

People Select Committee Overview Meeting 2016

21 November 2016

Report from Culture Events and Leisure Service

Context

Members are well aware that as a Council we have had to adapt to funding reductions of £52 million over the last five years and that we are still confronted with having to find further savings. In relation to Culture Events and Leisure Service services this has meant delivering efficiencies and savings in Libraries, Leisure, Customer Services and Events and also targeting significant increases in earned income in Sports Development and Museums.

Whilst we acknowledge that we have a strong track record of sound financial management and we have been dealing with these problems successfully for many years, it will not be easy to address the additional loss of government funding of over £20 million by 2019/20. Moving forward, expectations will need to be realistic as many more difficult decisions will need to be made.

It is both acknowledged and accepted that we can't continue to do all the things we currently do and that we won't be able to work in the same way. For Culture Events and Leisure Service services this may mean reducing staff in customer facing roles, reducing hours of service, reducing or withdrawing support for some events, charging from things that have been free in the past and charging more from things we already charge for.

The challenge for all Members is to ensure that decisions about the basis on which services will be delivered are within the resources available, taking account of a number of factors such as reduced budget allocation, changing demographics, increasing demand, new national legislation and policy direction. Members are reminded of the four policy principles that support our decision-making:

- **Protecting the vulnerable through targeted intervention**, particularly those people in our communities who are subject to, or at risk of harm, people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and those who are financially excluded or whose circumstances make them vulnerable.
- **Promoting equality of opportunity through targeted intervention**, specifically in relation to tackling health inequalities, meeting the skills gap and improving access to job opportunities, tackling fuel poverty, improving education and training opportunities, access to affordable housing and financial and digital inclusion.
- **Developing strong and healthy communities** through the provision of mainstream and preventive services that are available to all those who choose to access them.
- **Creating economic prosperity** across the Borough

It is within this context that the select committee is invited to undertake their overview duties.

continued

What has been achieved?

1. **Libraries** are subject to an ongoing review which has been the subject of a detailed report to Cabinet in recent months. In summary it will see reduced staff structures, the closure of Egglecliffe Library, the co-location of Fairfield Library and a significant reduction in the fund from which books and other lending material are purchased. Extra income from our partnership with Newcastle Building Society at Yarm Library is also helping us accommodate budget pressures.
2. **Preston Hall Museum** is the primary means of delivering our heritage work and the focus has been on efficiency whilst we respond to growing demand and rising visitor numbers. During the summer school holiday period the museum attracted a record 50,000 visitors. Earned income from entry charges, increased shop sales and increased income from charged-for events have enabled the service to sustain great customer service.
3. **Leisure and Sports Development** has responded to budget pressures by developing income-generating services like the pre-school Funky Feet programme. In addition, working with our leisure facility management partners Tees Active, we have made significant investments to improve the profitability of our leisure assets at the same time as reducing subsidy and driving down costs. TAL's high ropes course at Tees Barrage has achieved its business plan targets for the early months of trading.
4. During 2015/16, **Customer Services** answered over 300,000 calls on behalf of 20 Council services. Staff answered over 35,000 emails and dealt with over 110,000 visits to our Customer Service Centres. Across these interactions satisfaction with the service was 98%.
5. **Events** are a strategic priority, contributing to our town centre vibrancy objectives as well as social and community development goals. Our major summer events in 2016 were a great success, including the hosting of the British Cycling National Road Race Championships and the staging of SIRF. To mark the anniversary of the Somme Offensive, SIRF was launched with a major show in Preston Park, the first time a SIRF show has been staged in the Park. The scale and nature of the show presented significant challenges but was a technical and artistic success and attracted critical acclaim from the general public and national agencies alike. In our independent customer survey 92% were satisfied with SIRF 16 and 96% thought SIRF was a good use of Council resources.
6. The Council has a duty to ensure that all events on Council owned land are subject to comprehensive and thorough risk assessment and safety plans. Within our Event Delivery Framework Stockton coordinates an Independent Safety Advisory Group (ISAG) which provides a multi-agency check and challenge to any event proposal. ISAG has reviewed over 50 events this year.
7. The Learning and Skills Service is fully funded by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and as such has not been subject to budget cuts. However, the SFA has increased its emphasis on employability and apprenticeships and driven a shift in the curriculum of the Service. Learning and Skills continue to deliver high levels of retention and progression. Pass rates in 2016 were 93.8% with 91% moving on to employment or into higher level studies

Challenges

8. **Library** customers may find it more difficult to access the service with reduced hours and reduced service points, in addition they will begin to find that popular books may not be available as reductions in the book fund impact on the levels of stock. In general there will be fewer staff to help our customers. Despite these reductions we will be striving to attract as many users as possible and to sustain our high levels of reader development and education work.
9. Plans for increased entry charges at **Preston Hall Museum** linked to membership options and improved marketing, are being implemented in coming months. This is linked to new till and software systems. The challenge is both one of customer dissatisfaction at increased charges and potential increased queues as we seek to collect more information from customers at the point of entry.
10. The huge pressures of numbers of visitors to Preston Park and the Museum continue to challenge us with a growing need to manage the public's use of the space, to control car parking, to deal with competition for the use of spaces, and to address the upkeep of the attraction as thousands of people visit every day. Pressure on river access is also an issue, with rowers, open water swimmers, paddle boarders, anglers, and powered craft all seeking to get onto (or into) the Tees from Preston Park.
11. As we route increasing numbers of services through our **Customer Service** front line, the challenge is to make the interactions more efficient and reduce costs without increasing queuing or waiting times. The primary means of improving efficiency is through automation or information collection and responses, using online forms to capture the customers' needs and trigger bespoke responses in an 'end-to-end' response. There are significant technical challenges and there is the potential for customers to resist our attempts to automate, preferring to speak in person to our staff.
12. With an increasing number of **event** proposals coming forward from commercial organisations and groups with limited event experience, the event support team are stretched and will not be able to provide levels of support to some groups that have been possible in the past. In addition, with our greater focus on providing assurance of safety plans, ISAG is hampered by the reducing attendance of emergency service representatives.
13. The second phase of the current Arts and Events Review will explore which events we should prioritise in future and how we can encourage other agencies to provide greater support.
14. The employability focus of SFA funding has necessitated a move in the **Learning and Skills** Service to full cost recovery for the leisure and hobby courses that have been offered free or at a nominal charge for many years. At this stage demand remains high for these courses despite the charges.

Emerging Issues

15. The potential to attract significant Heritage Lottery investment in Preston Park presents a challenge as we evaluate the extent to which that might reduce our costs or increase our income potential as well as delivering an improved attraction for customers. Alongside this there is a need to review the staff structures across the teams working in the park as a whole, to see if we can improve the sense of the place as a single visitor attraction.

16. The Park has also suffered from incidents of vandalism and anti-social behaviour in recent months and these threaten the viability of the attraction and the satisfaction of visitors.
17. The corporate commitment to 'channel shift', attempting to move a significant proportion of our interactions with the communities we serve on-line, will be complex and have far reaching implications. Initial work on automating existing internal processes through to the customer are proving successful. However, customers' expectations are shaped by the sophistication and functionality of the major commercial businesses like Amazon. We need to be realistic but we must aim for a radical change in the way we interact with our customers.
18. The Learning and Skills Service is likely to be subject to an Ofsted inspection in 2017.

Possible Areas for In Depth Review

19. Whilst steps are already being taken to improve CCTV and other means of tackling antisocial behaviour in Preston Park, members may wish to look into the possible causes and solutions.

Reuben Kench
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