

TO: **RESOURCE ALLOCATION SUB-COMMITTEE**  
11 January 2021

FROM: **HAMPSTEAD HEATH, HIGHGATE WOOD, AND QUEEN'S PARK**  
**COMMITTEE**  
7 January 2021

#### **4. DEPARTMENTAL AND SERVICE COMMITTEE BUDGET ESTIMATES 2021/22**

The Committee considered a joint report of the Chamberlain and Director of Open Spaces regarding the Departmental and Service Committee Budget Estimates and high-level summary Business Plan 2021/22 for the Open Spaces Department.

The Chamberlain set out the revenue position stating that there were three main changes from the current year: 1) a reduction in the local risk budget totalling £660k which was mostly in relation to the 12% savings figure agreed at Resource Allocation Sub Committee (RASC) in December; 2) a reduction in the planned Cyclical Works Programme (CWP) totalling £732k; and 3) a reduction in the cost of support services totalling £249k. Overall, this totalled a decrease of £1.624M compared with the 2020/21 budget.

The Superintendent summarised the proposed budget savings for Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park. These included reviewing staffing arrangements, operational efficiencies, commercial licensing opportunities, donations, new events, a change to an online only Heath diary, and a number of operational reviews.

In response to a query from the Chair requesting the rationale behind the substantial reduction of the CWP as a result Covid-19, the City Surveyor confirmed this was twofold. The aim was to transfer to a new CWP approach to reduce the backlog going forward; however, Covid-19 delayed matters as there was a period of three months in the first lockdown preventing access to sites to undertake works. It was noted that all urgent health and safety and business critical projects were included in the 2021/22 bid and it was expected that normal funding would resume in 2022/23 bidding round.

The Chair questioned, if works could not take place for three months, then why was there not more money in the budget instead of less. The City Surveyor confirmed there was no resource issue, the money was transferred across. As a consequence, less money was requested this year so that the funds could be used in 2022.

Concerning the Climate Action Capital programme, the Director of Open Spaces clarified this was a bid for the Open Spaces Department as a whole for a six-year period. The first two years of funding would mostly support planned tree planting at Epping Forest.

Members made the following comments:

- The Deputy Chairman felt that the reduction of £1.6M, at a time when there had been a 5-fold increase in footfall, was outrageous and unworkable. Whilst the 12% decrease had been reasonably agreed in RASC the additional cuts from the CWP coming at the same time was not thought through or acceptable.

- The Deputy Chairman added that references to the £2M Climate Action Funding were misleading.
- It was acknowledged that the Heath in particular had come under significant wear and tear in the last year due to overwhelming visitor numbers and Members were concerned that there would be significant health and safety issues if works normally covered under the CWP were delayed.
- The Superintendent was commended for the savings that had been achieved under significant pressure, but there was significant concern for frontline staff trying to deal with the increasing effects of five times as many people visiting the City Corporation's Open Spaces. Whilst it was agreed that a reduction on the budget would inevitably come, the 12% cut was considered to be inappropriate at a time when more spending was required.
- There was concern regarding the reduction in centrally funded apprentices' budgets, especially at a time of huge impact on youth services and support.
- A Member voiced a health and safety concern regarding the slippery paths at the Heath which would get worse with high numbers at the weekend. It was not felt to be fair to put safety responsibilities on management.
- The Committee noted the proposed 2021/22 revenue budget and reflected concern that reaching the 12% savings in local risk would be difficult with the current Covid-19 restrictions on revenue generation opportunities and the increasing pressure on Officer workload and capacity.
- With regard to the CWP, the Committee was concerned that the increased footfall on the Heath has created further issues to the fabric of the Heath which should be addressed through this programme. The 50% cuts at this time subsequently had a significant impact on the Open Spaces and the Committee therefore requested that this be reconsidered to address these health and safety issues.
- A Member did not agree with the halving of the CWP and felt that procrastinations in necessary work would result in higher costs in the long-term.
- Members were informed that there was a programme to achieve the necessary savings but the added pressures on Officers meant there could be delays in achieving these savings. It was also noted that income generation opportunities were restricted due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- The Director of Open Spaces indicated that it was essential to approve a balanced budget in the timeline before the start of the financial year. The Director encouraged the Committee to consider approving the budget and refer concerns about the CWP and other matters to RASC separately to allow the financial year to start with an agreed budget. This could be reviewed and changed as the year progresses.

- A Member highlighted that borough councils were facing similar financial cuts as the City Corporation, e.g. nearly every budget in Barnet Council was cut by 50%. It was therefore difficult to vote against the 12% cut as these financial pressures would remain and the Member felt the Director's compromise to be a good solution.
- The Chair suggested taking each of the recommendations separately for Members to vote on:
  - (i) *review and approve the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee's proposed revenue budget for 2021/22 for submission to Finance Committee* - Members unanimously (with the exception of one abstention) did not support this recommendation.
  - (ii) *review and approve the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee's capital and supplementary revenue projects budgets for 2021/22 for submission to Finance Committee* – Members supported and approved the current projects listed on the expectation there would be an opportunity to review other projects for inclusion at a later meeting.
  - (iii) *authorise the Chamberlain in consultation with the Director of Open Spaces to revise these budgets to allow for any further implications arising from Corporate Projects, changes to the Cyclical Works Programme, and re-alignment of budgets emanating from the new 'Target Operating Model'* – A revision of the wording was recommended to include the Chair and Deputy Chairman to ensure Member's views were included in budget revision decisions.
  - (iv) *agree that minor amendments for 2020/21 and 2021/22 budgets arising during budget setting be delegated to the Chamberlain* - Members unanimously (with the exception of one abstention) did not support this recommendation.
- Members ultimately agreed that they did not support the Committee's current proposed 2021/22 revenue budget and requested that a resolution be sent to RASC to ensure full understanding of the issues since the 12% savings figure was agreed and its joint impact on Open Spaces in combination with significant cuts in CWP funding.

**RESOLVED** - That:-

- An urgent resolution be made to the Resource Allocation Sub Committee highlighting Member's concern and feedback regarding the proposed 2021/22 Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queens Park Committee revenue budget for submission to Finance Committee;
- Members review and approve the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee's capital and supplementary revenue projects budgets for 2021/22 for submission to Finance Committee and review other projects at a future Committee meeting;

- Members authorise the Chamberlain, in consultation with the Director of Open Spaces, the Chair and Deputy Chairman of Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee, to revise these budgets to allow for any further implications arising from current pressures on the Open Spaces, Corporate Projects, changes to the Cyclical Works Programme, and re-alignment of budgets emanating from the new 'Target Operating Model'.