases, but I'm a pensioner on a fixed income and i cannot afford your constant increases- way above inflation, let alone pension rises.

And what do i get for my £1200+ per year? my bin emptied - whoopee! 😄 but woe betide me if i put it out too early (or late) 'cos then you'll see fit to impose a fine!!.

Up the People's Revolution!! Its time to get rid of these dictators and send them packing back to Russia -oops i forgot even Russia has freedom these days, maybe communist china might suit them better?



I was very disappointed to hear the councils proposals to limit the opening times of the Eastbourne Sports Complex gym area. This is a valuable community resource that I regularly use as well as many others that I know. It offers an alternative to the Dolphin Centre which is often overrun with noisy teens and school parties and can be quite an intimidating atmosphere for some users. I can see why the council would consider this option as now they will be able to collect revenue from gym users as well as collecting extra revenue from their extortionate car parking fees, as at Eastbourne Sports Complex car parking is free(for now!).

I too cannot believe that our council is going to get rid of South Park's aviary. I always enjoy taking a look whenever I go to South Park. It's been there my whole life.

I think that if anything, the council should look to reduce the money it's spending on our dismal fireworks displays that are held in the park each year. I'd like to see a lot more money spent on South Park, and our other parks over the next year. Whilst local people are having a tough time of things financially, it's always nice to take a stroll through our parks to take your mind off the state of our country's economy.

I feel that the council has allowed some of our parks, such as Eastbourne and Lascelles park, fall into a state of ruin over the years. When I was a child, the parks had a lot more happening in them and they were far better maintained. What ever happened to park keepers? My guess is that they were axed due to budget cuts. Nowadays, I steer clear of the parks, as there's nothing there but foul mouthed youths and vandalised play equipment.

Whilst closing the aviary is a shame, I'm more concerned about the idea to charge parents for cycle and pedestrian training. The training really gives children confidence to use the roads safely, and charging could mean a child misses out then gets knocked over and killed. Its also another cost for parents who are hard pressed anyway. Even if you don't have kids it will impact on you as more parents will drive their children to school, adding to the chaos on the roads in the mornings.

Dear Sir,

On behalf of the FOSP, I would like you to reconsider the closure of the aviary in South Park. Our request is based on the premises that we do not believe that the actual cost of running the aviary is £35K and on the tremendous popularity of the aviary.

As a group we are very proud of South Park and put in lots of effort to support it. We carry out significant gardening tasks in the park and also raise funds to improve the fabric of the park (Installation of several picnic tables for example). These efforts were rewarded at the last two Northumbria In Bloom Competitions with Silver Gilt Certificates for efforts in community projects. At our last committee meeting, which was attended by management of the park (Robert George) it was agreed that we would make further efforts to raise funds to offset the cost of the aviary and to support the continued running of them.

To assess the public's support for the presence of the aviary, we have organised a petition. This has been signed by several hundred people to date. Everyone approached remarked how shocked they were by the proposed action and how important the aviary is to South Park.

The pleasure it gives to both young and old is very apparent when you see the number of visitors it attracts. It has been suggested that pound for pound it is the best tourist attraction in Darlington.

As to the costs, our observations have shown that over the years the aviary is staffed by between a third and a half of an employee and the current park employees confirmed this at our last meeting. So the actual costing is significantly less than that quoted in the budget savings document. If this could be reduced further by the Friends efforts I hope this would mean the aviaries could be kept open.

Please reconsider your proposal, as the aviary is a very important asset to South Park and the Community of Darlington.

Yours Sincerely,
John Throw
(Chairman FOSP)

I can't see how it costs so much to run the aviary but even if that's the cost it would hardly break the bank. its a drop in the ocean but closing it will take a lot of pleasure from the kids also be a signal that the town is starting to get run down. We have just invested millions into the park lets not let it decline back to the state it was pre investment we need to keep a park we can be proud of.

I am surprised to see that the Council are saying that they could save £35,000 by closing the aviary. The actual cost is approx £12-£14,000 p.a. and this includes half the salary of one of the South Park gardeners (approx £8,000). It is my understanding that this post will remain so the actual saving to the council would be approx £4 - £6,000. The figure of £35,000 assumed that a

certain new strategy would be implemented at the aviary and this never was. It included having someone Full time as well as spending a great deal more on vets/maintenance etc etc. How do I know this? I was the Park Manager at South Park from 2004 - 2008 and was made redundant in April 2008. None of what I am saying here breaks any confidentiality code as the information was made available at the time.

The aviary is well run now and is a huge attraction to those who visit the park. I myself visit regularly with my 3 year old on and he loves it. I think it would be a great shame to see something that has been in the park for nearly 100 years shut down in order to save up to £6,000 per year. IT is also an attraction that brings more people into the park. The more people who use the park the better for everyone because well-used parks attract much less anti-social behaviour. I am not saying that the Council don't need to make savings. In these times of course they do. What pains me is that the public are being told that demolishing the aviaries (at a cost of approx £3-4,000) would save £35,000 when this is simply not true.

