

Community Services Scrutiny Committee – Minute Extract

Medium Term Financial Strategy 2007/08 to 2009/10

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Community Services and Director of Resources concerning the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2007/8 to 2009/10. A copy of the report marked 'B' is filed with these minutes.

The Cabinet Lead Member and Director of Community Services advised the Committee that the proposals were for a 3 year budget and that savings had been identified and anticipated for subsequent years. The proposals support and strengthen service provision through additional growth, but also include challenging targets for efficiency savings.

In response to questions, the Committee was advised as follows:

General

- The Department had clear ideas about how it intended to achieve the required efficiency savings in 2007/8. Good progress had been made to identify areas of efficiency savings in 2008/9, but as yet no work had commenced in relation to 2009/10. The figures identified in relation to 2009/10 were target figures which the department would be expected to meet. Similar targets had been set for other departments.
- At this stage, it was difficult to forecast the cost and demand pressures beyond 2007/8. The figures identified for subsequent years (in Appendix B to the report) were best estimates, based on current information.

Growth

- The additional £40,000 for Bosworth Battlefield was to cover the costs of staffing and security required for the Visitor Centre to become an accredited museum. This was an ongoing commitment.

Reduced Income

- The Department had explored other avenues to try to make good the decline in income from traditional 'charged for' library services relating to DVD and sound recordings but there appeared to be limited scope. This was also the experience of other authorities contacted.

Savings

Joint Working with Staffordshire

- This item referred to Scientific Services and (Public Analyst) and related to developing the existing co-operation between the two authorities on external trading.

Trading Standards - Hard to fill vacancies

- The proposals in relation to the deletion of hard to fill vacancies in the Trading Standards service would generate £93,000 in revenue savings. This would not lead to a reduction in the existing level of service provided.
- The service was reviewing the way it monitored and inspected businesses and would continue with its intelligence-led risk analysis for determining priorities, utilising information gathered from a number of agencies, including trends emerging from complaints enquiries received by Consumer Direct. All high risk businesses would continue to be 100% inspected.

Operational Budgets

- The proposed savings relating to non-allocation of Operational Budget inflation would involve a variety of small reductions.

Support Costs

- Part of the reduction in support costs of £90,000 was an anticipated saving assumed from possible rationalisation from property holdings which would be realised through the Corporate Asset Management process.

Registration Charges

- The increase in registration charges would bring the County Council in line with neighbouring authorities. A balance would need to be maintained with regard to increasing charges beyond a certain level, so as not to affect the level of demand and therefore total income for the service.

Country Parks and Library Services

- With regard to Country Parks, Library Services for Education and Library Bibliographical Services, the Committee asked that the following comments, made at the previous meeting on 10 January 2007, be drawn to the attention of the Cabinet:

"Country Parks

In response to questions by members, the Committee was advised as follows:

a) The criteria for determining the land holdings that could be rationalised were in the process of being developed. The criteria would need to ensure:

- that there were no legal or financial impediments attached to the disposal.
- that, where possible, the current usage of the sites would be maintained, including public access.
- that there was a willingness and ability by the organisation to take on and maintain the land holdings in question.

b) The underlying principle was to achieve revenue savings and not to dispose assets for capital gain.

c) It was possible that up to ten sites could be identified for disposal. Initial consideration was being given to the following six sites:

- (i) Crow Mills, Oadby and Wigston
- (ii) Altar Stones, Hinckley and Bosworth
- (iii) Sarah's Wood, North West Leicestershire
- (iv) Lount Nature Reserve, North West Leicestershire
- (v) A511 sites (2 sites), North West Leicestershire
- (vi) Sutton Cheney Wharf, Hinckley and Bosworth

d) The County Council would be opening discussions/negotiations with a range of potential partners including District and Parish Councils, Heart of the Forest Foundation, Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust and British Waterways.

e) The proposals in the budget envisaged full savings being realised in year 3 (2009/10) given the timescales required for consultation and negotiations for disposal.

f) In relation to 2007/08, the £45,000 savings target would be met through the income from increased car parking charges agreed in the previous year.

g) That as negotiations progressed, local members and the Scrutiny Committee would be consulted.

Library Services for Education (LSE)

That Committee was advised that the City Council had withdrawn its subsidy and as a consequence changes had already been implemented in the staffing structure to reflect this. The proposals now being put forward were to enter into a dialogue with schools (City and County) about the level and type of service required. In addition, the service recognised the need to reduce its costs and as such would be looking critically at operational and property costs.

The current subsidy of £150,000 amounted to approximately 20% of the LSE budget. The majority of the savings were to be realised in 2009/10 as these were dependent upon discussions/negotiations with schools on price and level of service required, and on reducing property costs

Library Services – Library Development Team and Bibliographical Services

The proposals being put forward were timed to fit with a new national procurement initiative which would reduce the level of resource required at a local level. The savings would be generated by a reduction in the staffing levels in these areas but such reduction would only be completed by Year 3 (2009/10), and as such it was hoped that the need for compulsory redundancies could be avoided. The current proposal envisaged a reduction of four posts in Library Development."

External Funding

- The figures set out in Appendix D of the report showed the level of external funding to be attracted in 2007/8. The total ongoing project value of external funding was in the region of £11 million.
- The Department was exploring a number of other avenues in relation to external funding including funding from the EU. However, a balance needed to be struck between investing resources in the bidding process and the likely outcome. A specific bid was being developed with Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire County Council in order to broaden Centre Screen and secure ongoing funding.

Capital Funding

- The Capital Programme and revenue consequences did not reflect the proposed new arrangements in relation to Oadby Library, as negotiations were still proceeding and it was not yet clear whether the new proposals would come to fruition. The new proposal was broadly similar in value for money terms to the previous partnership project, though the timing of expenditure would be different. The figures would be updated once the new proposal was secured.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the comments now made be submitted to the Scrutiny Commission and Cabinet;
- (b) That in relation to Country Parks, the Committee reiterates its previous concerns regarding continued public access to any land holdings that are disposed and to that end urges the Cabinet to ensure that appropriate legal safeguards, in the form of covenants, are put in place;
- (c) That the Director of Community Services be requested to submit reports to future meetings of the Committee on the proposals in relation to:
 - (i) Library Services for Education;
 - (ii) Library Bibliographical services;
 - (iii) Progress on the disposal of Country Parks holdings.