

Parks Services Under Threat

an explanation of the 2014 budget cuts, and what you can do

Birmingham City Council continue to make cuts to services as part of their efforts to meet austerity budgets. Previous rounds of cuts have already affected Parks services - such as the 2010 reduction of Ranger services. The next round of cuts looks to be *much more visible*: they will affect maintenance, safety and the kinds of activity you can do in your parks.

If the condition of your parks and the related services matter to you, please read the following text, and **add your responses** to the Council's consultation by email (budget.views@birmingham.gov.uk) or online (https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/budget/budgetviews2014/consult_view). The consultation ends next week, **10 January 2014**. What follows is meant to make responding easier.

BCC have produced a guide to the 2014 Budget. The bits that concern us most directly are in the *White Paper* and the *Local Services Factsheets, Section 47*. The white paper gives an overview of the entire budget (see Parks on p. 78). A longer, more useful description is in *Section 47* of the *Local Services Factsheet*, which is reproduced below. The focus is on cuts – not on how to help services survive. But the consultation is a chance to suggest ways BCC might rejig the way it works.

47: PARKS, RANGERS AND WOODLAND TEAM				
Current Service	<p>Parks and Nature Conservation SLA with Districts. The Parks Service manages and monitors the grounds maintenance contract for all Parks and open spaces within the Districts. The Contract was tendered in 2009 for 10 years. We benchmark nationally and the cost of the Contract is 30% lower than the national average. The contract was awarded to 3 providers 2 external and the in-house service.</p> <p>The Ranger Service was reduced in 2010 from operating out of 13 sites to 6. The Ranger Service is responsible for environmental management, local nature reserves and ensuring we comply with the many Countryside Acts. The reduction in the Ranger Service will impact on the level of volunteering. Over the last 2 years over 16,000 volunteer days have been co-ordinated and delivered by the service. They have worked with over 6000 individual volunteers. Figures show more volunteering takes place in Parks when groups are led by a member of staff. The reduction will also reduce the environmental education programme the Ranger Service delivers. The Rangers are the local link to the Friends of Parks.</p> <p>The Rangers deliver walks and activities as part of the extended Be Active offer contributing to healthy lifestyles. The Rangers undertake site Risk Assessments and Annual Tree Inspections to a number of Park sites across the city. The Rangers have taken on this role when the Parks Service lost 43 posts in 2010.</p> <p>The Woodland Team carry out woodland functions across 500 acres of woodland. The Woodland team carried out the majority of the land work connected to the Ecoli and Phytophthora outbreaks.</p> <p>The monitoring team overseeing the Grounds Maintenance contracts across a number of portfolios. They monitor the contract across all portfolios ensuring compliance with standards, payment and health and safety. The current performance of the providers is good but there is daily contact with our team and faults are found, challenged and corrected. The grounds maintenance contract is benchmarked and is currently 26% lower than the national average this includes the cost of the monitoring team.</p> <p>There are 32 Park Keepers in local parks across the city. They work closely with the friends groups on a daily basis. They lead volunteering and park walks. They are on site 5 days a week (including weekends). They are a very visible part of the service and a key link with friends groups. They undertake some grounds maintenance operations but mainly deliver work above the core programme. The Parks Service evaluates their service and all provide evidence of work above programme. They carry out all the Health and Safety inspections on site.</p>			
All figures in £m				
Budget Overall Controllable Budget £8,190m	Saving in 14/15 (£2.1m)	Saving in 15/16 (£2.1m)	Saving in 16/17 (£2.1m)	Saving in 17/18 (£2.1m)
Proposed Changes to Service	<p>The proposal will be to remove 16 Park Keepers. This will mean there will be no staff on site and there will be a reduction in volunteering opportunities for local communities.</p> <p>Ornamental Grass cutting areas are cut 26 times per year the proposal will reduce this to 12. This will reduce the standard of all ornamental sites.</p> <p>Increasing meadows would reduce grass cutting from 12 times per year to once and in some case no cutting. This will across all sites. Desire lines will be cut to create</p>			
<p>fire breaks. Some areas of the Park could look as if they are not managed.</p> <p>The removal of a minimum of 60 play areas will reduce the opportunity for free access to play for local communities. The Play Areas will be taken out of 60 local Parks.</p> <p>The fees and charges will be increased to all facilities offered in Parks. This includes the introduction to charging for parking which is currently free.</p> <p>A reduction of approximately 8 Ranger posts, would reduce volunteering opportunities, reduce the educational programme currently undertaken and remove the presence of staff on sites. The Health programme offered within Parks will be reduced.</p> <p>The restructuring of the Woodland Team would result in a staff reduction of between 4 and 8 posts, which in turn would mean that all routine maintenance in our woods will cease. Some of the grants we currently receive, that are delivered by the team will cease. There is an increase risk to health and safety with the reduction of a team engaged in Tree management.</p> <p>The contract management team monitor the grounds maintenance contract. The proposal is to reduce this team by 2. There is an increased risk that contract compliance will reduce. Safety and risk inspections will need to be transferred to existing staff.</p> <p>Managing the implications of change for Service Users and Partners (including equalities issues and mitigation)</p> <p>The reduction of Park Keepers would need negotiations with Service Providers as they are part of the current contract. The Friends Groups often rely on the Park Keeper to lead local work this will stop. Safety inspections they undertake will be transferred to other mobile staff.</p> <p>All Friends of Parks groups and Birmingham Open Spaces Forum would be involved. There would be a reduction in volunteering activities in Parks. Current risk assessments undertaken by the Rangers would need to be transferred to other staff.</p> <p>Reduction in ornamental grass would be a reputational issue with a reduced standard of service, our Green Flag status Parks could receive negative comments.</p> <p>Increased meadows could increase the fire risk, make obstructions etc. less visible, collect litter and provide less spaces for informal sporting activities. We will cut fire breaks to minimise the fire risk</p> <p>Full cost recovery on sport could prevent use contributing to health lifestyles</p> <p>For details of consultation please go to www.birmingham.gov.uk/budgetviews</p> <p>Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken as appropriate</p>				

