

To: City Executive Board

Date: 7th December 2011

Report of: Head of Environmental Development

Title of Report: Implementation of budget service reduction – Environmental Development Low Priority Service Requests.

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report:	To agree and define the changes to low priority Services arising from Council's agreed budgetary saving.
Key Decision:	No
Executive lead member:	Councillor John Tanner Cleaner, Greener City
Policy Framework:	An efficient and effective Council
Recommendation(s):	To agree the proposed changes to low priority services and request that they are implemented by the Head of Environmental Development.

Appendices to report – Appendix 1 -Service Distribution Table (reconfiguration)
Appendix 2 - Risk register
Appendix 3 - Initial Equality impact assessment

Background

1. Council has approved a series of savings in response to national public sector budget reductions. One saving is a £162k staffing reduction in Environmental Development, phased over the 3 years 2012/13 to 2014/15. This saving is derived from a service reconfiguration which will prioritise service requests according to statutory duties and the overall needs of the community.
2. The proposals seek to ensure that the Council is able to focus upon the greatest need and in settings where the Council can be most effective.

The proposals also seek to reflect the Council's corporate priorities and its key concerns.

3. This service reconfiguration should be viewed against a backdrop of other efficiency savings within Environmental Development which include increased fees and charges which will produce an income of £70k and efficiencies across the Service in the handling of service requests which will produce a saving of £170k - by being more productive in meeting the rising demands for service with a reduced staffing resource.
4. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) statistics for England and Wales, show that the City Council's value for money performance in this area is high. (Oxford was £10.18 p/head against the LA range of £9.41 to £15.88). Benchmarking with all other Countywide counterparts has also revealed that the City Council's Environmental Development Service has carried out more enforcement actions in the year, than all the other County wide authorities put together. The service activity level that is delivered is more comparable with a metropolitan Council, yet this is provided with only district levels of funding. Much of this high level of activity involves non statutory matters and it is these that are the subject of this proposed reconfiguration.

Service Request Prioritisation

5. The attached table sets out the services currently provided by Environmental Development. These are labelled from statutory to proactive. Services categorised as "completely mandatory" are where the duties are specified via UK Statutes & Instruments, EU Treaties, Directives/Regulations, Codes of Practice, binding guidance or contract. These carry an imminent & substantial risk to health, safety or welfare. "Mostly mandatory" are where there are some options in terms of the degree of work or response. These carry a potential substantial risk to health, safety or welfare. "Mostly Discretionary" are where the Council is mostly free to choose whether the work is done or not although there will be risks to reputation nonetheless. These carry a low level risk to health, safety or welfare. "Discretionary" are those where there is no obligation upon the Council to carry out the work - though a public expectation may exist. These carry a low risk to health, safety or welfare. "Totally Proactive" are best practice services where anticipated problems are eliminated or minimised instead of handling the problems that would otherwise arise.

6. The attached table illustrates the resultant categorisation and proposed prioritisation of services, which have been colour coded. Green refers to the category of work which will be unaffected by the proposed changes; the orange category (the low priority service requests) that are subject to change in this proposal.
7. It can be seen from the table that the low priority service requests relate to matters that are not statutory duties for the Council and, on which the Council therefore has no obligation to intervene and in some cases no locus to become involved. Many other Councils do not provide these discretionary services and it is proposed that in response to the budget pressures we need to minimise expenditure on these areas to enable resources to be targeted in higher priority areas.
8. Examples of service requests in this area include minor drainage defects that have no bearing upon health and requests for service in respect of localised low level evening and weekend noise disturbances where there is no prospect of formal enforcement by the Council. Similarly, abandoned building rubble & low level waste left on non-Council land/highway will be a low priority and the Service will not be drawn into landlord and tenant civil disputes, nor investigate minor atmospheric pollution eg from garden bonfires. The table sets this out in more detail.
9. Medium and high priority service requests will continue to receive the same response as is presently delivered. These include calls about: protecting the environment and people from significant forms of pollution; safeguarding health and safety via mechanisms including licensing; ensuring food is safe; infectious disease is contained; essential repairs and improvements are made to homes, businesses and places of work; ensuring public health burials are properly arranged. Likewise, calls about loans and grant aid to ensure essential repair, or arrange aids and adaptations for disabled applicants, will continue to receive a full response. The Council recognises its duty to safeguard the wellbeing of its citizens, which is reflected in the reprioritisation.
10. In addition, programmes that greatly contribute to the Council's corporate priorities, such as internal carbon management, energy resource management, Low Carbon Oxford and flooding are similarly protected.

Planned Changes

11. For all low priority service requests it is proposed that in future the Council's involvement will be restricted to Customer Services giving advice on the telephone, the provision of information in standard letters & leaflets, and signposting where possible including to the Council's website and other potential service providers. For many callers, there will be no significant change in the level of service, but for some the difference will be in the absence of site visits and follow up currently carried out by Environmental Development staff. For example, where the Council is told that a caller's neighbour is carrying out DIY work every Sunday – this may well cause irritation but it is unlikely to have a marked impact upon public health, safety or welfare. For this reason, it is graded a low priority service request: In future, the Council's response will be to give advice and point to other options.
12. In recent years, around 14-15,000 service requests made to Environmental Development were low priority and to process these equated on average to 4 full time officer posts. Deletion of these flows from Environmental Development and deletion of the 4 posts will provide the required saving of £162k.

Impact of the Proposal

13. The service will make the financial saving as approved by Council. This in turn will help protect the service budget and ensure that essential services are funded and suitably protected, now and in future years. Since service requests rise in number by approximately four per cent per annum, the proposal takes into account the future demands on the service and the efficiency measures planned.
14. Across the City, those persons calling about high and medium priority issues will experience little change and therefore minimal impact. Those calling about low priority issues will not receive a service from Environmental Development but will be offered advice and any available signposting by Customer Services.
15. The impact upon specific groups is difficult to quantify. Current service requests do not in general ask for socio-economic information and service delivery decisions do not discriminate on such grounds. The same principle has been applied to the service reprioritisation and therefore the impact upon specific groups is still unquantifiable.

Climate Change / environmental impact

16. There are no identified significant climate change / environmental impacts resulting from these proposed changes.

Equalities impact

17. It is not anticipated that there will be any differential impact based on race, gender, disability, sex, age, or religion due to this policy. An initial assessment is appended.

Financial implications

18. Once fully implemented, these proposals will give rise to £162k financial saving through the deletion of 4 posts.

Legal implications

19. The proposals focus solely upon low priority service requests that relate to matters that are not statutory duties for the Council and on which the Council has no obligation to intervene. The Council recognises its duty to safeguard the wellbeing of its citizens, which is reflected in the reprioritisation.

Monitoring

20. Environmental Development will keep the overall impact of the changes under review. It is likely that some enquirers will be disappointed with the changed level of service and this will be tracked through the corporate complaints system and reported to Members in due course.

Conclusion

21. Due to the number and diversity of service requests received, this will be a complex saving to deliver. Officers recognise that public and Member expectation will bring pressures; however they are confident that the saving can be delivered if these expectations are managed in accordance with Council's decision.

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