

# Budget Scrutiny Working Group

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Monday, 2 December 2019

## MINUTES

### Present:

Councillor Jennifer Wheeler (Chair), and Councillors Michael Chalk, John Fisher and Yvonne Smith

### Also Present:

Professor Peter Latchford OBE (Black Radley)

### Officers:

Chris Forrester and Guy Revans

### Senior Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley

## 5. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY - FEES AND CHARGES

Members considered the draft fees and charges report for 2020/21. The Chair explained that the report had been provided for the group's consideration in draft form and at this stage the content should be treated as exempt. It was also noted that the group needed to be objective in scrutinising the content of the report and should remain apolitical, in line with national best practice in terms of the scrutiny process.

During consideration of this item Members discussed recommendation 2.1.2 as detailed in the report. Officers confirmed that the recommendation did not refer to services provided by Rubicon Leisure, as the company would set its own fees and charges. Instead the recommendation referred to Leisure and Cultural Services that continued to be provided by the Council. Concerns were raised about the meaning of the reference to remaining "within the industry and regional norms for the activities provided" and whether this would provide an explicit remit to Officers. There was general consensus that Officers should check the wording prior to publication of the report to ensure that the wording achieved the action intended. There was also general agreement that the relevant lead officers for Bereavement Services

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Chair

and Leisure and Cultural Services should be invited to attend the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> December when the report would be pre-scrutinised so that they could provide some rationale for the proposals in respect of their services.

Reference was also made to the fact that many of the charges included in the report had increased by 0%. In some cases this was confusing as a new charge appeared to have been introduced where there was no charge previously. To provide clarification in respect of this matter Members suggested that “new charge” should be recorded where a new charge had been introduced.

The fees that had been proposed for Dial a Ride were also discussed. Members questioned how these figures compared to the standard fare for a taxi journey. In the report it had been recorded that consultation had been held with customers and the proposed fees had been generally accepted. Further information in respect of this subject was considered useful and Members agreed that the Head of Community Services might be able to help clarify this matter further. However, Officers suggested that it was unlikely that the fees would cover the costs of providing the service or generate income.

The approach that had been adopted to producing the fees and charges report for 2020/21 was also briefly discussed. Officers advised that this year CMT had requested that Officers should take responsibility for setting the fees and charges for their departments. The Financial Services team had therefore collated the responses and incorporated them into the report.

Members noted that in many cases no changes had been proposed to the Council’s fees and charges in the report. Concerns were raised that this could have a negative impact on income, particularly as costs were likely to rise with inflation. However, it was also noted that in some cases Officers would have opted to retain fees at current levels or to reduce or remove them in order for the Council to remain competitive.

Reference was made to the new fees and charges that had been introduced for the Print Service. Officers explained that the team had identified opportunities to sell their services and this would be subject to a fee. However, Members were asked to note that the Council could not compete with the private sector.

The group also discussed the fees that were proposed for Bereavement Services. Questions were raised about the source of the Wesley Music and it was noted that this could be a specific band or associated with the Methodist Church. Members also noted that some charges, such as that for the DVD of the chapel

service, appeared to have been removed and then reintroduced. Further information to clarify this matter was requested. Members did, however, welcome information that confirmed that the fees for Bereavement Services, like other services in the report, had been rounded up or down to a reasonable figure, rather than including pennies in the price. Members also acknowledged that fees for Bereavement Services had been increased to cover the costs of delivering the service.

During consideration of this item reference was made to the Housing Recharge Policy that had been agreed by Council in November 2019. Members questioned whether tenants would be charged in cases where the damage had been caused accidentally. Officers explained that the policy applied in cases where damage had been caused maliciously and that Officers could use their discretion in applying the policy. However, it was agreed that further clarification would be requested from the relevant lead Officer in respect of this matter.

Reference was also made to the hire products that had been listed under Community Services. It was noted that hire of fire alarms was charged on a weekly basis and Members questioned whether anybody would hire a fire alarm for a couple of weeks. Further information in respect of the rationale for charging on a weekly basis was requested from relevant lead officers.

The group discussed the charges that had been listed for football pitches and facilities. It was noted that there appeared to be new charges replacing an old charging regime, though how these charges related to each other appeared to be unclear. Officers were asked to clarify this further prior to publication of the report.

At the end of the discussions around this item Members noted that they had requested a lot of information. There was general consensus that the group did not have enough information to recommend that the fees and charges contained within the report should be adopted. Members also agreed that the fees and charges report should ideally be drafted in a manner that ensured that the proposed fees and charges were clear, any variances from the previous year were clear and any new charges were clearly stipulated. Members also agreed that it would be helpful in future for the report to be presented in a way that clarified how the old and new fees for a particular service were reconciled and related to one another.

### **RECOMMENDED that**

**more detail should be included in the fees and charges reports in the future and there should be greater reconciliation between the old and new fees for a service in the report to help clarify how they relate to each other.**

### **ACTIONS:**

- 1) Officers to check the wording for recommendation 2.1.2 to ensure that it provides the scope to take the action that was intended;**
- 2) the Head of Leisure and Cultural Services, Head of Environmental Services and Bereavement Services Manager to be invited to attend the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> December to comment on the rationale for providing flexibility to officers setting fees and charges for Leisure and Cultural Services and Bereavement Services;**
- 3) the Head of Community Services to be invited to attend a future meeting of the group to discuss fees and charges within her remit;**
- 4) Officers to clarify the origins of the Wesley Music listed for Bereavement Services;**
- 5) Officers to explain the reasons why some charges for Bereavement Services appear to have been removed and then reintroduced in the report;**
- 6) Officers to clarify whether tenants would be charged, under the Housing Recharge Policy, in cases where damage had been caused to a Council property accidentally;**
- 7) Officers to clarify why the Council charges for people to hire fire alarms on a weekly basis; and**
- 8) Officers to clarify how the old charges for football pitches and facilities relate to the new charges for these services.**