Thank-you for your reply. As I understand it (and I am still in contact with some park staff) the weekend hours of the gardeners to carry out essential park duties have been halved over the past 12 months or so. They now have 2 hours on a Saturday and 2 hours on a Sunday to carry out all tasks, including litter, emptying bins and carrying out duties in the aviary. There has been no increase in Vets bills since I left my role as Park Manager and no other significant maintenance carried out on the aviary. All is as it was (apart from the cut in the gardeners hours). To say that the cost of running the aviary has jumped from £12 - 14,000 to £35,000 inside 12 months is strange. The £35,000 strategy included hiring a FT member of staff to run the aviary. You say, and I agree, that this was not a cost-effective option, in fact it would have been over-kill. The frequency of Vets checks is the same and I gather that no other duties have been assigned to staff in relation to the aviary. I would estimate that at most it takes up a half of one staff post, perhaps even less. This post is not being cut so the actual cash saving will be approx £4 - £6,000 at most. There will of course be an efficiency saving in that you can re-allocate the time spent by staff on the aviary to other roles.

On reflection I feel that keeping the aviary open was a good step by DBC. Yes, it is not an easy resource to run in this day and age when it is watched so carefully by a small minority who will do whatever to try and get it closed. Park staff have worked very hard over the past two years to ensure that the aviary is well run and the birds well cared for. It would be such a shame to overturn all of this good work and money spent to close a real asset for the Park, the town and the many visitors to the park just to save £4-£6,000.

I have no axe to grind, in fact my main motivation for this is seeing what enjoyment the aviary gives my 3 year old son when we regularly visit a still excellent park. However, I do feel that DBC need to be a little more upfront and transparent in what will actually be saved if the aviary is demolished. Thank-you

I am also having trouble adding up the running costs of the aviaries, nobody seems to be able to say how a saving of £35K could be made, Pauls estimate seems much closer to the mark than moderators. Even if DBC could prove otherwise I would still have to say that £35K is still money well spent. you can go through the park at anytime and you will see families peering into the aviaries, what other DBC service is so well used and loved.

This aviary has given countless hours of pleasure to generations of families and it would be criminal to deprive future generations of it.

We have 2 children 4 years and a 7 month old and they both love going to the park and seeing the birds. we go to south park 4 to 5 times a week to walk round and have fun, the main reason for my 4 year old going is so talk the parrots and go to the park there. as i have read in the post on the site a saving of £6,000 out of 35,000 is not a great saving and could saved elsewhere. the south park aviary is a big attraction there ll the children love to see the birds if you get rid of them the there will be nothing else at the park but the park and the ducks for the children to learn about.

I also feel that closing the aviary is a detrimental step that the council should avoid. Having spent so much money making South Park an enjoyable place to visit why throw the benefits away.

So many young children and their parents and grandparents enjoy this facility and have done for many years. There is nothing similar in Darlington.

How about looking for sponsors or volunteers to help fund and care for the aviary and therefore enable it to stay open.

I think that its testament to the Friends of South Park, a very active voluntary group, who have raised over 700 signatures against this proposal. I think this is too much of an asset not to have in the park and would be a hugely reputation damaging decision for an already beleaguered council! There are a number of options which the Friends group and members of the community should be allowed to put forward.

I don't see why Eastbourne Sports Complex should be closed and classes moved elsewhere. As residents and council tax payers of Darlington we already struggle to find any decent sports and fitness venues in the town due to the councils cut backs. If the only option is to attend venues on an evening many people will inevitably miss out on keeping fit and active which in turn will lead to an upsurge in obesity and other health related problems in the future (something the government is supposedly trying to avoid!). During the current financial climate I think it is unfair of the council to expect people to pay out more than they need ie for parking on top of entrance fee, as for some people visiting the complex not only keeps them healthy, but can also be an important lifeline with regard to socializing and keeping up to date with current events going on within the area. Please Darlington Borough Council for once listen to the people you are supposed to represent and do away with this proposal

I would just like to say that the Mayors Charity shop should remain open. The staff there recycle so many items, which are passed on at very moderate cost, to those in need. And just as importantly, they always make time to have a chat to everyone who comes in, whether to donate or to buy, and as such are as much a social service to the town as a shop. I do hope the money will be found to keep it open. The town and the shop staff deserve our support.

Table 2 - Summary of all Open Consultation responses received after 14 January Cabinet, by consultation close date 12 February

Number Received	Comments from Residents via	Aviary in South Park	Mayors Charity Shop	Pedestrian / Cycle Training	Public Conveniences	Head of Steam	Car Parking Charges	Eastbourne Complex	Other Specific Services	Total
47	Emails	17	4	14	11	2	3	3	13	67
3	Telephone				1		1		2	4
37	On-Line	23	6	3			2	2	3	39
21	Town Crier								29	29
10	By Post	3	2	1				1	5	12
118	Total	43	12	18	12	2	6	6	52	151

Additional Information II

Petition and letters regarding proposed closure of the Mayor's Charity Shop

A petition containing approximately 1,200 signatures was delivered to the Council at the Talking Together budget consultation event at the Dolphin Centre on 10 February.

The petition stated: -

“We the undersigned, Residents of Darlington, are totally opposed to the closure of the Mayor's Charity Shop. The shop provides a service to the local community by providing goods at reasonable prices and also providing cash aid to all sections of the community.

We ask the Council to abolish this proposal forthwith and support the excellent work of the shop which also helps to achieve recycling targets.”

