

COMMUNITY SERVICES AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday, 14 January, 2014 at 6pm in a Conference Room at the Council House

Councillors present Councillor C. Creaney (Vice-Chair)
Councillor I. Azam
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor L. Rattigan

Portfolio Holders in attendance Councillor M. Arif – Environment
Councillor A. Harrison – Leisure & Culture
Councillor I. Shires – Community Engagement &
Voluntary Sector
Councillor C. Towe - Resources

Officers in attendance Jamie Morris – Executive Director (Neighbourhoods)
Keith Stone – Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods)
Chris Holliday – Head of Leisure and Community Health
Pete Smith – Principal Bereavement Services Officer
Jag Raan – Major Projects & Minor Improvements Team Leader
Craig Goodall – Committee Business & Governance Manager

Others in attendance Mr. A. Nawaz – Chair of the Union of Muslim Organisations

Vice-Chair in the Chair

134/14 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor V. Woodruff.

135/14 Substitutions

Councillor J. Cook substituted for Councillor V. Woodruff.

136/14 Declarations of interest and party whip

Councillor Illmann-Walker declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 5 “Willenhall Lawn Cemetery Extension feasibility study”.

There were no declarations of party whip for the duration of the meeting.

137/14 Minutes

Councillor K. Hussain requested that he be listed in attendance at the last meeting of the Panel.

Councillor Illmann-Walker requested his concerns that the public sector would be left to deal with high risk probation cases whilst the private sector profited from no risk work be recorded under item 128/13 "Overview of Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation – Walsall Local Delivery Unit".

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting that took place on 20th November, 2013, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated be agreed as a true and accurate record.

138/14 Walsall Arboretum Visitor Centre

The Vice-Chair introduced the item and explained that he had added it as an urgent item to allow Members to consider the report prior to a decision being taken about the Visitor Centre following the calling of a Special Cabinet Meeting on 15th January, 2014.

The Executive Director thanked the Vice-Chair for agreeing to allow the decision to be taken under the Council's General Exception Rules and for the opportunity to present the proposals to the Panel.

The Assistant Director explained that the Visitor Centre was the final piece of the Arboretums refurbishment. The report set out the cost of the scheme and the contract that it was proposed to enter with Wilmot Dixon to deliver it. The contract included the important works that needed to be taken to stabilise an embankment. The proposal also included plans to create an "Illuminated Park" by illuminating the landscapes and buildings in the park. The funding for the lighting works is included in the current Capital Programme. The Heritage Lottery Fund had recently confirmed that the proposals, in particular the proposed use of HLF funding, were acceptable.

The Portfolio Holder (Leisure & Culture) thanked the Panel and explained the importance of making the decision now so that work could start on the site as soon as practicable to prevent further avoidable delays.

The Panel was supportive of the proposals. Members were disappointed that no plans of the Visitor Centre were included in the report and requested that copies be sent to them for information.

Resolved:

That:-

1. the proposals for the Walsall Arboretum Business Centre and associated works be supported;

and;

2. plans for the Arboretum Visitors Centre be sent to Members for information.

139/14 Willenhall Lawn Cemetery Extension Feasibility Study

The Panel considered the outcome of the feasibility study to extend Willenhall Lawn Cemetery (WLC).

The Head of Leisure & Community Health reported that current projections estimated that WLC would be full by December 2016. There was an opportunity to develop adjacent land to extend the cemetery which would create capacity, at current burial rates, for at least another 30 years. Following questions Members were reassured about the methodology that had been used to calculate the additional capacity.

The Major Projects & Minor Improvements Team Leader explained that a number of surveys and assessments had taken place on the location and the extension was feasible. He highlighted new vehicle access arrangements and that land towards the bottom of the site would not be developed for burials. There were also pathways on the site which would have to be reviewed as potential public rights of way.

It was reported that four mine shafts were located in the area. Two have been treated and a further two were outside the perimeter of the development. Members urged the review of mining surveys and warned about their possible inaccuracy. Members queried who was responsible for the remedial works if a new mine shaft in the area was discovered?

The Panel reflected on previous flooding incidents in streets surrounding WLC caused by water runoff and blocked drains. Potential for a repeat of this flooding was a concern which was exacerbated by the proposed budget saving to reduce maintenance and onsite presence in the Boroughs three cemeteries. It was explained that a recent survey had assessed the existing drainage and concluded that it had capacity to accommodate the extension. With regard to the reduction of an onsite presence, Members were advised that they anticipated using 'mobile staff' would provide a more efficient service. It was the intention to maintain similar levels of service. Members requested a copy of the flood risk assessment.

It was explained that the potential for disturbances to the peace and tranquillity of WLC from a nearby school would be mitigated by suitable tree planting and landscaping.

The Panel wished to remain informed on the development and requested a further report once the remaining assessments had been completed.

Resolved:

That:-

1. a further report on the proposed extension to WLC be considered once all the remaining surveys and preparation works have been completed;

2. clarification be provided on the responsible body for remedial work of the mine shafts;
- and;
3. a copy of the flood risk assessment regarding the proposed extension of Willenhall Lawn Cemetery be sent to Members.

140/14 Black Country Coroner Services

The Panel considered issues in relation to the Black Country Coroners Service (BCCS) following a request by a Member of the Panel.

The Chair introduced the item and reported that a petition had been handed in at Council on 13th January, 2014 calling for additional Coroner resources to allow the expedient release of bodies. He explained that due to the number of signatories this petition would be debated at a future Council meeting.

The Head of Leisure & Community Health reported that since 2012 the Coroner had provided services to Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. This meant that the service was provided to a population of one million which is in line with Ministry of Justice guidelines. Previous meetings with the Coroner had resulted in assurances that bodies were not held for longer than required for investigation into the cause of death. The Coroner had not been made aware of any particular concerns regarding delays. Generally bodies were released the day after they were sent to the Coroner. At the meeting the Coroner had made it known that he would find it helpful for two additional support officers. There were ongoing discussions with the Black Country Local Authorities and the Police and Crime Commissioner regarding the future funding of the support officer posts. These discussions were being led by the Chief Executive of Sandwell Council.

The following are the principal points from the ensuing question and answer session:-

- The role of the Coroner as part of the Judiciary was explained. The Coroner was very experienced which meant that the number of post-mortem's carried out locally was lower than the national average. When a post-mortem was required the Coroner was able to keep a body until he was satisfied about the cause of death.
- Members requested further performance information and benchmarking data so that they could understand in more detail the trends in timeliness of release of bodies both where a post-mortem was and was not required.
- Members referred to personal experiences where the Coroner had held bodies of family members for 23 and 7 days respectively. Other Members reflected on next day releases.
- A Member of the Panel explained that he had signed the petition as it was important that the bodies of Muslims were available for burial as quickly as possible after death. This was an Islamic duty and obligation.

- The increase of referrals to the Coroner in 2007/8 was likely to have been caused by a reaction to the Doctor Shipman cases.
- It was highlighted that compared to England and Wales the number of referrals to the Coroner and subsequent post-mortems in the Black Country was low.
- Improved communication within local communities and the Coroner may assist in balancing the needs of the Coroner with those of the local community. Mr. A. Nawaz, Chair of the Union of Muslim Organisations, reported that a petition had been raised due to the concerns of the Muslim community. He explained that the email referred to at the previous night's Council meeting was an expression of gratitude to the Coroner in an individual case rather than an indication of overall satisfaction with the service received.

The Executive Director (Neighbourhoods) explained that the petition would be considered in full at a future Council meeting and a report on the issue would be presented to Members.

Resolved:

That:-

1. Members be informed of performance information and benchmarking data so that they can understand in more detail the trends and timeliness of the release of bodies both where a post-mortem was and was not required;

and;
2. the report be noted.

141/13 Financial Plan 2014/2015 to 2018/2019 : Update on draft revenue budget and capital programme and outcome of budget consultation to date

The Panel considered details of the Financial and Capital Plan for 2014/15 to 2018/19 and the findings from the second stage of resident and stakeholder consultation.

The Executive Director highlighted the consultation responses received, the budget proposals within the remit of the Panel.

Below is a summary of the discussion that took place regarding the budget proposals and consultation:

Remove subsidy to support users for maintenance of grassed sports facilities

Members expressed concerns that the increase in fees could have an adverse impact on the number of local residents participating in sport. It was important to encourage residents to be active for their health.

It was explained that the saving was worth £90,000. Public Health already made a financial contribution to sports development. If this was declined then a decision would need to be taken on whether to reintroduce the subsidy or dispose of the sports pitch.

Closure of Walsall Museum

Following the question it was explained that display opportunities for artefacts from the Museum would be sought. This was more likely to be in Libraries rather than the New Art Gallery.

Reduce the maintenance of play areas by 20%

Concerns were expressed about this proposed budget saving due to the potential safety implications of the core message it gave to their core communities.

It was explained that the proposal concerned increasing efficiency in the way that staff were deployed therefore reductions in service would not necessarily be noticeable across the Borough. Members requested further information on the number of play areas and the age and condition of the facilities.

Further concerns were expressed regarding the inspection of sites for needles but it was explained that this was a public health issue and as such the service would not cease.

Reduce maintenance and onsite presence in three cemeteries

Concerns were expressed about this proposed budget saving due to the importance of maintaining cemeteries for visitors.

It was explained that the proposal concerned increasing efficiency in a way that staff were deployed therefore reductions in service should not necessarily be noticeable across the Borough. A member of staff would still be on site each working day between 8am and 4pm.

Increase in bereavement and registration charges by 5.5% (burials, cremations, registry of births, deaths and marriages)

Members felt that a 5.5% increase was high and would place families under increasing financial strain.

The increase was acknowledged and it was noted that these were still in line with other Black Country Authorities. It was also explained that if these did not rise it would be necessary to make additional compensatory savings.

Cease council operated print and design service

The high charges of the in-house Print and Design Service compared to other providers was discussed.

Make simple savings by reducing energy bills including street lights

It was noted that this was a suggestion received as part of the consultation but was not planned for implementation.

Resolved:

That:-

1. that further information on number of play areas and the age and condition of facilities be provided to Members;
- and;
2. the report be noted.

142/13 Work Programme 2013/14 and Forward Plan

Resolved:

That:-

1. the following items be considered at the 18th February 2014 meeting of the Panel:
 - a) Anti-social Behaviour Partnership with Walsall Housing Group;
 - b) Low Emission Strategy and Low Emissions Zone feasibility study;
 - c) Unauthorised Encampments;
 - d) Third Quarter Financial Monitoring;
- and;
2. the Forward Plan be noted.

143/13 Date of next meeting

It was noted that the date of the next meeting was 18 February, 2014 at 6pm.

The meeting closed at 7.50 p.m.

Chairman

Date: