

BCC Budget Proposals Nov 2022 – Parks Service Item GR12_A

Bristol Parks Forum Response

Bristol Parks Forum believe that our parks and green spaces should be protected and properly funded to ensure that the people of Bristol can continue to visit and enjoy them.

We call for the proposed cuts - Parks Service Item GR12_A - to be removed from the Council's budget proposals. As a minimum the funding for the Parks Service from the General Council Fund should remain at the 2022/23 budgeted figure.

We further call on the Council to engage with the citizens of Bristol on a Big Parks Conversation.

Big Parks Conversation

The Parks Service should be tasked with holding a 'Big Parks Conversation' in 2023/24.

As well as the Parks Service and the Parks Forum, the conversation should involve organisations such as: Your Park Bristol & Bath, the Allotments Forum, Avon Wildlife Trust, the Natural History Consortium, Bristol Civic Society and Bristol Disability Equality Forum. In addition, the Council's Community Development, Sustainability and Public Health teams should be invited along with representatives of the One City Environment and Culture Boards.

Public consultations on the Parks & Green Spaces Strategy; Managing for Nature; the Tree Strategy and the Allotments Strategy would form part of this conversation.

There needs to be open and frank discussions on the options for managing and funding green space. Such discussions and consultations cannot take place at the same time that budget cuts, which will inevitably involve redundancies, are being implemented.

Only once this process is complete can the support needed for our parks and green spaces from Council funds be properly assessed and the impacts of any future budget proposals be properly considered. The proposals should be withdrawn to allow a Big Parks Conversation to take place.

Current Proposals

The current costs of maintaining parks and green spaces are somewhere between £6m and £7m. A cut of £1.5m is therefore a reduction of 20 - 25% to funds available for parks and green spaces maintenance, this is unacceptable and will have devastating impacts.

The proposed cuts of £1,500,000 mean that the Parks Service will move from being supported from the Council's general fund to being a net contributor. It is a cut to the Parks Service budget of 115% from the 2022/23 figure.

Lack of clarity in these budget proposals has made it difficult for our member groups and residents to respond.

These proposals for cuts to the Parks Service in 2023/24 and 2024/25 must be withdrawn

Likely Impact on parks and green spaces

There is no clear indication yet of what the impact of these cuts will be; but we do know that a large share of the costs of the Parks Service are staff costs. A cut of 25% in spending is likely to be reflected in a similar scale of cuts in staff numbers, this would be at all levels.

The BCC budget proposal says:

“Stop, reduce, change or pause activities to make savings and reduce staff costs”

Reduced staff costs mean reduced staff numbers, this will mean less work will be done, less grass cutting, less bin-emptying, less repairs, fewer people to answer queries, fewer people to plan changes (for example to enhance biodiversity) fewer people to support park groups and other volunteers, fewer people to assess the likely impact of events or activities planned in parks and green spaces by other organisations.

We do not know exactly what the £1.9m investment in 2023/24 will be spent on, but we understand that much of it will cover redundancy payments, some may be used for purchasing new equipment, such as that necessary to cut longer grass.

It is certain that the current work on the Parks & Green Spaces Strategy and Managing for Nature will be delayed. Leaving grass to grow long and then collecting the arisings when it is cut for ecological benefit is expensive – plans to increase the areas where this is done may be dropped.

There is a suggestion that volunteers can take up some of the slack and do more, however, volunteers are likely to lose heart if basic maintenance is not done and, in any case, will in most cases, not have the time, skills, training or equipment to take on maintenance activities. Further they will not want to be in a position of taking on work previously done by staff who have been made redundant. Volunteering should provide the ‘cherry on the cake’ adding extras to the service provided by the Council. An impact of the cuts may be to reduce rather than increase volunteering in parks and green spaces, particularly if support staff are made redundant.

Parks management has already been pared to the bone through previous cuts over the past few years and is already running with far fewer staff than is needed. These proposed further cuts will bring the service below what is needed for even basic parks provision let alone quality parks and green spaces provision for Bristol.

In 2006 there were 10 Area Managers. Today, the management of day-to-day Parks Service activities fall on only three Area Managers, with three Area Co-ordinators – park groups already report that arranging meetings with these key people or getting responses to emails is difficult because of the volume of work they have. Further reductions in these roles will certainly also reduce volunteering in parks as requests for support or permissions go unanswered.

Cuts on this scale and associated staff cuts will also have (and, we are hearing, are already having) a devastating impact on Parks Service staff leading to lower morale at all levels.

The impacts will be long-term, cuts to the budget are unlikely to be reversed in the future. Indeed, it is likely (unless Government funding increases) that additional cuts will be imposed in future years.

Reduced maintenance and repairs in parks and green spaces will make them less welcoming and appear less cared for - there is a real risk that this will lead to a 'spiral of decline' with reduced visitor numbers and increasing anti-social behaviour.

There will also be a wider impact on the City with the benefits of parks and green spaces to people and wildlife being lost. Parks and green spaces are part of what makes Bristol, Bristol. They are part of what attracts people to the City and enhance its reputation. They provide valuable, free to use spaces for residents, particularly during the financial crisis. They are the only place many Bristol residents can afford to go for recreation, children's play, clean air, etc. They are extremely valuable for people's health and well-being including mental health.