In addition to the petition, 495 pro-forma letters opposing the proposed closure were received by The Leader of the Council. 452 of those letters were included in Annex D of the report to Cabinet on 17 February and 43 have been received between 7th and 12th February.

Petition from Heighington Parish Council regarding proposed closure of public conveniences.

A petition signed by 369 people was received from Heighington Parish Council requesting that the toilets in the village not be closed as part of the budget proposals. A letter was also passed to officers (copy **attached**) proposing an alternative to closure, set out below are the comments of the Director of Community Services on the proposal.

The proposal put forward by Heighington Parish Council would only reduce the cost to operate the toilets by a small amount. Currently we allocate five and a quarter hours per week and obviously have the costs of maintaining the building and paying for services. The Parish Council's proposal is to clean the toilets utilising three hours per week but still leave the running costs with the Council.



HEIGHINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman: Cllr John McGuckin, 36 Greenhill Road, Heighington

*Vice Chairman: Cllr Michael French, 35 Church View,
Heighington.*

*Parish Clerk: Miss Viv Horner
31 Westwood Avenue
Heighington
DL5 6RZ*

Tel: 01325 311842

E-mail: miss.vivhorner@virgin.net

Paul Wildsmith
Darlington Borough Council
Town Hall
Darlington
DL1 5QT

9th February 2009

Dear Mr Wildsmith

Re: 'Proposed' closure of the Public Toilets in Heighington Village

Please find enclosed a petition signed by over 400 members of the public and given the short space of time that we have had to consult the village it shows how much support the Parish Council are being given and how well used the toilets are.

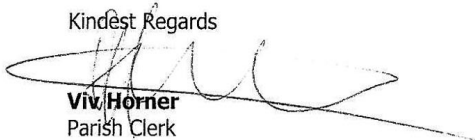
Whilst we fully understand the need to cut costs, we are sure there must be larger costs that can be cut rather than close a well used public amenity.

At a recent meeting Heighington Parish Council agreed to propose to offer an alternative to the closure. Heighington Parish Council via Darlington Borough Council employs an Environmental Warden for 11 hours per week to litter pick the villages of Heighington and Redworth, we have asked for Darlington Borough Council to consider an extra 2 hours per week to include The Chestnuts at School Aycliffe, and are awaiting a response.

Our proposal is if Darlington Borough Council would consider increasing the Environmental Warden's hours by a further 3 hours (15 in total) this would also enable the toilets to be cleaned, whilst Darlington Borough Council still retain overall custody of the actual building.

I look forward to receiving your comments and should you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kindest Regards



Viv Horner
Parish Clerk

Cllr Brian Anderson, 1 Tudor Court, Heighington, Cllr Gary Blenkinsopp, 27 Hawthorn Drive, School Aycliffe,
Cllr Gerald Lee, 1 Greenhill Road, Heighington, Cllr Miss Sue Simkiss, Magnolia Drive, School Aycliffe,
Cllr Eric Thompson, 11 Darlington Road, Heighington, Cllr JK Wilkinson, Grangeside, Redworth
Cllr Mrs Valerie Whitby, Houghton Bank Farm, Heighington,

Additional Information IV

Petition from the Friends of South Park regarding proposed closure of the Aviary.

A petition containing approximately 850 signatures was delivered to the Council at the Talking Together event at the Dolphin Centre.

The petition stated: -

“I the undersigned wish to register my opposition to the proposed closure of the Aviary in South Park, which was announced in January 2009”

Letter from Unison

1. Attached is a response to the consultation from UNISON, clearly some of the content of the report are opinions and views which Cabinet will wish to take into account when reaching their final decision, however, set out below are CMT responses/comments to some of the issues raised :-
2. A request for the Council to reinstate the no redundancy policy – UNISON themselves acknowledge how the Council seek to avoid compulsory redundancies and we have been successful in limiting compulsory redundancies, however, given the scale of change the Council faces, to put such a policy in place, would limit the ability to deliver change in the future.
3. Closure of Toilets and the impact on staff. –In the context of the overall work we do within the Borough, the absence of a toilet in a couple of villages is unlikely to have any significant impact. We may be in those villages once or twice a week. In the case of Heighington we have alternatives available at the Waste Transfer station and after April at Aycliffe Quarry.
4. Transport Policy – We note the option of reviewing the role of the vacant post and can confirm this will be reviewed before any appointment is made.
5. The green agenda -The Climate Change Action Plan sets out a series of action which the Council is taking to address 'green' issues through its own operations. These include the Energy Review, looking at our own buildings, reviewing the Council Travel Plan, obtaining through (free) advice from the Carbon Trust a complete audit of the Council's carbon footprint to better inform future action plans, the work of green champions, reduction of printer usage, review of transport and various other actions. Promotional work is being done on recycling and waste minimisation. The new Waste Disposal contract represents both a substantial financial saving on the current arrangements and a substantial increase in recycling.
6. Training - It is anticipated that savings can be achieved without reducing the effectiveness of our training, a review group has been established to look at better commissioning and procurement and staffing levels involved with training with a view to achieving greater efficiency. In respect of the Skills pledge external funding is being secured and we are surprised by the comment about cooperation and will follow this up with UNISON.
7. Agency/Consultancy – CMT are currently reviewing the amount of work undertaken by consultancy and agency staff and seeking to limit their use to where the business need is demonstrated. Within the Building and Design Division, we are reducing our reliance on agency and consultancy staff and creating 5 jobs to bring design work in house. Likewise in Highways we have substantially reduced our reliance with agency staff and are looking at converting the remaining two into permanent posts we can recruit to. The use of consultants

has also been reduced in Regeneration to save costs, for example by employing a member of staff to do sustainability appraisals and by taking in-house conservation, urban design and planning brief work previously done externally.

