

Maintenance of Parks, Cemeteries and Open Spaces and Ranger Service Consultation 2018

Introduction

The council faces an unprecedented financial challenge. Over the next three years to 2020 the council need to make savings of £20.6 million on top of the £74 million already made since 2010.

The council can longer pay for all the services we have traditionally provided. We must prioritise resources towards those services that we are legally required to provide (statutory services) such as adult and children's social care, waste collection, road maintenance and library services and review how we offer them. This extremely difficult financial position is the result of continued cuts in funding by Government, rising costs and increasing demand for key services like health and social care.

The majority of efficiency savings have now been made as part of the £74 million savings since 2010 and further savings will need to come from the radical reduction, cessation or complete transformation of how services are provided.

Parks and Open Spaces service

The council's Parks, Landscape and Street Scene section provides overall management of parks and open spaces including the maintenance of the parks assets and infrastructure, the provision of the ranger service, provision of playgrounds and equipment, landscape and environment maintenance including, grass cutting, sports pitch provision, litter picking, street sweeping, removal of fly tipping, litter bin and dog bin emptying, site patrols and inspections, tree condition surveys and maintenance, maintenance of schools grounds, highway weed spraying and the upkeep and maintenance of cemeteries.

The provision and maintenance of parks and open spaces is not a statutory service. Since 2010 the parks and grounds maintenance service has contributed over £1 million of savings through the deletion of supervisory, admin and management posts, the reduction of the ranger service, the closure of pet's corner and a reduction in grounds maintenance operations and standards.

The service is now operating as efficiently as possible and further savings will need to come from a transformation of how the overall service is provided and to this aim it is proposed to consult stakeholders on how this service can be provided in the future. We will need to find new ways of providing these services.

Our key ambitions for parks

The council's ambitions are to improve people's lives and to create a better place to live and we recognise that parks are vital for the health, fitness and wellbeing of our communities as well as playing a key role in the regeneration of the borough.

What are we consulting on?

To meet the council's overall budget responsibilities by 2020 when the council will have £20.6 million less to spend than it does today the council intends to reduce the non-statutory parks budget by £473,000 and proposes to do this by:

- reducing parks grounds maintenance operations by the equivalent of £170,000 from April 2018 and by a further £75,000 from April 2019
- reducing the spend on new and the repair and maintenance of play equipment by £45,000 from April 2018
- ceasing the ranger service from April 2018 saving £133,000 and to transfer operations and/or management of some green assets to the voluntary sector saving an estimated £50,000.

To retain the ranger service or continue with the current level of repair of play equipment would mean more reductions to the maintenance of grounds and would result in significant visual and safety considerations within the parks.

The proposals are considered those that will have the least overall impact for the majority of residents and park visitors.

Are you responding as:

- Member of the public Member of a local group (please specify)
- Other (please specify)

Proposal 1 - Reduction in the maintenance of Parks, Cemeteries and Open Spaces to save £215,000.

Parks and open spaces are maintained to high standards and the main parks are kept at Green Flag criteria standards. An assessment of all parks and open spaces has been undertaken and the maintenance regimes for all sites have been assessed. Reductions in maintenance are proposed based on those maintenance tasks that will have the least visual impact on the aesthetics of the park and will have no impact on the safety of visitors to the site. The specific reductions are detailed in the table below:

Category	Description
Grass cutting	<p>Grass cutting takes up a large percentage of the parks grounds maintenance budget, is labour intensive and provides scope to make savings by mowing grass less frequently and by extending the use of grass growth regulator on applicable areas.</p> <p>The reduction in grass cutting will also have environmental and ecological benefits, less fuel usage from mowing machines and longer grass will create a more diverse habitat for plants and animals.</p> <p>All grass areas have been reviewed on a site by site basis taking into account the function, safety, size, popularity and footfall attributed to the site.</p>
Weed killing	Weed killer application methods have been reviewed which will allow the frequency of applying weed killer on and around grassed areas and in shrubberies to be reduced with reduced negative environmental impact.
Litter picking	<p>Reduction in litter picking in winter months on infrequently visited and low participation sites. Reduction from two weekly to monthly frequency.</p> <p>Litter picking will be prioritised to the main parks that have high visitor numbers all year round, less well used parks will be litter picked less.</p>
Hedge cutting	Reduce the frequency of hedge cutting from 4 to 3 and space out the remaining cuts throughout the year. This should minimise the visual impact and ensure vegetation is kept from encroaching on to pathways.
Review and reduce spend on the repair and maintenance of play equipment	<p>The council provides 72 equipped children's play areas across the borough. St Helens Open Space Study carried out in 2015 showed that there is a higher provision, per head of population, for play in some wards than others. It is also the case that provision for the borough exceeds other comparative councils' and national averages.</p> <p>All play areas will be assessed against specific criteria including their geographical location, distance and comparison to other play areas, continued vandalism to equipment and any changes will be in line with the St Helens Open Space Study 2015. Some equipment which is subject to continued vandalism will not be replaced due to the unjustifiable high cost of replacement. The level of funding for locations will be based on need.</p>
Review spend on outdoor Park furniture	Park furniture such as benches, fences, bins etc. receive regular programmed maintenance and replacement. The provision and maintenance will be reviewed and, where justified, maintenance may be reduced or in some cases items may be removed and not replaced. These will be individually assessed when repairs are required and a decision made on the requirement/usage of the asset in order to achieve the saving.

Do you agree or disagree with this approach?

- Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neither agree nor disagree
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree

Proposal 2 - Cessation of Ranger Service to save £133,000

The ranger service was originally formed in 1979 primarily to oversee the transformation of the Sankey Canal from industrial wasteland to an area for public recreation. The service evolved over time to include all urban parks and included working with volunteers and providing a visible presence in parks with the delivery of some educational activities. At the turn of the millennium with the expansion of the service some maintenance tasks were added. The ranger service had grown from its original purpose and became a standalone service in its own right with 22 employees and a structure of its own led by a head ranger, senior rangers, rangers and assistant rangers.

Since austerity began in 2010 the service has gradually reduced in numbers following service reviews and with only 4 rangers remaining it is not possible to provide the exact same service across all parks and open spaces. The rangers now only cover 4 parks as permanent bases. The maintenance that was previously carried out by the rangers has been absorbed by the parks grounds maintenance teams.

The proposal will cease the current service as it is and will integrate some of the tasks within the overall parks department structure. It is envisaged that with community engagement some events will remain and statutory duties around biodiversity will be provided by an integrated borough wide parks and open spaces service, not as currently just by the ranger staff themselves.

Do you agree or disagree with this approach?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Proposal 3 - Investigate the feasibility of transferring some 'green assets' to the voluntary sector to save £50,000

Winter and summer games facilities such as bowling greens and football/rugby pitches are expensive to provide and maintain and in the case of bowling greens demand has reduced significantly over the years. It is proposed to investigate the possibility of transferring the management and/or maintenance of some of these assets to interested community groups.

It is anticipated that we may achieve £50,000 savings from greater involvement from communities in delivery and through the transfer of assets which may offset any potential increased savings from the reduction of maintenance or repairs.

Do you agree or disagree with this approach?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Would you or your organisation/community group be able to help or support us to deliver our vision for parks?

Yes

No

Already help/support parks

In what way would you be able to help or support parks in the future?

Do you have any further comments about the proposed changes to the future of the maintenance of Parks, Cemeteries and Open Spaces and Ranger Service

About You

We want to make sure that nobody is treated differently because of their age, gender, disability or race. One way we can do this is to monitor the details of the people who give us feedback to make sure no groups are more or less satisfied with our services than others.

We would be very grateful if you could help us to do this by completing the questions below.

Information provided on this form will be processed in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998. It will be treated as confidential and used for the purpose of improving our services.

- Gender** Male Female
- Age** 0-16 16-24 25-34 35-44
 45-54 55-64 65-74 75+

- Do you consider yourself disabled?** Yes No
- Physical Disability Hearing Impairment Learning Difficulty
 Visual Impairment Mental Health
 Other (Please write in below)
-

Ethnicity

- White British Mixed or Mixed British Asian or Asian British
 Black or Black British Chinese or Chinese British
 Other (Please write in below)
-

Please return to:

Kirsty Watkinson
Customer Intelligence and Consultation Officer
Customer Services
St.Helens Council
Wesley House
Corporation Street
St.Helens
WA10 1HF

