

Overview & Scrutiny Committee minutes:

Fees and Charges 2022/23

Children's Services – 1st Dec 2021 7pm:

The Assistant Director Education and Skills introduced the report and stated that it was presented before the Committee on an annual basis. She highlighted the charge that related to Grangewaters which had increased by 64% and explained that this was because it was an activity that required the whole lake and staff onsite to manage. She explained that previously this had been undertaken by volunteers or by holding other activities that required onsite staff at the same time, but this was no longer feasible. She summarised and stated that the team tested the market for fees and charges, and the proposals would be implemented in April, if agreed by Cabinet.

Councillor Kent highlighted the increase of 64% at Grangewaters, and asked if this was for the Water-ski and Jet-Ski Club, and if any consultation had been undertaken with them. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that conversations had been ongoing throughout the season, as they used the whole lake and it had been difficult to identify space for them. She explained that there were no volunteers identified in future, so staff costs would increase. She stated that the Club had felt disappointed that there had been no space for them this year, but the team would continue to work closely with them in future.

Councillor Anderson questioned how the overall pricing of Grangewaters related to the national average. The Assistant Director Education and Skills answered that pricing at Grangewaters was lower than the national average, but Grangewaters followed a different pricing strategy as it was aimed for local community use.

The Chair stated that over 50% of the fees and charges increases outlined in the report were above inflation. She asked if any consultation had been undertaken for these increases. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that some of the fees and charges had only been increased by approximately £1 above inflation, and this was low when compared to the national average. She stated that the team had spoken with services and service users before proposing an increase in fees and charges. The Chair questioned why the commercial rate hall charge had been removed. The Assistant Director Education and Skills responded that this related to the Thurrock Adult Community College building, which was not in operation. She stated that the removal of fees and charges relating to Grangewaters had been to simplify and streamline the system.

Councillor Kent questioned the approval process for the report. The Assistant Director Education and Skills explained that the report would go to February's Cabinet meeting for their sign off. Councillor Kent stated that he would not agree to give director delegated authority to change the fees and charges in year, and felt that this should have some Member oversight, for example in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder. Councillor Anderson questioned if the recommendation relating to director delegated authority had been previously included in fees and charges reports. He also questioned how regularly director delegated authority was utilised. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that the recommendation relating to director delegated authority had been included on fees and charges reports for the past few years, but had rarely been used by directors to amend a charge once it had been agreed.

Councillor Kent suggested that recommendation two be amended to include “director delegated authority, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, or appropriate Member oversight”. A vote was held on this recommendation amendment. There were two votes in favour (Councillors Muldowney and Kent), and two votes against (Councillors Anderson and Thandi). As the vote was tied, the Chair received the casting vote and voted for the recommendation. Therefore, the recommendation was amended.

Councillor Kent suggested an additional recommendation which read “The Committee did not support fees and charges increases above the current rate of inflation of 4.2%”. A vote was held on this recommendation. There were two votes in favour (Councillors Muldowney and Kent) and two votes against (Councillors Anderson and Thandi). As the vote was tied, the Chair received the casting vote and voted for the recommendation. Therefore the proposed additional recommendation was agreed.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Noted the revised fees and charges including those no longer applicable, and commented on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of the Committee.**
- 2. Noted that director delegated authority, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder or other appropriate Member oversight, will be sought via Cabinet to allow Fees and Charges to be varied within a financial year in response to commercial requirements.**
- 3. Did not support fees and charges increases above the current rate of inflation of 4.2%.**

Cleaner, Greener and Safer – 14th Dec 2021 - deferred to 20th Jan 2022:

Daren Spring stated the report had set out the charges in relation to services within the remit of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Charges would take effect from the 1 April 2022 unless otherwise stated. In preparing the proposed fees and charges, Directorates had worked within the charging framework and commercial principles set out in section three of the report and had taken into account the effect that Covid-19 had and would continue to have on services, residents and the local economy. Further director-delegated authority would be sought via Cabinet to allow Fees and Charges to be varied within financial year in response to commercial requirements. Members were referred to the full list of proposed charges detailed in Appendix 1, and the proposed deletion of any current fees and charges were detailed in Appendix 2.