What's On The Chopping Block?

Service managers have outlined ways of reducing costs by about £2M per year. Here's what they came up with as one way of meeting that target.

- **Eliminate** 16 of the 32 Park Keeper jobs
- **Eliminate** 8 more Ranger jobs
- **Eliminate** the Woodland team
- **Eliminate** 2 of the 4 contract monitoring & inspection positions
- **Remove** 60 play areas
- **Reduce** mowing ornamental grass (lawns) from 26 cuts a year to 12.
- **Reduce** meadow grass mowing to once a year, or less.
- **Reduce** the Health programme activities
- Introduce or increase **fees**, including parking fees.

Consequences

Some of these reductions will have decommissioning costs, such as the removal of playgrounds or the re-negotiation of maintenance contracts. Those decommissioning costs will have long term effects beyond the end of any austerity budgets.

Removing a playground means rebuilding a new one as and when funds are found. But at least it can be rebuilt. The knowledge of long-term staff cannot be replaced. Our Rangers and tree officers hold a *lot* of the local knowledge about habitat, plants, and animals. They are our best source of joined-up knowledge about the natural spaces we all love.

We should also be alert to **domino effects**, where the cancellation of one service makes it difficult or impossible to continue others.

For example, at Highbury, most of the woodland conservation work only happens with Ranger involvement. Rangers help plan the work and ensure everything proceeds safely. Without Ranger participation, the recently opened woodland above the beehives would still be a tangle of underbrush. If you enjoy walking through that area, it's because the Rangers were available to oversee the volunteers (with some help from the Woodlands team). Likewise, when we started dredging the Rhododendron Pond, it was with their involvement. **Certain kinds of work only happen** when volunteers work under Ranger supervision. That work is not in the maintenance contract, so only gets done this way.

Losing even one Ranger would have consequences for our parks and open spaces.

Rangers are the linchpin between public and Council. They coordinate activities, information and knowledge. For example, Highbury Park has no formal management plan. Likewise, Highbury Trust has no management plan for the Chamberlain Gardens. But the Rangers have compiled a set of notes in consultation with interested parties. That means anyone with an interest in how the land is being managed can contact a Ranger and get a basic outline of what's important.

It's worth noting that while we need Rangers, they also need us.

What You Can Do

It's up to us now. We have to persuade the budget managers to stop cutting Parks budgets. We can make three kinds of argument: parks have been cut already; other services should cover a share of running costs; cuts can be made elsewhere, such as in central bureaucracy and outsourced services; and the Council can rejig the way it works to make things easier for Friends groups to help.

The Parks department has made more than its fair share of cuts already; money should come from other budgets to sustain the incredible service provided by the department.

We should also be asking the council to **make sure money is used in a joined-up way**. For example, where there's an education, health, sport or social inclusion budget for promoting outdoor activity, some of that money should support parks. We'd like to see schools, health and neighbourhood development underwrite more of the Parks budget. After all, parks help meet health and education goals, but have yet to get any subsidy from those departments.

We can also ask the Council to rejig the way it works, and to shrink in other areas.

We can ask that power is devolved to wards and districts, and that volunteer groups are better supported. The Budget White Paper says this on p. 23: there's support for 'greater use of volunteers to enhance and sustain a service, but *alongside trained and paid staff, not instead of them*. Paid staff are also needed to organise and train volunteers'. The Chamberlain Forum makes some related points about co-produced services in [Neighbourhood-Strategy-CF-complete-draft.docx](#).

While we don't have a clear picture of how the cuts fall across all departments, we can ask for more clarity and further changes elsewhere. We don't know that executive salaries, central bureaucracy and outsourcing (e.g. Capita) are cut first. There is more to be done with the property portfolio and asset transfers. We can ask that BCC do a more rigorous sweep of these before cutting Parks budgets. More transparency and openness is required in saying where money goes.

Responding to the Budget Survey

The Council have set up a consultation questionnaire online at https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/budget/budgetviews2014/consult_view.

It has **10 main sections** of about **four questions each**. The 10 sections cover the entire BCC budget. The four questions are pretty much the same in each section. Two questions are answered on a scale of 1-5. The other two have open text fields for you to write longer responses.

The Parks budget is addressed in *Section 5: Developing Successful and Inclusive Communities*. We want to focus on the two open-ended questions:

- 5C. How do you think the proposed budget cuts to services that aim to improve community life and build social capital, well-being and community engagement will affect you and your family?
- 5D. Do you have any other suggestions on how the Council may spend less on these services?

These are very broad questions, but are best answered with specifics. We've compiled a list of responses that other people are using for one or both of the questions. We hope this makes it easier for you to say something in response to the proposed cuts.

What Others Are Saying

Other Friends groups have responded to these questions as shown below. We hope you will craft your own response by drawing from some or all of the same topics.

Parks Offer Value for Money

- **Parks provide excellent value for money.** No other service produces so many positive outcomes with the small amount of money they get.
- **Parks are multi-function service sites:** amenity, health, education, community, social cohesion, nature. They deserve staff and funding!
- **Friends of Parks groups already save BCC thousands of pounds** by doing thousands of hours of work looking after the city's open spaces.
- If parks are meant to help make up for cuts in provision of health, sport and education activities, then the parks budget should be increased, or held constant, but **definitely not cut!**
- **Parks deserve more support**, not less.

Park Keepers = Safety

- **Park Keepers mean we feel safe** using the parks, that the park is well-cared for and welcoming.
- **Park keepers keep an eye** on parks and people. They are community hubs.
- Without the park keeper **we wouldn't use the park** so often.
- Without the park keeper and rangers we wouldn't be able to do as much volunteering in the park.
- A park without staff is like a clinic without nurses or a classroom without teachers!

Parks Promote Health

- A safe, well cared for park helps us be fit and healthy.
- A safe, well cared for park is a space where we can meet our neighbours, volunteer & develop our community.
- Park-based play areas are safe, free, local places for families to play, to get exercise & fresh air.
- Where children can't play safely in the streets, play areas in parks are more important than ever.
- Obesity is said to be an issue with 25% of 10-11 year-olds in Birmingham. This means we need more places to play not fewer.
- Play areas are one of the few traffic-free places that children of all ages can get active, fit & develop independence.

(more...)

Rangers & Woodland Team = Knowledge, Interpretation, Inclusion

- **Rangers are the key custodians** of the city's natural environment – they undertake the management of our open spaces.
- Without the Rangers **volunteers would not be able to work** at improving the environment on our doorsteps.
- This level of volunteering would not be possible without the support of Park Keepers and **Rangers – who provide basic services and expert knowledge** – without which volunteers cannot add value and certainly not take on more work.
- Rangers have the resources to reach out and engage disadvantaged members of the community.
- Rangers are key to making parks more inclusive.

Supported Volunteers Make a Difference

- **Volunteers cannot replace jobs**, but they do provide added value
- Volunteering saves money but it isn't free.
- Volunteers do work **above and beyond** contract maintenance; work that would not get done otherwise!
- **Volunteers need support** – guidance, training, insurance, tools, first aid, risk assessments – all of which need to be provided by permanent staff.

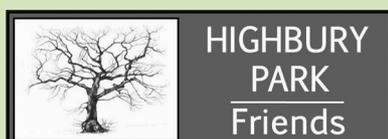
The Council Can do More with Less

- The Council must ensure budget cuts reduce central bureaucracy while **promoting new ways of decision-making** by neighbourhood officers and community groups.
- Localisation must be more engaging, e.g. make District committees easier to participate in.
- The Council can spend less by making it easier for volunteers to do more.
- The Council should be clearer about what it will do to enable voluntary and local groups.
- By using its own resources to **assist voluntary groups to form enterprises, get insurance, legal advice, funding, access to facilities**, etc.
- Make access to facilities easier, and consider asset transfer in more cases.
- Make it easier for constituted groups to get external funding.
- Make it easier for charitable organisations to **bid for and provide services**.
- Make it easier for volunteers, students, and others to work alongside service staff.
- Make sure departments work and spend together on common outcomes.

Your Park Matters

Your Voice Matters

Please Write



campaigning for your parks & open spaces

