

BCC Budget Proposals Nov 2022 – Parks Service

Briefing Document for Park Groups & Your Park Trustees

Document prepared by Rob Acton-Campbell on behalf of the Bristol Parks Forum Committee – note some of the statements included here are Rob's interpretation of the documents and other information received.

Information within the budget consultation documents is very limited. The Committee called for more detailed information in its statement to Resources Scrutiny Commission Emergency Meeting on 22nd November 2022.

On 11th Nov 2022, the Council launched its consultation on its Budget for 2023/24 and beyond.

The proposals include large cuts to the Parks Service.

Background

The proposals presented in the consultation amount to £45.7 million of cuts over the next five years across all Council services. The Council's financial challenge is significant (at 11th Nov the budget gap was estimated to be up to £87.6m) and means they are likely to need to make more cuts beyond these to bridge the remaining estimated gap.

It is important to remember that a cut of £45.7m to the budget is a reduction of spending of £45.7m in that year and every succeeding year. If the Council had an extra £45.7m that would only delay the cuts by one year.

National Government funding is putting all Councils in an impossible position. Around two-thirds of our Council's budget is spent on Adult & Children's Social Care, the increasing needs for this without adequate increases in Government funding are driving the Council's financial position. This is an issue that is impacting all Councils who have responsibility for social care.

It is not yet clear what impact the Government's statement of 17th Nov will have on the Bristol City Council's budget position.

To achieve a 20% cut in the Council's overall budget (which is what is being suggested might be needed of the next few years) means cutting well over 50% of the remaining departments' budgets. Within that, there are certain statutory services that the Council has to provide – for example it has to continue to collect household waste. Provision of parks & green spaces is not a statutory service; the Council does not have to provide parks.

If cuts are not made to the Parks Service, they will have to be made elsewhere to achieve a balanced budget; while we need to argue the case for parks & green spaces it is important to remember the overall position.

Key Documents

[Respond to the Budget Consultation >>](#)

[PDF with all the proposals](#)

[Your Park Budget Blog >>](#)

Current Parks Service Funding

The costs of maintaining parks & green spaces in Bristol comes from income and from the Council's General Fund with figures agreed each year at the Budget Meeting.

The overall spending of the Parks Service is around £14m, but as well as maintaining parks & green spaces, this includes other activities such as running Cemeteries and Crematoria, maintaining highway and housing land.

The cost of maintaining parks and green spaces is around £6-7m.

Summary by Service		2022/23 Budget					
Service	Base Budget 2022/23	Pay & Inflation	Virements	Growth	Savings and Efficiencies	Proposed 2022/23 Budget	
£000							
133	Bristol Operations Centre	(135)	18	(0)	0	(118)	
311	Waste	37,427	1	0	0	37,428	
333	Regulatory Services	2,256	39	(5)	70	2,361	
335	Parks and Green Spaces	1,528	73	(257)	0	1,294	
382	Harbour Service	536	9	0	0	545	
432	Traffic & Highways maintenance	(9,356)	62	41	600	(9,853)	
531	Energy Programme Manager (Corporate)	1,479	19	(14)	0	1,435	
Total Management of Place		33,735	222	(235)	670	33,092	

The current Council budget for 'Parks & Green Spaces', as agreed at the February 2022 Council Budget Meeting is £1,294,000 –the Parks Service get the rest of their income from other sources.

Some of the Parks Service's other income is from other Council budget items eg the cost of the work for highways and housing. Cemeteries and Crematoria are funded from charges, with any surplus being available for parks & green space maintenance. There is also income from events, cafés, car parking etc. in parks & green spaces.

There have already been dramatic cuts to the Parks Service budget over the last few years, the 2013/14 the budget for the Parks Service was £7,405,000. While some of this has been offset by increasing income, we have seen the effect in reduced maintenance and reduced staff numbers.

Extent of the Proposed Cuts to the Parks Service

The information given in the budget proposals is shown below.

Ref	Proposal for consultation	23/24 £000	24/25 £000	25/26 £000	26/27 £000	27/28 £000	Total £000
GR12 -A	Parks Service Review the council's green spaces to enable community or alternative management, reducing the council's costs. Stop, reduce, change or pause activities to make savings and reduce staff costs.	-1390	2890	0	0	0	1,500

- The negative figure shown under 23/24 indicates an increase in the budget for that year
- The increase in 23/24 is **not** additional money for maintaining parks & green spaces, it is an allowance for the restructuring and other costs that will be needed to move to a reduced Parks Service. These costs are anticipated to be around £1.9m.
- There is a proposed cut of £500,000 in the Parks Service in 2023/24.
- The full cut of £1,500,000 is implemented in the year 2024/25.
- The zeros in succeeding years show that no further cuts are planned, so the Parks Service will continue to operate at its reduced size from April 2024 onwards having shrunk during the year 2023/24.
- The current costs of maintaining parks & green spaces are somewhere between £6m and £7m.
- **A cut of £1.5m is a reduction of 20 - 25% to funds available for parks & green spaces maintenance.**

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.

