

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council

Briefing Paper to Portfolio Holder for Culture and Leisure

Management Review of the Impact of the Restructuring of the Park Attendant Service

Submitted by: Head of Operations – Roger Tait

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1. Background

In 2010/11, the Council carried out a Budget Service Review in order to identify and implement efficiency savings to meet the projected budget deficit.

One of the efficiency savings identified was a review of the Senior Ranger and Park Attendant Service.

The review proposed an initial restructure of the service to develop capacity in relation to community engagement and support and to reduce costs in relation to temporary and casual staff. It also proposed a change in working patterns to eliminate non-productive and low value tasks to enable resources to be focused into priority areas.

The review identified savings of £100,000 per annum which have been successfully delivered in 2011/12 and 2012/13.

The report on the proposed efficiency measures identified the impact of the changes and the risks involved, along with potential mitigation and control measures. This included recognition that by reducing the number of hours the parks could be staffed, there would be a risk of a decrease in standards of cleanliness and a reduction in the amount of income collected for “pay and play” use of tennis courts and bowling greens.

2. Rationalisation of Structure

In order to achieve the savings identified and retain a service which was fit for current purposes, plans were subsequently put together to amalgamate the existing Senior Ranger and Park Attendant services to provide a new mobile Park Attendant Service.

Taking into account existing job descriptions and current salary grades, a new structure was designed to re-designate a post as a team leader who would be in charge of the unit and report directly to the Community Manager. This post was titled “Park Attendant Officer” whose role primarily is to ensure that budgets are managed in accordance with the planned programme of work, work rotas are planned and community volunteer work is supported. The programme of community volunteer work is created and directed to the Park Attendant Officer from both the Environmental Officer and the Community Development Officer, both of whom are also based within the Community Business Unit.

The Park Attendant Officer is also responsible for ensuring VFM is achieved and materials are used effectively and efficiently. Other areas of responsibility are the management of the utility bills for the parks and sports buildings managed by the Community Business Unit, ensuring heating and water cost are monitored, and effective checking systems are in place to inform Facilities Management of possible improvements/alterations to help reduce waste.

The new park attendant service was also structured around the existing Streetscene model which splits the Borough into 2 geographical areas, North and South. Each area operates a vehicle with

two staff allocated per vehicle, and two shifts working which overlap during the day to allow communication between the two teams. The structure gives coverage from 7.00am – 10.00pm during the summer hours, reducing according to the natural daylight, finishing in the winter at 6.00 pm. Holidays and sickness are only covered by casual staff if there was a need for this due to Health and Safety, or organised events.

Each area is also allocated an Assistant Park Attendant Officer who acts in a supervisory capacity for the park attendants. Six full time Park Attendants are allocated to the two vehicles working the predetermined rotas and these posts plus the Assistant Park Attendant Officer are assisted by 6 casual staff.

Work rotas are designed to not only cover the traditional Park Attendant duties but to link into and support the community volunteer work parties who are operating in the Borough. The community volunteer work programme is delivered by groups co-ordinated by the Community Development Officer and Environmental Officer and consist of people from all walks of life whose aim is to get involved in caring for their local green space, street or neighbourhood. These works are often connected to general maintenance works like litter picking, weeding flower beds and sweeping paths; some of the groups are carrying out planting, painting and other more advanced grounds maintenance works.

The groups can consist of up to 10 volunteers and materials, tools and equipment are provided by the council along with a method statement and risk assessment. The Park Attendants work with the group in a supervisory role providing the necessary training and guidance to carry out the agreed task. The Park Attendants are also responsible for ensuring all tools and equipment are available for the work party and that adequate supervision and training is given to ensure the work tasks are carried out safely.

When there are no work parties to supervise / monitor, the Park Attendants are employed on the traditional Park Attendant duties, which includes cleaning of sports facilities, picking litter, opening and locking gates (which is greatly reduced from the previous rota carried out by the Senior Rangers) patrolling parks and sports facilities and securing premises.

3. **Impact of the Restructured Park Attendant Service**

Advantages

There are many benefits to the new structure which has rationalised the management structure and resolved issues with accountability experienced with the previous system. The structure is more cost effective and delivers a wider service than that of the previous structure. The benefits can be summarised into the following bullet points:

- Significant annual financial saving of £100k
- Greater focus and direction of the community volunteer groups.
- Reduction of non-productive periods of time (during the winter hours of darkness staff were employed until 10.00 pm at night).
- More appropriate allocation of tasks and deployment of resources (the Senior Rangers previously locked and unlocked daily at over 70 locations).
- Significant reduction in administration relating to annual recruitment of temporary and casual staff and associated costs relating to uniforms, telephones etc.
- Reduction in utility costs for parks buildings due to closer monitoring
- Operating two vehicles working within the Borough rather than one vehicle which enables faster response times to reported issues (each vehicle covering half the Borough) with two staff per vehicle working and in extreme cases both vehicles and four staff can be called upon if needed.