8. Interim ACE – CMT understands the concern at the cost of an Interim, these are standard national rates for people with the requisite experience and skills. The person appointed has the task of ensuring that the £280,000 proposed savings from the reviews of policy, performance, partnerships and “connecting with communities” can be achieved without significant damage to our capacity to secure delivery of the Corporate Plan.
9. Staff Involvement in Efficiency – We are planning to further engage employees in developing and proposing efficiency initiatives and welcome the support of UNISON.
10. Sickness Rates – Whilst CMT are working with partners such as the PCT, managers and employees to increase attendance performance in comparison to the North East region is good.
11. Staff Morale – The recently staff survey produced pleasing results as our level of satisfaction compared favourably with other organisations surveyed. The reduction referred to by UNISON as a sharp reduction is not accurate there was a marginal reduction in overall satisfaction.

To John Williams
Leader of the Council

From Alan Docherty
Branch Secretary

10th February 2009

Dear Councillor Williams,

Medium Term Financial Plan

Unison are pleased that they have been given an opportunity to respond to the Council's budget proposals and below is our views.

We do recognise the budget pressures and the difficult decisions facing the Council especially in the current economic difficulties.

Unison is, however, very concerned at the direction the Council is travelling by voluntarily making further cuts in the Council's income. We are of the view that a, low council tax, underfunded council is incompatible with delivering high quality services. We have serious concerns that the morale of the workforce will further deteriorate when they are so over burdened that they cannot do their job effectively. As a short term measure we ask that you maintain the previously agreed planned council tax in crease at 4.9%

We will continue to work with the Council and its management to find real savings and efficiencies and to do this in the most painless ways possible. We do have a good record in this and we have avoided all but a few compulsory redundancies in the past. We do however seek a concession from the Council in that you reinstate the policy of 'no compulsory redundancies'.

Generally we are of the opinion that the Council should play a positive role in helping Darlington through the recession. The Council should be creating jobs and increasing spending. The proposals to reduce spending and cut jobs will contribute to the downward spiral. Council spending has an economic multiplier effect. One recent study estimated it to be 1.64. Hence the loss of 60 posts could lead to the loss of 100 jobs elsewhere in the Darlington economy. In contrast the increased spending of not decreasing the rate of increase in council tax would generate almost £1 million additional spending.

Optimistically we do not have any practical concerns about the process of achieving the first round of proposed job reductions in the areas we organise. We think they can be achieved with minimal actual redundancies. We question the wisdom of these cuts both for recovery from the economic recessions referred to above and on the residual effect in whether these services can be delivered efficiently and effectively.

As in previous years there are large sums of money identified as efficiency savings and other cuts. These tend to be realised generally by a series of minor changes resulting in restructurings and job losses over the length of the plan. We are also concerned about the proposed major review of Adult Social Services. We believe that these cuts will not be achieved without reducing the level and breadth of Council services.

We are aware already of one small measure where a manager is cutting a temporary post in an overworked area where it will mean that the staff will be unable to process booking for leisure services. This will result in a loss of income and an under use of resources and facilities.

I now comment on some specific proposals:

Head of Steam

Head of Steam has had less than a year to establish itself after the significant investment that was put into it. We believe that more effort should go into marketing the attraction and especially there should be links with other similar venues. In particular Head of Steam should be looking to attract visitors who are also calling at Locomotion in Shildon (perhaps working with Northern Rail who run trains between the two venues). Locomotion is open Monday-Sunday all year but with only the main collection building open on Monday and Tuesday during winter, the days that are proposed to close the Head of Steam. We would suggest that Head of Steam remains open all week and that new joint marketing initiatives are explored with Locomotion.

South Park Aviary

This proposal concerns the removal of the South Park Aviary. This is an attraction which has been a feature of South Park for over 100 years, and features prominently in our tourist information. We would ask that the health and safety assessment be reviewed to see if the service could be continued. At present the aviary runs with a minimal staffing resource, about 2 hours per day, and a great deal of goodwill from the staff in the park. It is difficult to see where the savings of £35,000 will come from unless the expected cost of additional staff (who currently do not exist) have been included to massage the figure. It may be that the demolition eliminates any possible savings. This proposed cut is symptomatic and symbolic to us of how low the Council has fallen. Last year the South Park Manager post was deleted. Maintenance is not at a high standard in the park. The fountains do not work. The £3.9 million capital renovation achieved through the Heritage Lottery Fund is being lost. Now the Council is proposing to remove a facility, the Aviary, which has given lots of pleasure to children and adults for generations in order to save less than £1 per year for each taxpayer based upon an inflated saving. Is this proposed cut an indication of how difficult it is for the Council to continue to deliver services that actually add to the overall wellbeing of the town? The refurbishment of the park had previously added an 11% improvement to the Council's satisfaction rating by its residents.

