
Money Waste

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A row has broken out over a council's plans to spend £10,000 planting large shrubs to prevent children from playing football.

Aberdeen City Council, which is facing debts of almost £50 million, said it had received complaints from householders in five locations about youngsters playing football in residential areas.

The authority, controlled by an SNP-Liberal Democrat coalition, is considering landscaping as a way to stop youngsters from using the unofficial play areas.

But critics say that children have been driven to play football because the authority has shut down swimming pools and ice rinks, and cut the opening hours of its leisure centres, as part of a series of cost-cutting measures aimed at averting a financial crisis.

Opposition Labour group leader Willie Young said: "They have closed down the sports centres because of the budget crisis and now they want to spend £10,000 on stopping kids playing football outside. It is outrageous."

The council stressed it had not decided on the proposal.

Earlier this year, it was earlier revealed that Aberdeen's temporary chief executive, Bob Coomber, a financial expert from London, would earn £1,000 a day to sort out the authority's money troubles.

Taxpayers have been left with a bill for £310 after workers painted school road markings outside a supermarket.

The zig-zag safety warnings, which read "School: Keep clear", were supposed to be painted outside the entrance to Holme Slack Community Primary in Preston, Lancashire. But they were painted more than a hundred yards away, beside a path which leads to a Sainsbury's.

Local independent councillor Terry Cartwright said he was surprised the workers had not spotted their mistake sooner. "I couldn't quite believe it. They must have thought it was a very quiet school," he said.

David Beaton, deputy director of operations at Lancashire County Commercial Group, which carries out road repairs on behalf of Lancashire County Council, said: "The line markings had to be repainted after we resurfaced the road. In the course of this work our engineers unfortunately repainted the lines in the wrong place. We apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused and are taking steps to ensure it doesn't happen again. Our own works team carried out the job. The additional cost was £150 to cover up the lines and £160 to repaint them."

A council has been criticised for spending £65,000 recruiting two members of staff.

Basildon Council, in Essex, paid £25,000 to head-hunting firms to find a leader for its sustainable communities department and another £6,000 to find a head for its public spaces and street scene department.

It spent a further £34,000 advertising the two vacancies in industry magazines and on the internet.

Mark Wallace, spokesman for the TaxPayers' Alliance, said: "This is outrageous. Which councillors are going to sit down with the residents in their wards and tell them their entire council tax bill has been spent many times over on paying for head-hunters?"

"The council has its own human resources department. Why can't they be responsible for this sort of recruitment?"

But a spokesman for the council said: "These are standard costs any organisation committed to finding the best and brightest individuals would expect to pay. The council has a duty to persuade the most talented and committed staff to join us. We are competing in a fierce marketplace when we recruit for senior posts, and have to pay the going rate for consultants' advice and job advertising."

A council is planning a to publish a guide telling councillors how to do their job.

Labour-controlled Lambeth Council in London wants to produce a handbook to make it easier for councillors to find out how the council works, even though it already provides training for newly-elected members.

Andrew Gibson, an opposition Conservative councillor, said: "I'm surprised there is the money to do this and yet we are told extra resources aren't available to help councillors with their casework. As ever with the current administration, they can do the Lambeth Talk, but sadly can't do the Lambeth Walk."

A spokeswoman for the council said the cost would be "negligible". She said: "The guide for councillors is purely at a consultation stage, but would be in electronic form on the website, with hard copies limited to councillors who requested them.

"The small costs would be to cover minimal staff time, a page on the web and a small number of hard copies made available on request. These sorts of handbooks are in line with best practice and are already customary for many other councils, and many councillors have also asked for this sort of assistance.

"The handbook will include some information already available to councillors, but it will pull this together in a comprehensive and accessible guide as a tool to help councillors serve their constituents and to help the democratic process."

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