Cuts will have to come from parks & green spaces maintenance, cuts to other activities would come from cuts to other departments budgets. Cemeteries and Crematoria have to continue to operate.

There is also an 'Equalities Impact' statement alongside the budget proposals.

"Disabled people, carers, single parents, council renters and people living in the 10% most deprived areas of Bristol are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the quality of parks & green spaces.

Further assessment is underway to assess any disproportionate impacts of potential changes to frontline services, and the possibility of different standards of green spaces across the city – especially for children and young people, by locality and areas of deprivation, accessibility, health and wellbeing etc."

These proposals are in Section 2 of the budget consultation under the heading "Other ideas – consultation may be required and may follow"

The document adds:

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

This may change however as proposals are developed in more detail and we will keep this under review. We would like to hear your views on these proposals now, as part of this budget consultation. If further consultation is required, no decision will be made until it has been completed and considered.”

Likely Impact on parks & green spaces

We understand that the proposed cuts have been imposed on the Parks Service by the Council. It is a top-down process. Having been told the extent of the cuts they have to achieve, the Parks Service has been told it now has to find a way to make it work.

There is therefore no clear indication yet of what the impact of these cuts will be (see note above), 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 impacts described below include a degree of speculation but are based on what we have heard and experience of how parks & green space maintenance works in Bristol and elsewhere and we believe are likely outcomes.

“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 & 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 isn't 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 & green spaces, particularly if support staff are made redundant.

Cuts on this scale and associated staff cuts will also have (and are already having) a devastating impact on Parks Service staff, lower morale will inevitably lead to a less productive workforce.

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

Cuts of this scale over a short period will be noticed, it will have an impact in your area.

Increasing Income

Budget cuts could be achieved by increasing income, rather than by reducing services, however, there is no mention of this in the budget proposals.

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 & green spaces as an attraction and benefit to the City.

Part of the 'Future Parks Project' looked at this and a few 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 admin costs would likely off-set almost entirely any income.

Concerns have also been raised about the commercialisation of parks & 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 & electric hook-up) the lack of toilets in most parks & green spaces is also an issue.

Changes leading to significant increases in income would probably lead to undesirable results and in any case 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 other options such as 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.

Transferring Parks & Green Spaces to Other Organisations

“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 & green spaces, or parts of parks, through Community Asset Transfer or licencing agreements is theoretically possible, this would allow the reduced Parks Service to maintain the remaining portfolio at a better standard.

The Council’s track record on asset transfer is poor with the process taking far too long. 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 that can be 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.

What needs to change / what can we do?

The devastating impact on the Parks Service of these proposals need to be highlighted and there needs to be a large response to the consultation to make this clear.

There is an election in May 2024, just as the impact of these cuts will be taking effect, we need to make it clear that these cuts would hurt politically.

The Parks Forum Committee is calling on Parks Groups (and others that care about our parks & green spaces) to take the following actions now:

- Put these cuts on the agenda at your next group meeting
- [Respond to the consultation](#) as a group by the 23rd Dec.
- Encourage all your members to [respond to the consultation](#) as individuals by 23rd Dec
- Write to your [ward Councillors](#) - highlight the importance of your park and the impact on your area of reduced maintenance standards in parks.
- Tell others to [respond to the consultation](#) – use any channels you have.
- We are preparing a letter to Bristol’s MPs to be signed by Park Groups, please support this.

The Parks Forum Committee will send out some suggestions for points to be included in responses by Sunday 4th Dec (these will include points raised at the briefing meetings for Parks Forum members held on 30th November).

Any updated information we receive will be posted on our website.

Following this consultation, final budget proposals will be presented to Cabinet and then Full Council in early 2023. Unless these proposals are changed the Parks Forum will be calling for further action then.

Bristol's Parks Service will be under threat from further cuts until the Government sorts proper funding for Social Care and Local Authorities. The Government also needs to be the focus of any campaign and this should be national – the Parks Forum have contacts with the National Federation of Parks & Green Spaces and will pursue this, but the immediate threat to parks & green spaces in Bristol is in these proposals and we need to fight these now.

[Respond to the Budget Consultation >>](#)

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