Public Conveniences

We are concerned at the proposal to close public conveniences in Heighington, Middleton One Row and Cockerton. These are a vital public service. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee recently produced a report on the provision of public conveniences and raised concerns at the recent trend for closure. The report pointed out that many people's ability to leave their homes was restricted by the lack of public toilets. It looked at recent innovations which have been tried by some councils such as Community Toilet Schemes where private businesses such as shops, pubs and cafes made their facilities available to the public. The Middleton One Row toilets are on the Teesdale Way a popular local tourist attraction.

It is not just the public affected by these closures. Many of the Council's staff, such as Street Scene, are out in these areas during the course of their work. Closure of these public conveniences may mean that staff have to return to offices or the depot. This is an additional cost on the Council in terms of lost productivity and vehicle mileage which probably outweighs the cost of closure. UNISON would suggest that the Council should not close any public conveniences until possible alternative provision has been considered.

Transport Policy

The removal of a Policy Officer post in this section will limit the ability of the Council to deliver on important areas such as parking strategy. This will be a significant problem with the forthcoming implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement. In the longer term we would, however, suggest that the currently vacant post of Principal Transport Officer be reviewed. We believe that there is scope to remodel this role into a less senior post and to accommodate the work into the remaining teams. This would offer further savings to the Council and would give the opportunity to integrate the preparation and implementation of the Local Transport Plan.

Libraries

We are concerned about plans for a saving here of £146,000 and the loss of up to 6 posts. We await the proposals but we are at a loss how these can be achieved. Libraries are an important leisure and learning resource, they are currently classed as a high performing and low cost service. Unison nationally is lobbying government for an extension of library services, particularly for books. It is no alternative to encouraging people and especially children to read and gain research skills.

Training

There are further proposals to cut the training budget. Training is essential to improve skills and services. The council as a big employer can assist the local economy by employing and training young people. The Council is also signed up to the Skills Pledge, which gives an undertaking to train staff up to at least NVQ level 2, we would expect that this requires more resources rather than less. Unison is helping in this field by promoting learning opportunities through an officer who is seconded to a post funded by the TUC. The Council still has not fully cooperated with us to exploit this potential. Ironically our MP has been given a government portfolio to encourage people from less privileged backgrounds into training at a time his Council is cutting funding.

Cycle and Pedestrian Training

This service is one in which Darlington has led the way. Over 800 children a year receive cycle training and many more pedestrian training. It is funded through grants. We can not understand why the Council would try to make a profit out of a road safety programme that helps children. Imposing a charge will devastate demand for the service, especially in the current economic climate. Parents cannot be expected to find £45 for cycle training or £36 (over 3 years) for pedestrian training. The expected income is unlikely to materialise with the result that the service will have to be cut. This will affect over 30 members of staff. The Council's own "Local Motion" survey found that 90.6% of respondents believed that the Council should fund the cycle training. The Council has made great efforts to encourage cycling in recent years and is a "Cycling Demonstration Town". Imposing a charge sends out a negative message to those who we wish to encourage to take up cycling and also the partners who provide funding for the project. A knock-on effect would be to the Bike It initiative which has been successful in raising levels of cycling to around 10% at the Bike It schools. It is likely also that performance indicator NI198, which measures travel to school, will suffer if cycle and pedestrian training levels fall. We need to continue to work towards reducing car use for the school run.

Generally we are concerned that the increasing of charges across all council services can in some areas be counterproductive. At some point and particularly in the current environment increased prices will result in a lower take up of the service and in consequence result in a loss of income.

Other Points

Agency / Consultancy

The Council relies heavily on the use of agency and consultancy staff. Whilst this can be beneficial to cover short-term peaks in workload or staff absences there are examples of agency / consultancy staff being used on a long-term basis. They effectively become permanent members of staff but are employed on different rates. These rates are sometimes far in excess of the rate which would be allocated via Job Evaluation and also incur additional fees. Despite a review of procurement there is still a substantial number of agency staff employed by the Council and some managers are flouting the system.

The Council still lacks an adequate control mechanism for the employment of staff from agencies / consultancies. There needs to be centralised control to determine whether there is a long-term need for a post. If the post is required a proper recruitment process should be followed to appoint on a permanent or temporary contract. We appreciate that at times it may be difficult to recruit to specialist posts. However, we would suggest that it would be better to use the market supplement system rather than to continue long-term agency or consultancy arrangements.

There is also an issue of accountability. There are examples of major projects which have been exclusively managed through consultancy / agency arrangements. Including the Pedestrian Heart and Eastern Transport Corridor where massive overspends have impacted on these budget proposals. The quality of the contract supervision has been questionable and may well have been better and more cheaply managed by directly employed staff.

Of serious concern to us is the decision to temporarily fill the vacant Assistant Chief Executive's post with an Interim paid £600 per day. While the maths may make sense in that other arrangements may appear to be less cost effective, such an hourly rate is obscene in light of the other savings being proposed in this budget. This suggests to us that some senior managers and politicians live in a different world to the majority of Council staff and tax payers.