Councillor Redsell thanked Daren Spring and spoke about the ticketing system at Thameside Theatre and how the box office should be open for those with no access to the on-line booking system. Daren Spring stated the box office was open Tuesday to Friday, 2.00 to 3.00pm and on Saturday from 10.00am to 3.00pm.

Councillor Redsell questioned whether there were any plans for Thurrock to have its own crematorium to which Daren Spring stated a feasibility study had been undertaken to look at a potential area.

Councillor Redsell referred to an area of flats where there were currently 42 bins used by residents and questioned whether bigger bins could be strategically placed to replace these.

Daren Spring stated this would be dependent on the location of the bin storage and how secure this was but would be happy to speak with Councillor Redsell outside the meeting.

Councillor Liddiard referred to fly-tipping and questioned whether to help the Council recover monies that discounts on bulky collections could be reduced for those residents on benefits to which Daren Spring stated bulky items could be disposed of, for free, at the Housing Waste and Recycling Centre and in comparison with other authorities, Thurrock's bulky collection rates were very competitive.

Councillor Rigby questioned whether any new allotments would be available into the borough to which Daren Spring stated there were no plans for any new ones at present as it was hard to find the right location. There were a lot of allotments in the borough which were self-managed.

Members discussed football pitches in the borough and how some were being blocked-booked by non-Thurrock residents and all members agreed that Thurrock residents should have priority over non-Thurrock bookings. Councillor Thandi questioned whether there were any 3g pitches in the borough to which Daren Spring stated there were none but this would be looked into.

Councillor Liddiard questioned whether the portfolio holder would consider reducing fees and charges for sporting activities for those users who were unable to pay the full amount.

Councillor Thandi asked whether the number of fly-tipping reports had gone up or down this year to which Daren Spring stated he did not have those figures to hand but could provide to members if required.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Cleaner, Greener and Safer Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees, including those no longer applicable; and comment on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.**
- 2. That Cleaner, Greener and Safer Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that director delegated authority will be sought via Cabinet to allow fees and charges to be varied within a financial year in response to commercial requirements.**

Health and Wellbeing – 4th Nov 2021 7pm:

Catherine Wilson presented the report that set out charges in relation to services within the remit of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Any new charges would take effect from the 1 April 2022 subject to consultation and Cabinet approval unless otherwise stated. In preparing the proposed fees and charges the Adult Social Care Directorate had worked within the charging framework and commercial principles set out in section three of the report. It had also taken into account the effect that Covid-19 had and would continue to have on services, residents and the local economy. Further Director delegated authority would be sought from Cabinet to allow fees and charges to be varied within the financial year in response to commercial or legal requirements. Members were referred to the full list of proposed charges as detailed in Appendix 1. At this stage there were no proposals to increase charges for 2022/23 other than the proposal that had already been agreed and currently being implemented which was the three year incremental increase to the domiciliary care charges.

Councillor Ralph thanked Catherine Wilson for the report.

Councillor Holloway thanked officers for the breakdown of the fees and charges but would also have liked to have seen the wider directorate breakdown of finance. Asked for clarification that the Appendix 1 was for information only and requested some financial context in which the financial charges sat. Members agreed to add to recommendation 2 that any such changes would be brought back to the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee for scrutiny. Ian Wake reassured Member that such changes would be consulted with service users and then back to committee. Ian Wake stated this was a challenging time for the Council with a deficit of £3 million for 2022/23 with a lot of work being undertaken in the background and further proposals were being put in place to close that deficit. In Ian Wake's directorate there was a transformation programme in place to transform services with a target savings of just under £5 million over two years.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and agreed that a consultation should be completed for the proposals to revise fees and charges for Adult Social Care.**
- 2. That Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that Director delegated authority will be sought from Cabinet to allow Fees and Charges to be varied within a financial year in response to commercial and legal requirements. That any such changes would be brought back to the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee for scrutiny.**

Catherine Wilson left the meeting at 7.42pm.

Housing – 9th Nov 2021 7pm:

The report was presented by Dulal Ahmed.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on where the 212 HMOs were and said that Ward Councillors needed to be made aware of these in their ward as there were a number of concerns with HMOs. Referring to page 25, she pointed out that the traveller site on Gammon Field was moving 100 yards away from its current site and not 'elsewhere in the borough' as the report stated. Dulal Ahmed answered that the Council's website highlighted where HMOs were. He advised that concerns with HMOs should be emailed to officers and for the Planning department to be notified. The Chair requested that the link be included in the minutes (Register of licensed HMOs | Houses in multiple occupation | Thurrock Council).

The Chair asked if the service was aware of any hidden HMOs in Thurrock. Dulal Ahmed answered that the service was investigating up to 2,500 unlicensed HMOs. There had been a delay in this due to Covid-19 but was now reinstated.

Councillor Ononaji sought clarification on what were considered discretionary charges. He also asked whether a consultation took place for these. Dulal Ahmed explained that these were services that the Council provided such as Housing Enforcement Notices as it required time to carry out and a reasonable charge for the cost incurred was allowed. He said that before a notice was served, the service consulted with the landlord and gave time for the landlord to resolve the issue. A number of considerations were taken into account and enforcement was usually served as a last resort to ensure that residents were not at risk of harm.

Councillor Pearce asked if the service benchmarked their fees against neighbouring authorities. Dulal Ahmed answered that the service compared and regularly reviewed their fees against neighbouring authorities to ensure that the service was not expensive.

The Chair questioned what the penalty charge for energy efficiency on paragraph 9 was. Dulal Ahmed explained that the law had changed so that properties with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) that had a rating lower than E could not be let. The service had identified properties with an EPC lower than E and had notified these properties. If these properties continued to be let with an E EPC, the service would need to take enforcement action but landlords were given the opportunity to improve their EPC rating to ensure that it could be legally let.

The Chair asked why discretionary charges had increased by 10%. Dulal Ahmed explained that there had been an increase in the amount of time that staff spent in removing hazards with part 1 actions. There was an increase in complaints from tenants living in poor homes with hazards of damp and mould, structure, sanitation and pest problems. The charges had increased to meet demand and the money was ring-fenced to the Private Housing Team.

The Chair mentioned that at last year's Fees and Charges report, Members had been informed that carbon monoxide alarms would be installed in all council homes by this year's Fees and Charges report. She sought confirmation of this. Susan Cardozo confirmed that this had been done.

Councillor Fletcher noted the increased charge for the 'Sheltered Housing Visitor's Room' in the appendix and queried why this had increased by 25%. Ewelina Sorbjan explained that this fee did not fall within the remit of the Fees and Charges report for Housing O&S and would look into this. The Committee said that they did not agree with the increase in this charge.

Councillor Redsell highlighted concerns of a doorbell entry charge on Jesmond Road and Springfield Road. She would email this information to officers to look into.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees, including those no longer applicable, and that Housing Overview and**
- 2. Scrutiny Committee comment on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.**

Planning, Transport, Regeneration – 7th Dec 2021 7pm:

This meeting was deferred to 1st Feb 2022

The report was introduced by Leigh Nicholson.

Councillor Kerin stated that he was pleased to see a good level of detail in the report. He referred to pages 17 – 21 and asked why the increase for charges was so high and what formula had been used to assess the increase. David Kleinberg referred to parking charges and explained that no formula was used as the service looked at former benchmarking. He said that no set figures were used but the service looked at parking across the county to find a way to manage this.

Councillor Kerin highlighted his concerns that people's wages were not enough to cover parking permit charges as well as other expenses. He referred to page 21 and asked if the service had assessed the impact of the charges to local businesses specifically in Darnley Road and Argent Street.

Due to technical issues with the Wi-Fi connection, the Chair moved onto item 6 of the agenda to allow time for the connection to improve. – **This was then deferred to 1st Feb 2022** (briefing note to be tabled at Cabinet meeting).