- Risk assessment for a person working with another member of staff indicates that this is safer than lone working.
- Members of staff are based alone less frequently at parks buildings which ensures a safer method of operation and more efficient way of working.

Disadvantages

These can be summarised into the following bullet points:

- No staff are permanently based at any of the parks / sports centres, which has affected the sale of both “pay and play” and season tickets, for bowls and tennis.
- Litter is not cleared as quickly as it was previously where static staff were based.
- The lack of presence of a Park Attendant regularly patrolling the Parks can lead to a greater feeling of insecurity (fear of crime).
- Fewer checks are being made in areas where there is a charge for tennis (Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park) with the result that people are playing without payment being made. The mobile vehicle visits Westlands Sportsground every day (including weekends) but the Park Attendants now spend limited time on site (from 30 minutes to 2 hours) thus allowing more periods when play can take place without challenge. In addition, the site is staffed by casual staff from 4pm to 9pm on weekdays in the summer (which have traditionally been the busiest periods) giving 20 hours per week dedicated staffing. This represents a decrease from the 54 hours per week (36 hours weekdays, 18 hours weekends) during which the site was staffed prior to the restructure. In terms of total hours of staffing provided throughout a year of operation, the new system provides approximately 1000 hours per year compared to approximately 1400 hours per year under the previous system.
- No facility is available to offer pre-booking a tennis court at Westlands Sportsground as was previously offered.
- Less capacity exists to check season tickets and collect fees for “pay and play” ticket sales for bowling on the council’s 10 bowling Greens.

Mitigation

The following measures have been put in place to mitigate the anticipated impacts on the service:

Creation of Community Development Officer role to develop community capacity.

Preparation and implementation of community work programme for green spaces and neighbourhoods (litter collection, weeding, shrub bed maintenance, painting etc)

Realignment of Streetscene resource into litter collection in strategic parks.

Development of partnership arrangements to supplement in-house resource (e.g. Elite/Day Care: Saltbox; Community Payback).

Additional patrols and joint working with the police.

Reactive response to localised issues (e.g. temporary locking of sites when problem arises).

In general, these mitigation measures appear to be working successfully or have the potential to improve and develop. The reduction in the number of sites which are locked each evening does not appear to have resulted in any major problems occurring with crime or anti-social behaviour to date and the service has retained the capacity to deal with any such issues on a reactive basis. Litter is an ongoing problem, not just in parks but across the Borough as a whole and a number of collection, education and enforcement initiatives are in progress to tackle this.

The impact on income from tennis and bowls is explored in the following section of this paper.

4. **Impact on Income**

Income for Tennis 2011/2012 was £17,520

Income for Bowls 2011/2012 was £7,908

This was divided for Tennis: Season ticket income £6,325
Casual ticket sales £11,195

This was divided for Bowls: Season ticket income £ 7,187
Casual ticket sales £721

Current income levels for 2012/13 at period 6 for tennis is £4,414

Income levels for 2011/12 at period 6 were £16,741

Current income levels for 2012/13 at period 6 for Bowls is £4,341

Income levels for 2011/12 at period 6 were £7,908

5. **Options for Future Collection of Tennis Fees**

The risk of not being able to collect income on a constant or regular basis was highlighted in the initial report. At the time of writing it was assumed that regular season ticket holders would continue to purchase annual tickets.

However, it has become apparent that the sales of season tickets has reduced considerably, perhaps due to people opting to play without paying when the site is not staffed.

Sales of both season tickets and pay and play tickets have also been affected by the extremely poor weather experienced during this Spring/Summer.

Elected members have also challenged the current pricing structure for tennis, particularly in relation to family tickets which have been perceived to be expensive and a barrier to family use of Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park during school holiday periods.

During the course of summer 2012, income levels and site use and management has been monitored to inform a review and assist in developing options for future management.

It is apparent that if no change is made to the current management system, it is likely that there will be very limited income from tennis ticket sales from Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park in the future. However, this must be considered in the context of the ongoing annual saving of £100,000 which will continue to be achieved by the reduction in staffing levels which has been implemented.

The following options for future site management have been considered:

Option 1

Allow free use of "Class A" tennis courts (Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park).

Advantages

Eliminate problems with trying to put in a workable cost effective solution: promote the Borough's Health and Well-being agenda by offering free opportunities to participate in sport and outdoor activity

Disadvantages

Loss of income for tennis; difficulties in managing the sites and potential conflict between users.

Option 2

Lock the gates and issue a key when a season ticket is purchased.

Advantages

It is inexpensive to operate, if damaged can be easily repaired and the lock barrels can be changed each year when the new season tickets are sold.

Cost per court estimated at approximately £100.

Disadvantages

Reliant on trust to operate effectively; can be easily misused; does not allow casual play (although this could be resolved at Westlands Sportsground) by leaving two tennis courts open for casual ticket sales.

Option 3

Fit electronic swipe card system to each tennis court.

