

West Lothian Council looking at scrapping bus subsidies and other cost cutting measures

Scrapping subsidised bus services, getting rid of lollipop staff and charging people to collect garden waste are among budget-cutting proposals set to go before West Lothian councillors.

The wide reaching cutbacks have been proposed by council officers to help meet the budget shortfall of £47.6 million over the next five years.

More than 109 pages of detailed proposals went before the Environment and Sustainability Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel this week. The responses from the public ran to 1,300 pages of full comment.

Removal of subsidised buses, which are not a statutory provision, would bring savings of almost £2 million over three years. The revised passenger transport strategy would also alter qualification for school buses – cutting the current generous West Lothian allowance which is three miles for secondary children and two miles for those under eight to the statutory minimum which is two miles and one and a half miles.

The revised strategy would also include the scrapping of rail

concessions.

The proposals, put before the public in the weeks before Christmas, attracted more than 7,000 comments, second only to the 8,000 plus made on education.

Officials summed up some of the responses to the proposals, stating: "Some respondents feel that the bus services are already infrequent and unreliable and that this proposal will exacerbate this problem for communities".

And on school transport they found "Some respondents feel that this proposal will result in an unfair financial burden with parents required to transport their children in place of the bus. "

Cutting out crossing patrols, better known as lollipop men and women, was another proposal, and would mean 24 full time equivalent jobs go to save £475,000 over three years. All crossing patrols are at automated zebra crossings.

Council policy is against redundancies with redeployment being the preferred option. However officers acknowledged union representatives said it would be difficult to redeploy crossing staff in any meaningful way because of the part time nature of their work, and age- the majority being retired .

Services which see the most impact will be in cleansing if agreed. These include introducing charges for garden waste removal, cutting the opening hours for recycling centres.

Officers highlighted objection to waste collection : "Many respondents highlight the importance of effective and accessible recycling and waste collections services to the community and are not supportive of any reduction in service."

Changes to facilities management would see school facilities staff undertaking to transport food around schools for the

breakfast clubs and wider changes to duties throughout and beyond the school day. It would also see cuts to cleaning in schools and council buildings beyond statutory requirements.

Other Operational Services hit would be restructuring of staffing in country parks, revised winter maintenance plans. revised street lighting maintenance and removal of festive lights.

One of the few cuts which won support at the meeting was the closure of the 13 automated toilets, known as APCs across the county.

Contract costs for these are around £24,000 to £29,000 per year in the current financial year- a total of £358,183. Usage is low.

Chairing the meeting Tom Conn said he had been a councillor since 2007 and ever since it had been a time of constraint in local government. This was the worst, he added.

“This is not a happy time to be a councillor in local government in Scotland. Somebody has to say ‘Stop’.”

Union rep Tom Carr-Pollock told the meeting that the cuts would hit the lowest earners the hardest and that Operational Services was again the easiest to hit. He said staffing levels were reaching dangerously low levels.

Diane Calder for the SNP said: “What a really depressing meeting this has been. I think there are few proposals which the public would accept.”

Pippa Plevin representing the Joint Forum of Community Councils said: “If the decision on Christmas lights goes ahead West Lothian will be a miserable place. I hope councillors will read the full comments from the public before they take decisions.”

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency. It is funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector (in Edinburgh that is Reach plc (the publisher behind Edinburgh Live and The Daily Record) and used by many qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover news about top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.