Cutting the Parks Service budget will also negatively impact on the City's ability to tackle the Ecological and Climate Emergencies, further diminishing its reputation. The Parks Service portfolio includes 13 Local Nature Reserves, many Sites of Nature Conservation Interest and other 'wildlife' areas within parks, these include natural grassland area as well as woodland. The ecological benefits of these spaces depend on them being managed for nature and there are plans to do more of this, but there is a high risk if these cuts proceed of these important areas will lose their ecological value to the detriment of the City's wildlife and its residents.

Cuts of this scale over a short period will be very visible, they will have an unacceptable impact on all our parks, this proposal must be dropped.

There are two options implied in the proposals to alleviate the impact of these cuts, we consider these below.

Increasing Income

Budget cuts could be achieved by increasing income, rather than by reducing services.

Bristol Parks Service has been working to increase income over many years and has been relatively successful, but there are limits as to what can be done without destroying our parks and green spaces as an attraction and benefit to the City.

Part of the 'Future Parks Project' looked at this and some new ideas came forward, but these need time to be developed and will not bring in large sums. Any income generating projects are likely to be focused on buildings, many suggested new cafés - but these were to fund the projects rather than to fund the Parks Service. Charging for activities such as 'boot camps' or commercial dog-walkers has long been talked about, but administration costs would likely off-set almost entirely any income.

Concerns have also been raised about the commercialisation of parks and green spaces; they are valued as spaces you can go where there is no pressure to spend money. There is some scope for additional food concessions, but some of these would require investment

(eg hard-standing and electric hook-up) the lack of toilets in most parks and green spaces is also even more of an issue if more food outlets are to be introduced.

Changes leading to significant increases in income could not be achieved in time to avoid the proposed reductions to the Parks Service being implemented.

To achieve an imposed budget reduction of £1.5m from April 2024; the Parks Service would have no option other than to start on a process of downsizing and making staff redundant immediately. While this process is in progress, there would be little opportunity to look at options for increasing income. If additional income streams were developed in the future there would then be a backlog of maintenance and repair which would need to be fixed.

Further increasing income is not a viable option to alleviate the impact of these cuts.

Transferring Parks & Green Spaces to Other Organisations

The BCC budget proposal says: **“Review the council’s green spaces to enable community or alternative management, reducing the council’s costs.”**

Working with other organisations and allowing them to take on the management of some parks and green spaces, or parts of parks, through Community Asset Transfer or licencing agreements is possible, theoretically this would allow the Parks Service to maintain the remaining portfolio at a better standard at the same cost.

The Council’s track record on asset transfer is poor with the process taking far too long, even if the delays were reduced, this could not be achieved within the timescales for this budget proposal. The appetite for organisations to do this at scale has never been tested. Experience in Bristol and elsewhere in the UK has been that transfer of individual parks or parts of parks only works where buildings are included. These buildings are then used to generate income through hire, lease, or provision of cafés etc.

Transfer of a number of individual parks or green spaces would lead to the different organisations competing against each other both for funding and customers.

If those parks or green spaces that had buildings or facilities to allow organisations to generate income were transferred, then the result would be a reduction of income (or income potential) for the Parks Service, further reducing the maintenance standard in the remaining parks.

Transferring all of our publicly accessible green space on a long-lease to a charitable trust has also been mentioned; but experience from other parts of the country is that this would require the Trust to have a reliable source of income in addition to that available from the parks. The longest-running example is Milton Keynes, which receives income from a portfolio of £150m of commercial property.

The transfer of assets cannot be achieved on any significant scale. We do not believe that this is a viable option to alleviate the impact of the cuts.

Proposed Further Consultation and relationship to other consultations

We are aware that these proposals are in Section 2 of the budget consultation under the heading “Other ideas – consultation may be required and may follow”

The document also states:

“These proposals are newer and many will need more work to shape the proposals and may require further public consultation and assessment”

As noted above, if these cuts are confirmed, a process of downsizing and making staff redundant will be in progress from early 2023, when would this further consultation take place?

There are also consultations due early in 2023 on the Parks & Green Spaces Strategy (P&GSS); Managing for Nature; the Tree Strategy and the Allotments Strategy. Are these to be delayed to allow consultation on the proposed cuts?

The P&GSS may open the door to additional income streams around health and wellbeing in particular. The plan for Managing for Nature may also help secure grants to change management practices, as could the Tree Strategy. The Allotment Strategy could also lead to additional income.

We also fail to see how any decisions on the future shape and size of the Parks Service can be sensibly decided until these strategies are adopted. We need a Big Parks Conversation.

The time scale proposed does not allow time for proper consultation.

Summary

- **These proposals for cuts to the Parks Service in 2023/24 and 2024/25 must be withdrawn**
- **There should be a Bristol Big Parks Conversation in 2023**
- **Cuts of this scale over a short period will be very visible, they will have an unacceptable impact on all our parks, this proposal must be dropped.**
- **Further increasing income is not a viable option to alleviate the impact of these cuts.**
- **The transfer of assets cannot be achieved on any significant scale. We do not believe that this is a viable option to alleviate the impact of the cuts.**
- **The time scale proposed does not allow time for proper consultation**
- **We look forward to positive future for Bristol’s parks and green spaces as set out in the Bristol Parks Forum Vision.**

Bristol Parks Forum, December 2022

www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/vision