

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 April 2016

PRESENT – Councillor Carson (in the Chair); Councillors L Hughes, Lyonette, Wright and York. (5)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Baldwin, Cossins, Lyonette and York. (4)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Baldwin, Cossins and M Nicholson. (3)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson, Assistant Director – Community Services, Steve Petch, Place Strategy Manager and Lead Officer and Karen Graves, Democratic Officer.

P53. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interests reported at the meeting.

P54. 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 :-

LL8 and W10 – Allotments – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Council to provide, if requested, Allotments under the Allotments Act 1908. There are currently 18 Council-owned sites, 11 are Council maintained with 241 plots and 7 are self-managed. Associated costs for the service provide administration, maintenance and utility charges which are partly offset by the income received.

Members requested comparison rentals with neighbouring local authorities.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the increased rents and removal of the concession, currently £27, so that the service would breakeven by 2021. To achieve this, rents would gradually increase from £54 for a full plot to £170 by 2020/21 resulting in a net budget reduction of £29,686.

LLE9 – Arboriculture – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the Council to inspect and maintain the tree stock of the Borough. There are in excess of 150,000 trees within the Borough and 2,000 to 2,500 inspections were undertaken annually. Scrutiny were that the proposal was to retain the current service as to reduce the staff of one Arboricultural Officer and four Arborists would impact on the Council's ability to defend any insurance claim and create risks of danger to the public and excess costs of claims.

Following a question Scrutiny was advised that there was very little out-sourcing as the team had the necessary equipment and skills; most of the waste was chipped on site although Third Party Payments for waste disposal were part of the Stonegrave waste contract; and a small amount of third party and household work was undertaken by the Team.

LLE10 and W10 – Maintenance of Council Cemeteries and Crematorium – Details were supplied of the core offer budget to manage and maintain three cemeteries, one crematorium and five closed churchyards in the Borough.

The Council currently carries out approximately 150 burials and 66 cremated remains, approximately 1600 cremations and 15 to 20 public funerals per year.

The crematorium returns a surplus for the Council and it is appropriate to continue to provide this service to residents and include it in the core offer, however, the crematorium will require significant capital investment in the next few years.

Following a question, Members were advised that the Cemeteries had a dedicated ground maintenance team.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to gradually increase the burial charge to £700 by 2018/19, resulting in a net budget reduction of £56,645 by 2020/21

LLE11 – Dog Warden Service – Details were supplied of the core offer budget to meet the Council's statutory requirements for this service under Section 149 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Scrutiny was advised that there were no proposals to change this service which was interwoven with environmental crime and managed by one person.

LLE13 and W11 – Refuse and Recycling Collection and Waste Disposal – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for waste collection and waste disposal service which met the statutory obligations of the Council.

Members were advised that there were 62 contracts with organisations across the Borough that received either free of charge or reduced charges for the collection of waste from their premises and that the Senior Engagement Officer of the Council was currently liaising with the voluntary sector.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to charge the appropriate rate to the organisations receiving free of charge or reduced services which would increase overall income to the Council, resulting in a net budget reduction of £30,949 by 2020/21.

LLE14 and W13 – Street Cleansing and Environmental Crime – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for street cleansing, a statutory duty under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that footpaths and the highway were free from litter.

Scrutiny was advised of the proposals to reduce the amount of large mechanical sweepers and mechanical path sweepers, reduce frequency of Town Centre cleansing, cease operation of the Town Centre Water Feature, reduce the litter response crews which undertook litter and dog bin emptying and back lane cleansing, reduce the street scene orderlies and cessation of environmental crime enforcement which was not a statutory function.

Following a question Members were advised that if offenders of environment crime paid a fixed penalty notice the Council kept the fine, however, if the issue went to Court, the fine was kept by the Court and that the majority of the equipment was leased and not purchased by the authority.

Members raised concerns that if environmental crime enforcement was not undertaken litter and fly tipping would increase.

A member of the public addressed the Committee and raised concerns over the proposals that first impressions of Darlington would not be good and could deter business, tourism and residents. It was also stated that it was difficult to organise volunteer litter pickers due to lack of public liability insurance.

Discussion ensued on the need to encourage businesses to clean shop frontage; actively campaign for volunteers to undertake litter picks around the Borough; and educate school children of the consequences of dropping litter.

Particular reference was made to Street Champions being allocated a permit to ensure no charges were incurred when taking large items to the Household Waste and Recycling Centre; a need to ensure used needles were correctly disposed of; redistribution of income gained from plant sales at the Nursery; the effect of losing a large amount of staff from Street Scene; and health implications of litter and dog waste not being cleared.

Concerns were expressed on the effect of the Borough's economy if the town were not clean, tidy and welcoming; and the issue of Toxocariasis in children due to dog waste not being removed.

LLE15. Grounds Maintenance – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for grounds maintenance, including community housing services, parks and countryside management and environmental services community engagement.

Scrutiny was advised that it was not a statutory duty to cut grass, although the Council had health and safety responsibilities and owed a duty of care to visitors of parks and open spaces; and needed to maintain sight lines for safe passage on the highway and playing pitches.

The proposal was to reduce grass cutting in open spaces, parks, nature reserves and roadside verges; reduce support to voluntary groups including Friends, Street Champions and Darlington Cares; and cease floral displays. Council housing estates will continue to be maintained to existing standards as they are funded through the Housing Revenue Account.

The proposal also included maintenance of shrub beds next to highways and footpaths; hedge cutting and weed spraying on hard surfaces continuing at its current level; and reductions in staffing levels.

Discussion ensued on the need to keep this service at its current level; use of volunteers and educating children in schools; and gaining sponsorship to ensure continued floral displays within the town.

Reference was also made to the use of wildflowers on roundabouts; and the capacity required to manage a group of volunteers.

The proposals in relation to Ground Maintenance services were to be further discussed at a Task and Finish Review Group to be held on 4 May 2016.

LLE16 – Winter Maintenance – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for winter maintenance which was a service required by law to ensure highways are not endangered by snow or ice.

Scrutiny was advised that it was not practicable to cover the entire highway network and priorities were developed through a Winter Maintenance Plan, operated between April and October, which was reviewed annually.

W12 – Grounds Maintenance, Horticulture, Parks and Countryside Management – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce services and staffing levels which would see a net budget reduction of £618,231 by 2020/21.

W13 – Street Cleansing and Environmental Crime – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce services and staffing levels which would see a net budget reduction of £496,232 by 2020/21.

Futures Fund –

Funding to Maintain Open Space and Parks to Allow Standards to be Introduced at 50 Per Cent of Current Levels – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £100,000, to retain maintenance of Open Space and Parks.

Maintain South Park to Existing Standards – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £120,000 to enable South Park to be maintained to current standards.

Wildflower Meadows Invest to Save Fund – Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £50,000 to further expand the use of wildflower meadows in the Borough.

RESOLVED – That the information provided at this stage be noted.
