

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday 14 October 2010 at 6.00pm in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Panel Members Present Councillor L. Harrison (Chair)
Councillor S. Coughlan
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor C. Creaney
Councillor B. Sanders
Councillor I. Shires

**Non-Voting Co-opted
Member Present:** Mr P. Holmes JP

Officers Present Keith Stone – Assistant Director, Neighbourhoods
Chris Holliday – Head of Leisure & Community Health
Sue Grainger – Head of Libraries, Heritage & Arts
Steph Simcox – Service Accounting and Financial
Training Manager
Craig Goodall – Scrutiny Officer

41/10 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors R. Martin, G. Perry, K. Sears and I. Shires.

42/10 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillors B. Sanders and I. Shires substituted for Councillors K. Sears and D. Shires respectively.

43/10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

44/10 MINUTES

It was requested that Mr P. Holmes JP be listed in attendance as non-voting co-opted member.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes, as amended, of the meeting held on 7 September 2010, copies having been previously circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(annexed)

45/10 BUDGET SETTING FRAMEWORK AND TIMETABLE 2011/12 – 2014/15

The Panel was informed of the budget setting framework and timetable for 2011/12 – 2014/15.

The Service Accounting and Financial Training Manager explained the budget setting process and highlighted the working smarter programme, asset management, the resource allocation project and opportunities for scrutiny.

In response to questions from Members the following items were explained:

- 'Council system redesign' was part of the working smarter programme that focussed on empowering officers to take action and avoid unnecessary delays.
- 'Cost leadership' was about increasing value for money and efficiency in budgets compared to other similar local authorities.

There was currently a £68m funding gap that needed to be met by 2014/15. This was based on assumptions of government funding and council tax rises.

The Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods) commented that in order to make the predicated savings it would be necessary to have a fundamental review of council services and customer engagement. Simply 'salami-slicing' service budgets would not create enough savings to deliver a balanced budget.

A number of Members expressed concern that they were unable to discuss important budget related issues with a Cabinet Member.

46/10 FINAL REPORT OF THE LEISURE CENTRES AND LIBRARIES WORKING GROUP

The Panel considered the final report and recommendations of the Leisure Centres and Libraries Working Group.

The Chair, as Lead Member of the working group, presented the working group's final report: *'A Vision for the Future of Leisure Centres & Libraries'*. She explained that the working group had a short time frame to complete their work but during this time they had established that leisure centres and libraries provided benefits to all local residents. As part of the investigation Members visited all local leisure centres and a new facility in Wolverhampton which Walsall should aim to emulate in the future. A meeting with schools had shown that most were keen to improve community access to their swimming pools. Members had also visited many local libraries as well as Lichfield Library to view their popular self service machines. She commented it was clear libraries offered more than books and their role could be further increased to offer council service points in localities. It was important that the current library network was maintained, where possible, and that all residents should live no further than two miles from their nearest library. Despite the context of the current financial climate it was important that both leisure

centres and libraries were protected and modernised.

The Panel discussed elements of the report.

Leisure Centres

A Member who had participated in the working group expressed serious concerns regarding a recent newspaper article that quoted the Leader of the Council stating that budget cuts could mean the end of Council operated leisure centres and closure of local libraries. He explained that he felt the situation had been pre-judged and that the working group's efforts and recommendations had been undermined.

Another Member explained that despite all the positive advantages leisure centres clearly provided he was fearful that budget cuts would result in the closure of more local leisure centres.

In response to a question on how the working group's recommendations to refurbish the boroughs existing leisure centres would take place the Chair explained that the working group had felt this could be funded through greater partnership working, sponsorship and potential savings created by the establishment of a leisure trust.

The Panel agreed that local leisure centre facilities were in need of modernisation and replacement and noted it was disappointing that other local authorities had delivered new facilities but Walsall had not.

The competition from private pools to the council's facilities was discussed. It was noted that it was often cheaper to use private pools.

Regarding refurbishment it was suggested that Darlaston Swimming Centre should be refurbished first. A Member questioned why the building only had a life span of 25 years? The Head of Leisure and Community Health explained that modern construction techniques had concluded that it was more cost effective to provide new facilities once a centre had reached the end of its planned life than to continually try and modernise and update old buildings. Further information was requested regarding the ongoing problem with the roof.

The use of school facilities by the local community was noted as a good proposal that would replicate practices from the 1980s. It was important that any school opening to the public should have disabled access.

Libraries

The Panel noted that libraries were more than about providing books. They provided important community gateways for local residents. Access to computer equipment was an increasing role of the local library that needed improving.

It was important that access to local libraries was protected through investigating partnership opportunities, providing other councils services and new ways of working such as volunteers. The idea of providing micro-libraries in existing buildings that were open to the public should be investigated.

Following a question the Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts explained that the introduction of self service machines, if agreed, would need to be funded through the Councils capital programme. It was estimated this would cost approximately £230,000.

RESOLVED:

THAT:

- 1. the final report of the leisure centres and libraries working group be agreed and forwarded onto Cabinet for consideration;**
 - 2. the Panel review the outcome of the Executives response and review progress with the implementation of the working group's recommendations after six months.**
 - 3. the Panel be advised regarding who was responsible for grounds maintenance surrounding Darlaston Swimming Centre;**
- and;**
- 4. Members be advised on the latest situation with regards to resolving the ongoing problem with the roof at Darlaston Swimming Centre.**

47/10 WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered their work programme and the latest version of Cabinet's Forward Plan of key decisions.

RESOLVED:

That the following items be considered at the Panel meeting on 25 November 2010:

- a. Walsall Partnership Programmes and Resources, and;**
- b. Engagement and Utilisation of the Voluntary and Community Sector.**

48/10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the date of the next meeting was 25 November 2010.

The meeting terminated at 7.02 p.m.

Signed:

Date:

