

**BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
BUDGET CONSULTATION 2014+**

Longbridge Public Consultation Meeting Report

Held at Bournville College, Northfield on 18 December 2013

Introduction

The meeting was attended by 106 people with a good representation of young people.

The meeting started with a presentation by the Council Leader. It was followed by a question and answer session with a number of questions being taken together and then each question was answered by the relevant member of the Council Cabinet on the platform. This report consists of a summary of the key points made by attendees. This is followed by a more detailed summary of each question asked (in black) and a summary of the answers given (in blue).

Summary

This was the largest of the four public meetings, probably also with the highest attendance by young people, and the one with the largest number of questions from the floor.

The questions covered a wide range of topics but the **main themes** were concerns about cuts to the **parks budget**, the impact on **vulnerable people**, particularly in relation to housing support, and **young people**, and doubts about the advisability of **contracting out** services to large private companies.

Six people raised concerns about the cuts to **the parks budget**, including volunteers in 'Friends of the Parks' groups and staff employed in the parks team. Parks were seen as important for citizens' health and wellbeing and for the city's image. Birmingham had a high reputation nationally for its parks but this would go if staff were cut drastically as proposed. Their work is undervalued and underestimated; for example, it was claimed that the woodlands team covers a much larger area than acknowledged in the White Paper. Volunteers could not substitute for the work of paid staff and the current huge volunteering effort in the city would decline as it relies on park staff for recruitment, co-ordination and training.

The **link between volunteering and paid staff** was also made in relation to other services such as within health and social care. One person expressed a fear that many charities would become untenable as a result of the cuts.

Five contributors, including some of the young people who attended, referred to concerns regarding the **impact of the cuts on children and young people**. The ring-fencing of safeguarding services and the additional investment was welcomed but it was felt that cuts in other children's services would undermine safeguarding as *"this is where problems are identified"*. Two contributors wanted a guarantee that youth centres would not close and one predicted a rise in crime as a result of cuts to youth services. The role of Connexions in transforming lives and in reducing the need for expensive intervention later on was identified by another contributor.

Fears of increasing social isolation of **vulnerable, older people** and going "back to the old times when people with learning disabilities were locked up" were raised by five people. Most of these comments highlighted the importance of **Supporting People** and **housing support services** which help the homeless and people cope with living independently in

their own accommodation. One person said it was unfair to evict people as a result of the bedroom tax.

Concerns about the **outsourcing services to private contractors** were raised by four people. There was a general feeling that these contractors were expensive and less efficient than Council workers - *"they're ripping people off to make a profit"* said one contributor - with examples given in relation to parks and the wider cleaner, greener agenda. As in the previous four public meetings, one person said that the waste contract with Veolia should be ended because of its work with illegal Israeli settlements. One person questioned the Council's decision to establish trading companies such as the Cityserve (cleaning services) and Acivico (building and facilities management and services) which were thought to be inefficient.

Fears for the future of **swimming pools and leisure centres** were raised by three attendees. Concerns were around a potential loss of facilities, a gap between plans to build a pool and the closure of an old one, higher prices when private operators took over and the need for transparency in the planned transfer.

A couple said that it was hard working, decent people who were suffering most from the cuts. Another three called for the Council to lead much **more intense protests** against the Government's cuts.

Returning to the cleaner, greener agenda, one person bemoaned the decline in the quality of **street cleaning** because of under-staffing resulting from cuts. Another questioned the ending of free black bags for rubbish at the same time as millions were being spent on wheelie bins.

An employee in **Pest Control** said that charging may have an adverse effect as many people will not/cannot pay the charge, particularly with the squeeze on incomes. Could means testing be introduced in relation to the charging? *"Pest control is a service not a business,"* she said, and the cuts to date along with those proposed means that there is no room left for pro-active/preventative work.

Other points made by individual contributors were:

- Pay Councillors less;
- Collect bad debts;
- What is the impact of the Equal Pay settlement?
- There is a need for better quality of information to have more effective consultation and to assess the cost of private sector contractors.

Notes on Questions and Answers

Questions from the floor:

Q1. What is happening to Youth Clubs? What would you do if all the Youth Centres are closed down?

Q2. You're not standing up for Birmingham, you're capitulating to the Government. The Government doesn't care; they'll do what they can get away with. You should use reserves and borrow against projected income, and mobilise support against the cuts.

Q3. Friend of Perry Hall Parks – what are the cuts going to mean to parks? Will there be less park keepers and rangers and closing of play areas?

Cabinet responses:

We will take a balanced budget to Council. It is illegal not to. A budget that is not balanced cannot be acted upon. The government would send people in to manage the Council and that would not be as fair as we're trying to be. According to the latest figures, in 2014-15 the government has decreased our spending power by £145 per dwelling - £71 average across the country but in Wokingham they are increasing spending by £5. The less deprived areas are being favoured. What is happening is unfair, I agree, and we will try to recover ground. Central Government will be challenged.

The budget for Youth provision is with the 10 District Committees. District Chairs will try and protect as much as they can for Youth Services, Library Services: budget numbers will be finalised soon.

Proposal number 47 suggests a £2.6m cut in parks. We would like suggestions on how this could be achieved. We hope that through this consultation process we might come to a different narrative about the proposal.

Reserves are ear-marked for specific purposes. The amount of usable reserves is £22m. The auditor has advised that this amount is too low and we should increase the reserve. We are not in a position to use reserves.

Q4. Home from Hospital Care has helped 1000 old people and has 70 volunteers but volunteers need an organisation to work for. The organisations need financial assistance from the Council. Many charities are concerned that reduction will make their organisations untenable.

Q5. Questionable whether it is possible to set an illegal budget. Things cost more in the private sector. If you give the private sector our leisure facilities it will cost three times the price. It's not fair if we cannot use it. You are going ahead with evictions because of the bedroom tax and there is no accommodation to go to – it's not fair. You want us to stand up for Birmingham but I haven't been asked to do anything like go to London to protest. Volunteers are important but nothing will be achieved without workers. Cuts to the adult social care budget will lead to social isolation of the vulnerable, elderly and disabled. In Kingswood there are bungalows for respite and they will go but there is no alternative. You've got to review these things, if you want to stand up for Birmingham.

Q6. I work in a charity that supports vulnerable adults – Will housing-related support services for people with learning disabilities and mental health issues end in 2015? Can you confirm you will end Supporting People funding? How will you support vulnerable adults to ensure that they're safe and will lead independent lives?

Cabinet responses:

The work of voluntary organisations is valued. We protected money for the voluntary & community sector last year - a £9m pot. Since 1 April, the Council is responsible for Public Health. There is £80m in Public Health, Supporting People is £40m. An exercise is taking place to align the budgets, to avoid duplication and look carefully at services that we need or want. We are doing all of this to ensure this supports voluntary organisations and simplifies how small organisations apply.

In collaboration with service users and providers we are trying to make sensible reduction but we have to face up to the fact that we will reach a point where we won't be able to resource Supporting People because it is discretionary spend.

Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the NHS are joint commissioners of Kingswood. We are trying to move away from expensive and institutionalised methods of care. We want to promote dignity and independence with adult safeguarding at the core.

These cuts will lead to 1,000 job losses. We are using the private sector to upgrade roads, pavements and street lighting across the city. All different options were costed, the only option was to look to PFI. We have turned to the private sector for new swimming pools – 6 across the city - and it is working in Harborne. Provision would not be there otherwise. Prices in Harborne are set by BCC and new ones will be the same too.

A balanced budget is a legal requirement. We have a Section 151 Officer who has to sign off a legal budget. Cuts do have to be made.

Q7. Will you be closing old swimming pools before building new ones? It is vitally important that people learn to swim.

Q8. Conservation Group – Volunteering is not a stand-alone activity. Cuts to the Ranger service will be a big problem. In answer to savings proposal 47, we have to have some professional paid staff in parks too, so we need to challenge this. Also, there is an economic case for having District councillors working from a smaller and more effective hub, and less councillors.

Q9. What are you doing about collecting bad debts? The accounts say long term debtors are over £70m, and short term £300m. What are the redundancy cost and could these be better used in the Council?

Cabinet responses:

We will not close any pool until the facility to replace it is open. We will bridge the budget deficit between closing one and opening another from central funds to allow this over a phased period 2015 -2017.

We are hoping to move more money into District Committees. What will be the role of BCC if all cuts come into play? Some things will be sub-regional (economy, skills) and driven to Districts to be in tune with local needs. We would have to go to government to reduce the number of councillors.

Point well-made re parks. They can't operate on volunteers alone. Uncomfortable about removing Park Keeper posts. Need to find a different way to achieve the £2.6m cut there.

The Council makes every effort to recover bad debt, including bailiffs. Targeted redundancy scheme will cover all except Children's Social Care. It is a double statutory scheme; as generous as possible as we know people will struggle. Provision is made in the budget to cover the costs.

Q10. I disagree that at time of public sector cuts and people losing their jobs, the Veolia contract is protected. The contract should be cut because of Veolia's links to the illegal settlements in Palestine.

Q11. Clean, green city does not come into it anymore. Play areas are being closed. £8k leisure centre overspend would protect parks. Already 8,000 days of volunteer work in parks and £5m in cuts. It is having a detrimental effect on childhood obesity and access to clean air.

Q12. The city has won medals for its horticulture. The document says we could lose 36 people, a quarter of our parks workforce. If you don't cut grass, it will be a haven for rats, litter and dog faeces. If there are no flower beds, no colour, who will come to Birmingham?

We have strived to put the City on the map, with colour. We're one of the top horticultural cities in the country. It will be decimated. Why does the Council employ outside companies that charge £139 to change a light bulb, £800 to put lights on a Christmas tree, £2000 to plant a tree? Council workers could do these jobs.

Cabinet responses:

This is a consultation exercise. When we take the budget through Council we have to show that we have consulted, listened and changed. We value the work of parks staff and volunteers, comments were made on this issue at all meetings and it will feature in further discussions.

£2000 to plant a tree is the lifetime cost, not just the planting costs, over 25/50 years. I would like details of the £139 to change a light bulb and I will follow this up. The contract was signed a few years ago and prices are set down for various operations. Through the social charter, we're trying to negotiate contracts that benefit local communities. In new contracts, a commitment to local communities is there. When we re-let those contracts we will be measuring quality to users first, and then Social Value which will be weighted as highly as price, so local groups will have a good chance of winning contracts.

In this budget there is no saving on the Veolia budget because it was consulted on in 2012/2013. The contract will be up for renewal in five years time.

Q13. Connexions budget only £3m now and it only does statutory services. It protects the Council from adverse judicial reviews. It has an impact on lives, reducing the need for expensive intervention later on. In areas with the highest unemployment in the UK, there is an economic impact of getting young people into jobs. Connexions directly engages, transforms lives and saves money.

Q14. In South Birmingham there is a lot of crime, the Youth Service has been cut and it costs thousands to send someone to court and hold them in jail. How are you going to put up with crime going up?

Q15. Can you guarantee that Youth Centres won't close? We are looking at ways to improve services but what are your plans for the repercussions if you do close them?

Cabinet responses:

Most of the budget for Connexions went to schools two years ago; we retained only the statutory services. Connexions' non-statutory work didn't get the buy-back from schools, so there were cuts. Aware of the impact of cuts on Youth Offending service and pledge to look at it. There is a Young People and SEND review at the moment and we will look at factoring in Connexions.

It is good that young people have taken the time to come here. At a meeting tomorrow of District Chairs we will look at proposals. I cannot give any guarantees, what I can say is that following consultation last year the youth budget was protected.

Q16. Do you think you'll go back to the old times when people with learning disabilities were locked up?

Q17. Support for park rangers. There is a link between parks and health & fitness; parks are used by schools and various groups. Is there possible funding for encouraging fitness and schools in parks?

Q18. The quality of information is poor and misleading. One example on p33 of the White Paper which shows a cut of £56m in benefits spending over this year which is equal to the

£56m cut in money coming to the Council for 'grants to reimburse expenditure. The government believes it is funding various things, but unless the Council gives us the information about grants and spend readily available on the website, we are not in a position to judge. Cityserve cleaning services and Acivico are providing very inefficient services. Why has the Council set up wholly traded services? It is very difficult to understand where the money is going and where the waste is. Cut inefficient staff not the good staff to move elsewhere.

Q19. There is a cost to the city of the rent and repair of buildings e.g. swimming pools.

Cabinet responses:

We definitely will not go back to the old times of locking people with disabilities up.

The new pools will be operated at no cost to the City. We can deliver six new facilities, one in this part of Birmingham to replace Northfield. We can use the money saved on operating costs to deal with capital borrowing.

There is Public Health spend for parks in some of our budget proposals. BeActive started as free swim/gym but we're keen to roll it out. Active Parks pilot has been successful and will be rolled out. We're funding Birmingham Open Spaces Forum to give capacity. This is why we are looking at the £84m in Public Health, line by line, to see if this is what we should be spending it on.

There are problems with Acivico. It was set up as a long term investment. It has opportunity to earn money as a separate stand-alone division, but the performance indicators were wrong. They were all about process, now we're trying to get some about service users.

Cityserve has to compete with the private sector. It is paying dining ladies the living wage which puts money into locals' pockets. It's not easy as we are competing in a market of devolved schools, but there is a great future. Historically it has operated on a neutral funding basis, but it is taking on board issues and tackling them.

Q20. Older Adults who rely heavily on day centres are concerned about cuts. Will there be further cuts, e.g. in support for carers, respite care, and ring and ride?

Q21. Street cleaning was winning awards but now it is Ward-based, there have been 20% cuts in the workforce. We're undermanned. How do you expect us to keep the city clean?

Q22. I'm a working woman who cares for her husband and has son in supported accommodation where he gets the support to enable him to cope. His support is being cut. Will they cut the accommodation too? It is supposed to be care in the community but if there is no care, people will just be in the community. Where are all the people going to go? Hard working decent people are suffering and white collar criminals get away with it.

Cabinet responses:

The budget for waste is in three parts: collection, disposal and cleaning streets. We're locked into a 25 year contract for disposal and we are committed to weekly collections, so there has to be a cut in street cleansing. Last year approx. 100 street cleansers went and it has already had an impact across the city – the city looks scruffier, we can't dodge that.

There are formal ways to engage in consultation with the City Council and commissioning groups. It is an important part of managing a joint commissioning budget. One has to distinguish between providers and commissioners. Issues should be raised with managers. We have to distinguish between proposals and the Council making cuts. We are consulting. There will be changes because of the funds to spend on services.

Individual case will be dealt with in a case review. We want to protect the money spent on living independently and the focus will be on supporting carers. We have pledged to meet substantial and critical need regardless of the stress it puts elsewhere in the city.

Ring & Ride is not part of BCC. It is the responsibility of Centro which will be consulting about it until 19th January.

Q23. Everybody has had enough of the cuts. It is the hard working, decent people who are the most vulnerable. Cut MPs wages. Why are normal people suffering?

Q24. The Councillor said we can't have black bags any more. Surely this isn't right when £55m is being spent on wheelie bins and weekly collections. Also the equal pay-outs are enormous.

Q25. Children's services will be protected but Education Welfare Services will be cut. This is where problems are identified. Also closing parks, pools etc. which will impact on kids. Winterbourne was a private sector nursing home – you're giving a lot of services to private sector, e.g. waste disposal, and they're ripping people off to make a profit. Bankers caused this crisis. There's no fight against these people. We want an alternative. We expect more from our Council than cuts.

Q26. Pest control is a service not a business. There's no room for a proactive service to prevent problems occurring in the Wards now that funding from Community Chest and the Neighbourhoods Renewal Fund has gone. Being asked to make £300,000 savings next year and to charge a £20 call out fee. Austerity has had a huge impact and a lot of people can't afford £20 so they won't deal with pest problems. Could it be means tested and charge more to those with more?

Q27. The Woodland Team is down to be cut by more than half. We do specialist work across the city: we look after Sutton Park, the Lickey Hills, Broadmeadows and Woodgate Valley Country Park. This year we had a disease that was eating the trees. We worked alongside private contractors to deal with this but we did a more efficient job and we are still clearing up after them. We are already thin on the ground, eleven of us, and it's a huge task. The document says we cover 500 acres which is wrong – Lickey Hills alone is 500 acres, Sutton Park is 2,000 acres.

Cabinet responses:

About half of black sack waste could be recycled. Wheelie bins drive up recycling and make money. We can get income from recycling rather than paying for disposal. This is a one off £30m investment programme with matched funding. It is not revenue money going forward. We protected street cleaners last year, but we cannot this year as the budget has got worse. We have to start tackling fast food and other waste that attracts pests. Wheelie bins are part of the solution. Broadly, where things are compulsory, we have to provide; other things do not come free of charge.

We've been failing children for far too long. In order to protect them we have to ask other areas to make sacrifices, and we understand it's a difficult ask. There are cuts that will affect children but front line social work has to be protected. The Education Welfare Service is putting forward proposals as part of the consultation.

There were changes in the law on Equal Pay and the Council was not able to settle on equal pay claims, no win no fee lawyers were involved, goalposts were changed and this led to a huge £1,000m budget to pay claims etc. £400m has been paid so far. We have agreed payments over a scheduled basis until 2019. The Secretary of State has ruled we cannot borrow any more money to deal with these claims. The Council will sell off capital assets to

pay for them. This is not in the revenue budget of the Council so it is not in the budget consultation paperwork.

There has been a strong representation about Parks tonight and other nights too. This is consultation, so it does mean we will have to look again. Thank you for being here and making the representations that you have.