Future Efficiencies

We all want the Council to operate in as efficient manner as possible. However, this should not be seen as a once a year exercise when the budget is being set. Furthermore it should not be seen as the sole preserve of Members and Chief Officers to seek efficiencies. We would suggest that efficiency should be something that should be embedded in team meetings. Staff should be encouraged to come forward with suggestions where they believe savings could be made. It is often staff who are carrying out the work who can see ways to do it more effectively. Encouraging gradual savings may reduce the impact of sudden shocks when budgets are being set.

We also consider that the Council is not serious about the green agenda, particularly around climate change, waste awareness, and setting an example for Darlington; this is borne out by the criticism in the Corporate Assessment. Until recently there were only two dedicated staff employed in this area, although this has recently been increased to three. However despite this additional resource there does not appear adequate support or priority given to such an important agenda. We think energy savings can be made in the Town Hall by fixing the heating and insulating the building. The Council can further save on landfill costs by recycling in offices and schools. We also question the wisdom of a waste disposal contract that will initially cost £500,000 pa more to run in the initial years. However we are now stuck with it because the current recession is not the best time to renegotiate it.

Funding

The current economic climate is as difficult for councils as any other organization. Indeed in some ways it can be worse. As income from land sales and other sources falls the Council is likely to see demand for its services increase. Many people who have been hit by the recession will need to turn to the Council for support through housing or council tax benefits or welfare advice. In

these circumstances it is surely reasonable for the Council to turn to central government for assistance. Government has shown that it is willing to intervene to assist the financial sector, an area which has contributed to the current crisis.

We believe that the Council should lobby the Borough's two MPs to seek additional government funding. There has been speculation that the government could try to spend its way out of recession through public works. Councils are ideally placed to carry out this programme through a series of schemes such as improving schools, roads, building council houses etc. These could be delivered quickly unlike other major projects which would take time to pass through the planning process.

Unison is very concerned that the continued pressure on the staff to make efficiencies will lead to a meltdown. Darlington Borough Council has a comparatively higher sickness record than comparable councils and stress related illnesses dominate. The staff survey has also indicated a sharp drop in staff morale. We have serious concerns that the morale of the workforce will deteriorate further because many of the staff are already over burdened. While many cuts are 'painless' in that there are no redundancies, the deletion of vacant posts puts pressure on other staff to go that extra mile. Many staff are so dedicated that they put in unpaid overtime. Darlington is a very lean authority and simple comparison with neighbouring authorities indicate that it provides excellent services with a fraction of the staff. I would speculate some authorities have on average 50% more staff in some areas than in Darlington. This squeeze cannot continue and it is the result of some past decisions that have not maximised the resources potentially available to the council. The proposal not to raise council taxes to 4.9% will compound this over future years. We ask you to reverse this proposal.

The views of the citizens' panel reinforce the view that 'better services' are more important than 'keeping council tax payments low'.

Yours sincerely

Alan Docherty
Branch Secretary

Talking Together – Budget Consultation, Dolphin Centre, 10 February 2009

Approximately 50 people attended the event. A number of services were represented, providing opportunity for residents to discuss matters of interest with officers.

The Leader of the Council chaired an open forum session, comprising a presentation and question and answer session.

A presentation was made by the Chief Executive, outlining the Council's service and financial planning in the context of the Sustainable Community Strategy and partnership working.

Questions from the audience were answered by a panel comprising Councillor Jenny Chapman, Councillor Stephen Harker, the Chief Executive, Ada Burns and the Director of Corporate Services, Paul Wildsmith.

Questions and key statements were: -

Buses

- We are concerned about older and disabled people in Harrowgate Hill, Firth Moor and elsewhere. Can cabinet give an assurance that they will do something about helping these people to move about?
- Why are buses stopping service at 7.15pm in Harrowgate Hill?

Mayor's Charity Shop

- Many people are appalled that the Council is thinking of closing the Mayor's Charity Shop. I am presenting a petition from 1,202 users and non-users. We would like to propose that the Council carries out a health and safety risk assessment and spends £25,000 on the urgent repairs that are its responsibility to carry out.
- The Mayor's Charity Shop should not be closed during financial hard times. The mayor's allowance, civic ball and tea party could be cut instead.

Aviary

- A representative of the friends of South Park referred to a petition of 1,000 signatures to protest against the proposed closure of the aviary. The group have offered to work with the Council to reduce costs.

- The fact that the aviary will be demolished if it is closed is not mentioned in consultation documentation. There appears to be a lot of information missing. Is this genuine consultation?

Cycle training

- Parents cannot afford the charges that are proposed for pedestrian/cycling training. Darlington is promoting itself as a cycling town. These services should be made available to all children, not just those that can afford it.

Waste

- Why is the cost of the waste management contract increasing?

Head of Steam

- We only have one steam museum; it's important attraction for visitors. Are the right things being put forward as cuts? What about staff cuts?

Allotments

- Are there proposals for more allotments?

Council tax

- My council tax has increased by 81.9% since 2000 and I will have difficulty paying it this year. Should the council be thinking of cutting back services and freezing council tax instead?

Staffing

- Should the Council be recruiting more communications staff when street scene services need to be improved?

