

CO-OPERATIVE & COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Minutes of the meeting of the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny
Committee held on Wednesday, 9th November, 2011 at 6.00 p.m. in the Civic
Offices, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors A. McClements, (Chairman), A. Jhawar, K. Tomlinson, S. Bentley.

Also Present: Angie Astley, Head of Leisure, Libraries & Customer Services; Stuart Davidson, Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager; Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Group Specialist; Tracy Clarke, Scrutiny Officer.

CCSC-11 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee held on the 12th September 2011 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

CCSC - 12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors A. England, Cabinet Member; N. England, J. Loveridge, Scrutiny Co-optee L. Baker-Oliver.

CCSC-13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

CCSC-14 LEISURE SERVICES CONCESSION POLICY

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member (in his absence) and the Head of Leisure, Libraries & Customer Services for involving the Committee at the early stage of the discussion about concessions in leisure. Included within the Leisure Services savings proposals, as part of the Councils budget cuts Leisure Services have proposed a review of the existing concessions policy to realise an additional £50,000 of income.

The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager presented the report on Leisure Concessions and the Arthog Remissions Policy, and tabled a table showing how the swimming concession in Telford & Wrekin compared to other authorities. A report on the feedback from consultation with the public on the proposals relating to Free Swimming in the 100 Day budget was also tabled.

Research by external consultants highlighted that the Councils leisure concessions were generous and in times of austerity there are potential savings that could be made.

In terms of savings there is a necessity to maximise the income levels, while protecting vulnerable groups and still achieve the £50,000 savings.

Leisure Concessions

- Leisure is a discretionary service for the Local Authority and there are no legal obligations for the Council to provide concessionary leisure activities for residents.
- All categories are means tested except senior citizens aged 60 years old who regardless of their financial circumstances are entitled to concessionary rates and free Swimming. This could be deemed to be unfair when there are a number of people in this age group who still continue to work.
- The options are to look at groups who have an automatic right to concessions or the level of concessions offered. The easiest option is to look at the level of concession that the group is entitled to and this needs to be comparative to other concessions offered by other services.
- The age group that has the potential to offer the largest potential savings through swimming and health & fitness is the over 60 age group. The other categories potential savings are minimal in comparison.
- The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager tabled a document with the feedback from the Local Authorities that had responded to the question on the concessionary rate for the over 60's. The document highlighted that Telford & Wrekin Council is the only authority that is offering free swimming with the norm being for concessionary rates of up to 50%.
- The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager drew the members attention to appendix 2 on concessions modelling which showed different levels of price increases and the comparative loss of income from service users who may chose other options, including the private sector.
- It was agreed that part of the problem with the Local Authority Leisure facilities is that the service has been on a tight budget and has suffered from a lack of long term investment. This has led to tired looking facilities which can make it more difficult for the Councils leisure services to compete with the private sector. Although it was noted that much of this is being addressed through regeneration programmes and the Sports & Learning Communities programme.
- The Head of Leisure, Libraries & Customer Services highlighted that the Council run Leisure services had benefitted from the credit crunch, with users from the private sector looking for a more affordable option. Furthermore, with refurbishments taking place at Wellington and the new build at Abraham Darby these facilities should be able to directly compete with the private sector in the near future.
- There is a recognition that there has been problems accessing the facilities at Hadley Learning Centre and Madeley Court Academy but due to recent negotiations it is hoped that this has now been resolved for future usage.

Questions and comments from Members

How do the Council run leisure services compare with the private sector?

The full package rate at Telford & Wrekin Council is £26.00 this compares favourably to Nuffield Health at £40.00 and JJB at £30.00. The Council aims to offer good facilities, good staffing and better equipment than its private competitors at the value end of the market. The difference is that the private sector is not obliged to provide services for the public and so has its focus purely on profit.

Are there any figures available on the income from secondary spending?

The Flex card has the intelligence to show what users are buying using their cards although this doesn't extend to all products such as vending machines.

If the over 60s had their concessionary rates for swimming taken off them what would happen to those residents who fall into the lower income bracket?

If the over 60s are in receipt of pension credit then they would still qualify for the concessionary rate.

Could one of the options be to raise the age group eligible for concessions from 60 to 65 to reduce the number of Members who might be working and getting the benefits of free Swimming?

The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager said all but one authority is using the age of 60 as the age for concessionary rates to start. However, the majority of the over 60's service users are over 65 years old and therefore no considerable savings would be made by raising the concessionary age. A member added that as this is a discretionary service therefore there are no legal requirements to offer concessions and therefore this is a privilege and not a right.

Why are there 100% discounts on services?

The Council's scheme has been recognised as generous and with the need to make £50,000 savings this is being reviewed.

Are there cost implications for checking the residents who say they are eligible for discounts?

No there are no costs involved. The eligibility of the resident for the concessionary rate is checked when they complete the application form for the flex card.

Can any revenue be made by raising the flex card charges?

A comprehensive review of Flex card charges was undertaken last year with a new charging structure introduced from April 2011. This could be re-considered but there is a risk that if customers deem the card to be too expensive then they may not buy the card in the first place and will therefore not access the leisure activities leading to a greater loss of income.

Do the schools still have a statutory obligation to provide free swimming for one hour a week?

There is a local indicator for the percentage of children who can swim 25 metres or more at the end of key stage 2 and this can be provided. With regards to if there are any statutory obligation this can be checked.