Advantages

Implements a system with better controls, giving knowledge of users and times of use; Could be designed to allow casual play (purchase 1hr cards only); cards can be changed each year when new season tickets are sold; swipe cards could also be sold at J2/Guildhall/Kidsgrove/Madeley.

Disadvantages

Reliant on trust to operate effectively; can be easily misused; if damaged, expensive to repair; expensive to install (due to lack of outdoor electrical points). Cost per court estimated at approximately £1,000

Option 4

Staff Westlands Sportsground for a greater proportion of time during the summer months.

Advantages

It will allow collection of fees for pay and play tennis and checking of season tickets, as well as allowing bookings.

Disadvantages

The cost of providing casual staff to carry out this work is approximately £15.00 per hour (including on costs). Staffing Westlands Sportsground from 2.00pm – 8.00 pm 7 days per week would cost £630.00 per week and over 6 months (26 weeks) of the summer season it would cost £16,380. Taking into consideration that the Park Attendant would only collect casual ticket fees (as season tickets are purchased from the Guild Hall) the income he would potentially collect would be approximately £11,195 (based on 2011/12 income levels). This staffing cost would not cover times from 8.00 am – 2.00 pm daily nor the winter October – April period.

Poor weather conditions and the difficult economic climate could also seriously reduce the estimated income from casual tennis ticket sales from that achieved in 2011/2012.

Option 5

Engage a club to assist with the management of Westlands Sportsground

Work with a local tennis club or coach to supervise the site, organise ticket sales, book and allocate courts and collection of money for casual tennis play. This arrangement could involve a negotiated management fee based on income collected. The club or coach could potentially use the pavilion as a base, sell drinks, food and sports clothing etc and store equipment. Building repairs and cost related to the building would remain the responsibility of the council.

A further interim option would be to explore the use of agency staff or people looking for temporary summer employment (eg students) to staff the sites during the summer season. This could be put in place while work on developing the club/coach managed option was progressed.

Advantages

This would deliver a local management solution with full controls, resulting in a better managed facility with more use of the buildings and tennis courts, and potentially a more secure income stream, albeit offset by management costs.

Disadvantages

Preliminary talks with local clubs have not elicited a positive approach so it is evident that there will have to be some development of this option to make it feasible. Club or coach managed tennis may reduce the opportunity for casual tennis play if the club/coach becomes more intensively used. A greater demand for repairs and maintenance to the tennis courts and pavilion could result if the facilities are more intensively used.

6. Preferred Option

It is considered that Option 5 should be pursued as the preferred long term solution for the site, if it proves feasible following development work and negotiation with potential local clubs and/or coaches. The interim solution of employing a summer agency worker or student could be explored as an immediate trial during the summer of 2013.

In the meantime, if the interim solution proves undeliverable, it is proposed to continue with the current staffing arrangements and attempt, where possible, to increase the presence of a park attendant at Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park during busy periods.

7. Proposed Review of Tennis Fees/Charges

In addition to this, in response to challenge from elected members regarding the affordability of tennis, a benchmarking exercise has been carried out to compare current charges in Newcastle with those of other providers in the locality.

This has revealed that charges in Newcastle (Westlands Sportsground and Wolstanton Park only as all other sites are free) are broadly similar to other providers although some providers offer a greater concession for family tickets, junior, 60+ and unemployed players.

The aim of reviewing the charges is to encourage greater participation in tennis, encourage greater family use of the facilities, encourage more use of the courts by groups, and to increase the sale of season tickets.

Current charges for tennis in Newcastle are:

Family ticket 1hr (1 or 2 adults and 2/3 children)	£7.00
Adult 1 hr ticket	£4.00
Junior / 60 plus + unemployed 1 hr	£2.20
Adult ½ hr ticket	£2.20
Junior / 60 plus + unemployed ½ hr	£1.20
Season Ticket adult	£88.50

Season Ticket Junior / 60 plus + unemployed £61.00

Proposed Changes to the Tennis Fees and Charges

Family ticket 1hr (1 or 2 adults and 2/3 children)	£5.00
Family ticket 1hr (up to 4 adults and or 4 children with 2 adults)	£8.00
Adult 1 hr ticket	£4.00
Adult 1 hr group ticket (4 adults)	£12.00
Junior / 60 plus + unemployed 1 hr	£2.00
Junior/60 plus + unemployed 1 hr group ticket	£6.00
Adult ½ hr ticket	£2.00
Junior / 60 plus + unemployed ½ hr	£1.00
Season Ticket adult	£90.00
(Direct debit option £7 per month)	
Season Ticket Junior, 60 plus and unemployed	£65.00
(Direct debit option £5 per month)	

It is hoped that by offering discounts for families and groups and offering direct debit options on season tickets it will make it more attractive to play and potentially increase the numbers of tickets sold, albeit recognising that former total income levels may no longer be achievable in the short term.

8. **Communication**

In the short term, signs will need to be erected on each tennis court to indicate that players must purchase season tickets prior to using the courts and that casual tennis can only be played on specified courts where Park Attendants will call regularly to collect money from people playing and check season tickets.