Comment received by telephone 11 February

Mr R P D. Woodcrest Road, Darlington attended the Public Consultation Session last night and wished his objections to be acknowledged as he was not able to stay for the open forum.

He is objecting strongly to the closure of public toilets, in particular Cockerton, as he said there are many people at his age who feel that this is a necessary function and that there are no alternatives in this area i.e. the Library will not allow use of their toilet facilities. He is also diabetic.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION VII

DRAFT MEDIUM-TERM CORPORATE PLAN 2009 TO 2013 INCORPORATING THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Introduction

1. To advise Cabinet of the Resources Scrutiny Committee's recommendations in relation to the draft the Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2009/13.

Summary

2. At a special meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee, held on the 19th December, 2008 (Minutes attached), we agreed to establish a Review Group to enable us to examine Cabinet's proposals in relation to the draft Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2009/13.
3. All Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee were co-opted onto the Budget Task and Finish Review Group and a number of meetings have been held and the Council's Corporate Management Team have been questioned.
4. At the conclusion of the review, the Budget Task and Finish Review Group made a number of recommendations which were considered at a special meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee held on the 10th February, 2009.
5. The recommendations were approved and endorsed by the Scrutiny Committee at that meeting and it agreed to forward a number of those recommendations to Cabinet for further consideration.
6. Cabinet consider the recommendations made by the Budget Task and Finish Review Group detailed in paragraphs 18 (h) to 18 (l).

Information

7. The Resources Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting held on 19th December, 2008, agreed to establish a Task and Finish Review Group to consider the draft Medium-Term Financial Plan 2009/13. All Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee were co-opted onto the Group and we have met on several occasions.

8. At the commencement of the Review, we agreed the methodology to adopt in carrying out the review and the aim which was to :-

‘Review the budget to ensure prudent financial management of the Council’s expenditure/income for 2009/10’

9. In accordance with that methodology, at the first meeting held on the 15th January, 2009, the Chief Executive and the Director of Corporate Services gave us a corporate overview of the budget and the challenges and pressures which the Council was facing.
10. Each Member of the Council’s Corporate Management Team were then questioned at each subsequent meeting on their respective budget areas and gave responses thereon.
11. We accepted that the Medium-Term Financial Plan and, in particular, the 2009/10 budget proposals were challenging and that prudent financial management this year would enhance the Plan for 2010/11.
12. We also recognised the difficulties in departmental spend to ensure continuity of service while making efficiency savings. It was evident that all Lead Officers understood the difficulties within their individual budgets and thanks must go them for the work that has been undertaken in producing the budget proposals.
13. It was however felt that departmental budget reviews could produce further efficiencies over the term of the Plan and that, in particular, the Director of Children’s Services’ approach to the budget process was to be congratulated.
14. Members also agreed that the process had been thorough and prudent and it was fully recognised that there needed to be Member involvement in the monitoring of the budget and the efficiency savings.
15. As outlined in this report, a number of the recommendations are around the process of review and monitoring of the Medium Term Financial Plan, but the recommendations will also allow for a further understanding by Members of the efficiency requirements over the term of the Plan.
16. Commissioning has been clearly identified as a strategic consideration for Departments and needs to be looked at further by Directors. We felt that communication with the voluntary/private sector would benefit from high level involvement and the development of a clearer understanding between partners around capacity, management change and legislation would enable the future thought process to be better informed.
17. At the conclusion of the review, we made the following recommendations to a special meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee which was held on 10th

February, 2009 :-

- (a) That the revenue budget monitoring information which is submitted monthly to the Council's Corporate Management Team be also submitted to Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee on a monthly basis.
- (b) That a Review Group, to be known as the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group, be established to monitor the 2009/10 budget and to assist in developing efficiency projects to try to identify further savings 2009/10 and future years.
- (c) That the above Review Group meet every 2 months in between the ordinary meetings of the Resources Scrutiny Committee and that all Directors be requested to continue to review and challenge their individual budgets and attend meetings of this Review Group, as and when, requested.
- (d) That the Resources Scrutiny Committee continue with its current monitoring role in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- (e) That a report on the National Agreements/Contracts of Employment of Directors and Assistant Directors be presented to the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group.
- (f) That, in relation to the Communications Unit, the Chief Executive be requested to submit a report to the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group on the scope of the work undertaken by that Unit.
- (g) That, in relation to Talking Together, the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Task and Finish Review Group monitor the proposed savings of £45,000 in the 2009/10 budget.
- (h) That, in relation to vacant posts within the Authority, the Chief Executive be given responsibility to approve, in writing, the filling of all vacant posts and that the pay structure within the Senior Management of the Authority be taken into account when filling vacant posts.
- (i) That all Directors be requested to look at commissioning services within their individual areas with the voluntary and private sector.
- (j) That, in relation to the Mayor's Charity Shop, the proposal to close that shop be deferred to enable a Business Plan to be drafted to enable the shop to continue in operation and for partnership working to be explored.
- (k) That, in relation to the proposal to charge for cycle and pedestrian training, this be reconsidered and that the recent monies received be used to fund this.

- (l) That, in relation to the proposed closure of the South Park Aviary, the Officers be requested to investigate the possibility of partnership working with a local organisation to retain the Aviary.
 - (m) That this Budget Task and Finish Review Group is concerned about the proposed reduction from the original proposals in the Leading Edge Efficiencies in 2009/10 and that further monitoring be undertaken in relation to that by the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group.
18. We agreed, at that meeting, to accept and endorse those recommendations and refer recommendations (h), (i), (j), (k) and (l) above, to Cabinet for further consideration.
19. The recommendations which we have referred to Cabinet are supported by the following reasons :-

in relation to (h) above, our view is that, although there is a management process in place for the approval of filling vacant posts, this needs to be strengthened and one Officer (the Chief Executive) should, for consistency purposes, be given responsibility for undertaking this. A written record of the decisions made should also be retained;

in relation to (i) above, we accept that there is already some good work being undertaken in relation to the transfer of some services to the voluntary/private sector, however, we feel that Directors could look further at opportunities to work with the voluntary/private sector; and

in relation to (j), (k) and (l) above, we feel that there is an opportunity for alternative proposals to be adopted on issues which we feel are of concern to residents. It is also felt that these services are of benefit to a broad remit within the community and a full measure of options should be investigated and made available for further discussion.

Councillor I Haszeldine
Chair of Resources Scrutiny Committee

Comments of the Corporate Management Team

20. Corporate Management Team have made the following comments: -
- (a) The recommendations of the Budget Task and Finish Review Group set out in paragraphs 18 (a) to (g) generally support and should further strengthen existing management arrangements, however, the impact on the work of Officers needs to be monitored.

- (b) Recommendations (f) and (g) - reviews are being conducted and annual savings of £60,000 and £45,000 respectively are included in the proposed MTFP.
- (c) Recommendation (h) - CMT believes that current arrangements are effective. Savings of £750,000 are already included in the MTFP as a result of managing vacancies.
- (d) Recommendation (i) – CMT agree that the Council should continue to at opportunities to improve value-for-money by working with the private and third sectors
- (e) Recommendations (j) to (l) are matters for Cabinet to consider together with the outcome of consultation and with due regard to the SCS and financial implications.
- (f) Recommendation (m) – the existing and proposed efficiency savings programmes are challenging, as they need to be to enable the Council to contribute appropriately to the aspirations of the SCS and in light of the expected tightening of financial resources. The proposed reduction in projected savings in 2009-10 slightly reduces some risk in the proposed MTFP. In the context of a programme to deliver efficiency savings of £5.6million each year it does not represent any reduction in the total target.

RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10th February, 2009

PRESENT – The Mayor (in the Chair); Councillors Coultas, Francis, Johnson, Lewis, Maddison, Richmond, Thistlethwaite and Walker. (9)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Burton and Swainston. (2)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE –

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – David Hall, Assistant Director, Accounting Services and Local Taxation, within the Corporate Services Department.

R55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

R56. DRAFT MEDIUM TERM CORPORATE PLAN INCORPORATING THE MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN – The Scrutiny Committee considered the recommendations arising from the Budget Task and Finish Review Group.

RESOLVED – (a) That the following recommendations be approved :-

- (i) That the revenue budget monitoring information which is submitted monthly to the Council's Corporate Management Team be also submitted to Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee on a monthly basis.
- (ii) That a Review Group, to be known as the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group, be established to monitor the 2009/10 budget and to assist in developing efficiency projects to try to identify further savings 2009/10 and future years.
- (iii) That the above Review Group meet every 2 months in between the ordinary meetings of the Resources Scrutiny Committee and that all Directors be requested to continue to review and challenge their individual budgets and attend meetings of this Review Group, as and when, requested.
- (iv) That the Resources Scrutiny Committee continue with its current monitoring role in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- (v) That, in relation to vacant posts within the Authority, the Chief Executive be given responsibility to approve, in writing, the filling of all vacant posts and that the pay structure within the Senior Management of the Authority be taken into account when filling vacant posts.
- (vi) That a report on the National Agreements/Contracts of Employment of Directors and Assistant Directors be presented to the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group.

- (vii) That, in relation to the Communications Unit, the Chief Executive be requested to submit a report to the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group on the scope of the work undertaken by that Unit.
 - (viii) That, in relation to Talking Together, the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Task and Finish Review Group monitor the proposed savings of £45,000 in the 2009/10 budget.
 - (ix) That all Directors be requested to look at commissioning services within their individual areas with the voluntary and private sector.
 - (x) That, in relation to the Mayor's Charity Shop, the proposal to close that shop be deferred to enable a Business Plan to be drafted to enable the shop to continue in operation and for partnership working to be explored.
 - (xi) That, in relation to the proposal to charge for cycle and pedestrian training, this be reconsidered and that the recent monies received be used to fund this.
 - (xii) That, in relation to the proposed closure of the South Park Aviary, the Officers be requested to investigate the possibility of partnership working with a local organisation to retain the Aviary.
 - (xiii) That this Budget Task and Finish Review Group is concerned about the proposed reduction from the original proposals in the Leading Edge Efficiencies in 2009/10 and that further monitoring be undertaken in relation to that by the Budget Monitoring and Efficiency Review Group.
- (b) That recommendations (iv), (ix), (x), (xi) and (xii) above, be referred to Cabinet for further consideration.