A Member raised that free swimming should only be for children swimming with their families, as making a concessionary activity for the family is a good idea. The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager said families are still being targeted with various campaigns. This idea was not agreed with some of the other Members who said the health and social benefits for children should not be underestimated.

Members discussed the possibilities of having a sliding scale for the concessions to take account for single parent families and families that miss the benefits threshold and subsequently are not entitled to other benefits such as leisure concessions. It was agreed that this would be unworkable and the current means tested system aims to enable as many people as possible to not be disadvantaged.

It would be of benefit to market the benefits of the flex card.

There has been marketing but there is always more marketing that can be completed. The limited marketing budget is a factor in why more marketing is not carried out. However, we are getting more creative with our marketing by utilising social networking sites, particularly to target our younger service users.

Leisure is very important it can have long term benefits that assist in the long term public health of residents. Historically the revenue from leisure has always subsidised other services. Have cabinet been asked if this item can be exempt?

The Chairman was clear that while in an ideal world there would be no cuts, this meeting had been called for the Committee to be able to make direct and early recommendations on the £50,000 saving proposals and the only areas that will be a priority for the council in terms of being exempt from budget cuts are going to be safeguarding of vulnerable children and adults.

A lack of previous investment in the leisure services has meant that facilities such as the Horsehay Golf Club have not been able to compete with facilities in the private sector. How can this change?

As part of the Co-operative Council, negotiations are taking place to allow Leisure to have a three year budget and invest any extra income that is generated into future improvements.

What is the time factor for the savings?

The new schemes need to be initiated by 1st April 2012, however, there will need to be at least a months notice to communicate the concessions to the public.

At the end of the discussion the Members agreed that the over 60's age group was an area that could be considered for potential savings. However, in order for them to make further recommendations they asked for more modelling options to be prepared.

The Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager said that they would report back in the next three weeks with informed options for creating savings. This will include some more modelling on the over 60's swimming and gym membership.

Arthog Remissions Policy

- The reason this has been brought to Scrutiny is because a complaint has been received and although this is the first known complaint that has been received about the service in 18 months it was felt the Members may wish to review the policy and make any necessary recommendations.
- Arthog Outdoor Education Centre primarily provides educational opportunities rather than the Treetops experience offered by the private sector. While Arthog used to mainly cater for secondary aged children this has evolved to be more primary aged children. Most of the children enjoy a 5 day stay which costs between £228 and £263 a stay. Although some schools do stay for 3 days.
- The remission policy in place allows for 500 pupil places to be funded. With the current economic climate the demand for this service may increase.
- The management of Arthog has fallen into the remit of leisure and there is no statutory obligation to provide the service, although there is legislation in respect of charging and remissions policies for Local Education Authorities.
- If changes were to be made to the remissions policy then the children from the lower income families may not be able to go to Arthog. As a lot of the schools that attend Arthog are primary schools with whole classes attending, if a number of pupils drop out then this may mean that the pupils may need to go into another class putting extra pressure on the Teachers that stay at school or that the school are forced to cancel their booking. This could mean the centre suffers from a loss of revenue and the pupils miss a valuable experience.

Questions from the Members

How is Arthog run?

Arthog is managed by the Council through Leisure Services, in addition there is a Management Committee that comprises of Telford & Wrekin, Shropshire Council Officers and Headteachers.. At the moment any surplus money is being re-invested to bring the centre up to a standard that is appropriate for both school children and the adult market at the weekends. This year this has included refurbishing the kitchen to an appropriate standard.

How often is Arthog shut?

Arthog does not shut at the weekend, companies and events make use of the facilities and a differential pricing structure is used. Arthog's additional business operates at no cost to the Local Authority.

Will Arthog make a profit this year?

Until Arthog was taken over by Leisure Services it was being subsidised. This year it will break even.

While it is understood that there has to be a cut off of where the support ends could the remissions policy have a sliding scale?

It is not deemed suitable to have a sliding scale option as the implementation would be difficult.

However, some Headteachers offer an instalment system, although this is not something that the Council has any influence over.

What is preventing us from determining an annual income level?

There could be a set income level where the concessions cut in but this would be difficult to implement, in terms of checking on income levels.

If Arthog could become profitable then this money could be used to subsidise those families identified by their Headteachers as needing extra financial help. Members agreed that some families do not accept free school meals when they are entitled to them so they may not accept help regarding Arthog.

What reserves do the schools have to assist lower income families?

With the changes in school governance there will be a new fund that schools may chose to fund projects such as Arthog. However, this will be their choice and Arthog will probably be competing against other projects.

Can the number of complaints regarding the remission policy be reported back?

Yes, the number of complaints can be checked.

The Members felt that given that there only seems to be one complaint that the remission policy did not need to be changed. They did however, request that the number of complaints was checked and this was reported back at the next meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***That the Community & Leisure Services Delivery Manager would report back in the next three weeks with possible options for creating savings. This will include some more modelling on the over 60's swimming and gym memberships.***
- ***That following the next meeting that the Members will get involved in consultation with the Elderly Peoples Forum.***
- ***That the Head of Leisure, Libraries & Customer Services will report back on the number of complaints received on the remissions policy for Arthog.***

The Committee noted that the next meeting would need to be in the next three weeks. The Scrutiny Officer will confirm the date and time of the meeting with the committee

The meeting ended at 7.36pm

Chairman:

Date: