

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15 April 2016

PRESENT – Councillor Carson (in the Chair); Councillors KE Kelly, Lyonette, MR Nicholson and Wright., (5)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Baldwin, Cossins and York. (3)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Coultas, Currie, Kelley, Lee and H Scott.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ada Burns, Chief Executive, Ian Thompson, Assistant Director – Community Services, Stephen Wiper, Creative Darlington Manager, Steve Petch, Place Strategy Manager and Lead Officer and Karen Graves, Democratic Officer.

P51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interests reported at the meeting.

P52. MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2016/17 TO 2019/20 – The Scrutiny Committee met to discuss those proposals contained in phase 2 of the next round of spending reductions as contained within the Medium Term Financial Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20, which were specifically under its remit.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the following proposals in relation to the core Offer and the Impact Assessment Forms :-

W21 – Town Twinning – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to remove the subsidy to support international links from the Council to its twin and cousin towns which it was expected would see a net budget reduction of £5,406 from 2016/17.

Scrutiny was advised that Town Twinning gave younger people the opportunities to visit foreign countries; a bursary scheme had been established to allow young people to visit school, youth clubs, universities; and that the Mayor and Leader paid their own expenses for civic visits to the twin towns.

Discussion ensued on the strength of the Town Twinning Association which had grown and developed in anticipation of the decline in Council resources and was very successful in gaining sponsorships.

W9 – Creative Darlington – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to delete the staffing resources supporting the Council's cultural vision and the delivery partnership, Creative Darlington which it was expected would see a net budget reduction of £119,768 by 2020/21.

Scrutiny was advised that the Creative Darlington Manager reported to Creative Darlington, a successful partnership, chaired by the Assistant Dean of Teesside University; small pots of money had been used effectively and created match funding bids to Arts Council England, Lottery and Charitable Funding; and among the activities supported were the Festival of Thrift, Jabberwocky Market and the Darlington for Culture Arts Festival. Details were supplied of a grant of £30k received from the Arts Council to work with looked after children which ensured they had access to the culture offer; help provided to The Bridge and Crown Street Gallery; re-staging of Theatre in the Park at South Park following its success in 2015; and the work of an artist in recreating models of railway stations across the world.

It was stated that the Arts Council recognised Darlington's strong approach.

Futures Fund – Heritage and Cultural Development – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £100,000 to provide some match funding and capacity to ensure Darlington benefits from the Tees Valley Investment Strategy 'place and culture' themes working with the residual Economic Growth capacity and focusing on the towns rail heritage and to lever in external funding to support community and Darlington Hippodrome based arts activity.

Particular reference was made to the Tees Valley bid to become the City of Culture 2025 which coincided with the Railways 2025 celebrations and details were supplied of the proposal to retain the post of Creative Darlington Manager with a refocus on the build up to 2025, working with the Tees Valley to lever in match funding. It was also encouraging to note that a White Paper on Culture published two weeks ago made reference to the Tees Valley, on several occasions, for innovative areas.

Following a question Members were advised that the Council had provided modest support to The Bridge from the closure of the Arts Centre with the expectation that it would develop a model for sustainability. The Engagement Officer of the Council was currently supporting The Bridge Management Committee in putting forward a business case and detailed proposal to move The Bridge to complete sustainability. This will be evaluated as part of the MTFP consultation. In response to a question about the Borough's art collection the Creative Darlington Manager advised that it was hoped that alternative spaces to exhibit art work might be found and included the Hippodrome and the Town Hall, but acknowledged that this would not replicate what is currently available at Crown Street.

LLE1 – Head of Steam – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Head of Steam which was a discretionary service that could cost £45k to £50k to mothball. It was stated that the Council has a fully maintaining lease for the former North Road Station building and the building was Grade II* Listed. There was a requirement to make financial provision to keep the building maintained and watertight and the provision in the core budget would enable this obligation to be carried out.

LLE2, W3, W4 and W5 – Libraries Service – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the library services, a statutory service, which included the closure of Cockerton Library, withdrawal of the mobile library service, closure of the Centre for Local Studies and relocation of the services provided within the Crown Street Library.

Scrutiny was advised that the proposal was to re-model the Dolphin Centre and relocate the Crown Street Library Services within the Dolphin Centre achieving a saving of £400k, £65k for the remodel and £335k to move.

Scrutiny heard the views of a member of the public who had created a Facebook page called 'Darlington Library – Keep it in Crown Street' which had achieved a large number of subscribers. She also requested that the public be kept informed and all possibilities for a library service explored. It was also stated that work was ongoing with Darlington for Culture to retain the Crown Street building as there were concerns that the Dolphin Centre would not be adequate to hold the Library Service. Reference was also made to the Covenant on the building; permission of the Pease Family being sought to move the library service; and the importance of retaining Darlington's heritage buildings as they had links to the Quakers and Head of Steam.

Discussion ensued on the uncertain future; the need to be certain of the facts; ensuring that the proposed resource was the same as currently offered; importance of the Centre for Local Studies service; re-modelled Dolphin Centre plans; issues surrounding the covenant on the Crown Street building; and Darlington's library offer being comparable to other local authorities.

Particular references were made to transition arrangements for Cockerton Library; the possibility of a volunteer-run service being introduced; mobile library service being relevant to the rural areas and the possibility of finding a sponsor.

The proposals in relation to the Library Services were to be further discussed at a Task and Finish Review Group to be held on 26 March, 2016.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to withdraw the mobile library service resulting in a net budget reduction of £59,559 by 2020/21.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to close the Centre for Local Studies, currently part of the library at Crown Street, resulting in a net budget reduction of £60,000 by 2020/21.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to close the Cockerton Library resulting in a net budget reduction of £46,788 by 2020/21.

LLE3 – The Hullaballoon - Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Hullaballoon, a partnership between Theatre Hullabaloo and the Council to provide a national flagship theatre for children and young people by adapting the Edwardian Fire Station adjacent to the Civic Theatre. Members were advised that funding of £1.5m had been received from the Arts Council and that the Council had agreed to underwrite a subsidy of £80,000 for the operation of the Theatre.

LLE4 and W1 – Civic Theatre – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Civic Theatre and members were advised that Heritage Lottery Funding of £4.5m had been released towards the restoration and refurbishment of the Civic Theatre. The Civic Theatre was a non-statutory service which, when refurbished by 2021, would break even.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to this proposal resulting in a net budget reduction of £93,000 by 2020/21.

LLE5 and W2 - Eastbourne Sports Complex – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Eastbourne Sports Complex, the Council's main outdoor facility, which was home to a number of community sports clubs and the Martin Gray Academy.

An application to the Football Foundation to replace the artificial grass pitch at Eastbourne was successful and £412,580 has been received towards the refurbishment of the existing sand-filled AGP to form a new floodlit 3G football training pitch.

Eastbourne will operate with a nil subsidy by 2021 and the facilities will be provided at no cost therefore it is included in the Core Offer. Should break even not be achieved then services will be reduced to deliver a break even.

Following a question Members were advised that a planning application had been received to relocate the hockey pitch to Carmel College as the Football Foundation funding allowed only football games on the pitch.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to this proposal which would see a net budget reduction of £135,025 by 2020/21.

LLE6 – Indoor Bowls Club – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Indoor Bowls Club which detailed that the Council was responsible to ensure Morrison's received the agreed annual lease payments through a back to back lease agreement from 1981 when the Bowls Club was built as part of Morrisons.

Reference was made to the dwindling membership of the Bowls Club and Scrutiny was advised that if the Bowls Club were to close the Council would still have to pay £25k. It was also stressed that the Bowls Club provided a fitness and social interaction service for the older community and that there could be possible costs to Adult Social Care if it was no longer in existence.

Following a question Members were advised that younger people were being introduced; open sessions were held at the Club; and Officers were working closely with the Club to ensure it was as sustainable as it could be.

Members queried the legality of the lease and whether it was possible to be released from it.

LLE12 – Indoor and Outdoor Markets – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the markets which was not a statutory service. Scrutiny was advised that the Markets service generated a small marginal surplus although investment circa £4m was required to enable the covered market to continue.

Particular reference was made to a private sector partner being sought although the markets would remain in the Core Offer at present due to the marginal surplus. If it was not possible to locate a partner, consideration would need to be given to closing the Covered Market unless alternative investment could be identified.

Scrutiny was advised that a report would be submitted to Cabinet in May requesting release of capital funds to undertake necessary maintenance works.

Members raised concerns at the amount of funding required to invest and refurbish the market and were advised that the amount depended upon the level of restoration works to be undertaken.

Discussion ensued on the success of some privately-run Markets and the need to ensure Traders were kept fully informed.

W6 – Dolphin Centre - Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to close the Dolphin Centre, which would have an impact on the Council's ability to narrow the health gap and affect the economy of the town centre. This proposal would result in a net budget reduction of £1,165,436 by 2020/12.

Discussion ensued on the benefits of a town centre location; maintenance costs; reduction in subsidy costs; and re-location of the Library Service to the Dolphin Centre providing a centralised area for various service users.

W7 – Events – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to stop any Events across the Borough, including the town centre and Festival of Thrift, and withdrawal of support to community organised events. This proposal also includes the deletion of one post and would see a net budget reduction of £138,211 by 2020/21.

W8 – Head of Steam – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to close the Head of Steam resulting in significant effect on the Council's aspiration in relation to the Heritage Campus and 2025 celebrations of the Stockton to Darlington Railway. This proposal includes the deletion of 7.5 posts and would see a net budget reduction of £241,160 by 2020/21.

Futures Fund –

Remodelling of the Dolphin Centre including the Central Library – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £779,000 to retain a centrally located multi-purpose leisure centre and libraries service.

Libraries – Local Studies – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £30,000, to retain a Local Studies service.

Festivals and Events – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £90,000 to fund events and fund match events in partnership with others.

Head of Steam – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £228,000 to maintain key assets relating to the Borough's Railway Heritage.
