

## NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2015 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House

**Members in Attendance:**

Councillor C. Creaney (Chairman)  
Councillor C. Towe (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor A. Ditta  
Councillor M. Arif  
Councillor S. Fitzpatrick  
Councillor E. Hazell  
Councillor J. Murray  
Councillor A. Nawaz  
Councillor K. Phillips  
Councillor E. Russell  
Councillor I. Shires  
Councillor G. Sohal

**Portfolio Holders in Attendance:**  
& Culture

Councillor K. Hussain – Community, Leisure

Transport

Councillor L. Jeavons – Environment and

**Other Members in Attendance:**

Councillor T. Jukes  
Councillor S. Coughlan  
Councillor K. Sears

**Officers in Attendance:**

Support Service

Jamie Morris - Executive Director  
(Neighbourhoods)  
Keith Stone – Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods)  
Sue Grainger – Head of Libraries, Heritage and  
Arts  
Alan Mitchell – Head of Integrated Young Persons  
  
Steve Pretty – Head of Engineering and  
Transportation  
John Roseblade – Group Manager (Highways and  
Environment)  
Jackie Groves – Catering Service Manager  
Chris Knowles – Services Finance Manager  
Craig Goodall – Committee Business and  
Governance Manager

32/15 **Apologies**

There were no apologies for absence.

### 33/15 **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

### **34/15 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

Councillor S. Fitzpatrick declared a pecuniary interest in item number 37/15.

Councillor C. Towe and Councillor I. Shires declared a non-pecuniary interest in 37/15.

### **35/15 Local Government Access to Information Act, 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items that required the exclusion of members of the public.

### **36/15 Minutes**

It was agreed to list Councillor M. Arif as in attendance.

The Committee Business and Governance Manager reported on an amendment to item 29/15 '*Financial Plan 2015/16 to 2018/19*' where 'nursing home' had been deleted and replaced with 'neighbourhood office in Buxton Road' in both the last paragraph and recommendation.

#### **Resolved:**

**That the minutes of the meeting which took place on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2015, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as true and accurate record.**

### **37/15 Petitions: Save Blakenall and Walsall Wood Libraries**

*Having earlier declared a pecuniary interest in the item Councillor S. Fitzpatrick remained in the room in order to make representations, answer questions and give evidence regarding the petition to save Blakenall Library as allowed under the Councils Code of Conduct. He did not participate in the voting of the resolution regarding Blakenall Library.*

The meeting considered two petitions that were handed in at Council with over 500 signatures. One petition opposed the closure of Blakenall Library in 2016/17 and the other opposed the closure of Walsall Wood Library in 2015/16.

The Executive Director explained that, as the petitions contained over 500 signatures, the appropriate senior officer was required to provide a response at a meeting of the relevant Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

The Chair asked Councillor Fitzpatrick to introduce the petition to save Blakenall Library. Councillor Fitzpatrick explained that it was important to keep Blakenall Library as it was located in a deprived area. It had been

created using New Deal funding. Research for the New Deal funding had shown that local people wanted opportunities for education and libraries provided this. The computers in Blakenall Library were well used by local young people who did not have IT facilities at home. It was no good saying that there was another nearby library as local people could not afford the travel expenses.

The Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts explained that the Council needed to make financial savings. Part of the plan to make these savings was to rationalise the library portfolio from 16 to 8 locations. The 8 libraries planned for closure received 19% of overall visits across the borough and undertook 22% of loans. The possibility of establishing community book exchanges was being explored in each location where a library closure was proposed. The closure of libraries in 2015/16 would not take place until 1 July 2015 to allow more time to establish community book exchanges. The mobile library timetable would be reconfigured to spend more time in the areas that had lost libraries.

The Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) sympathised with the situation but noted the need to set a budget for 2015/16. He explained that effort would be made to establish a community book exchange in the area in lieu of the library.

Following a question, the Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts explained that the Council's basic offer to community groups interested in taking over library facilities was stock, furniture and the onsite computer equipment. Blakenall Library had 30,000 visitors a year resulting in 19,000 loans and 8,000 computer sessions. The mobile library had 30,000 visits a year and issued 141,000 loans.

Members of the Panel commented on the community benefit of libraries explaining that there would be consequences from the proposed closures. In particular, access to PCs and the internet was increasingly essential as the government intends to make all applications for benefits to be completed online. Members reflected on the level of rent charged for the premises in which Blakenall Library was situated and how this could be a factor in the decision to close it.

Members expressed the view that the presumption that community groups and volunteers would step in to take over libraries, or run community book exchanges, was optimistic. It was more likely in affluent areas of the borough but Members felt it was less likely that volunteers would come forward in more deprived areas, such as Blakenall.

Members emphasized that the closure of libraries should be delayed until the proposals for community hubs became fully formed as it could be possible to locate both facilities around each other.

Councillor K. Sears presented the petition 'Save Walsall Wood Library'. He explained to the Panel that the library, whilst only open 3 days a week, was

responsible for a lot of activities; particularly with children in the school holidays. He understood that a community book exchange would be set up in Oak Park Leisure Centre but this was due to be closed for reconstruction for some time. He felt that the closure of the library should be delayed until the new Oak Park Leisure Centre was built.

The Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts explained that a community book exchange could be set up in Oak Park by July 2015. The exchange would be supervised by leisure centre staff, administered by the library service and stocked by the mobile library. The exchange would remain in Oak Park once it was redeveloped. Walsall Wood Library currently used volunteers. No discussion had taken place with them regarding volunteering in the book exchange.

If volunteers wished to take over the operation of a library then a basic offer had been established by the council. This would include the cost of the building and administration for the first year to give voluntary groups time to become self sustainable.

**Resolved:**

**That:**

- 1. Council reconsider the closure of Blakenall Library in 2016/17 as proposed in the Corporate Budget Plan;**
- 2. Council staff support the development of a library service at Oak Park Leisure Centre and that the activities that take place at the existing Walsall Wood Library be maintained at the new location.**

**38/15 Petition: Beechdale – against the closure of the lifelong learning centre on Stephenson Square**

The Panel considered a petition with over 500 signatures which was handed in at Council opposing the closure of the lifelong learning centre on Stephenson Square. As the petition contained over 500 signatures then the appropriate senior officer was required to provide a response to it at a Scrutiny and Performance Panel meeting.

Councillor T. Jukes explained that since the petition had been handed in the majority of funding which was due to be removed had been restored. For this she thanked, the Leader, Cabinet Members and supporting Members. She added that although the library had low usage figures its value to local residents was high due to the severity of local deprivation. In particular, access to computers and the internet through the library was an important local asset. She asked that Cabinet continue to work with the local community to see what could be done to maintain the library moving forward.

The Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts explained that work was taking place with Frank F Harrison Community Association to establish whether they could take over library facilities. This would include the existing computers.

At the invitation of the Chair, a member of the public commented that the library was an important asset to local young people. She noted that should Frank F. Harrison Community Association take on the running of the library they would have to fund its cost whereas the library facilities proposed for Oak Park Leisure Centre would be manned by Council staff.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be noted.**

**39/15 Petition to introduce a two hour parking limit at St Michael Street council car park, Caldmore**

The Panel received a presentation requesting the introduction of a 2 hour parking limit at St Michael Street car park, Caldmore. The petition was handed in at Council on 12 January 2015 and had over 500 signatures. This required a response for the appropriate senior officer at a Scrutiny and Performance Panel meeting.

The Chair of Caldmore Traders Association explained that traders had started the petition as they felt the car park was being abused by people parking there all day, for free, whilst they worked in the town centre. This prevented sufficient turnover of spaces for visitors to businesses. This problem could be alleviated by introducing a parking limit during the day time. The lack of spaces also contributed to congestion in the area as vehicles circulated looking for spaces. There was capacity in other nearby car parks but people did not know where they were due to inadequate signage.

The Head of Engineering and Transport reported that a survey of the car park had been undertaken. The survey showed that there was a reasonable turnaround of vehicles during the day that should provide enough spaces to local users. He reported that he could review the signage to other car parks in the area.

The Portfolio Holder (Environment and Transport) agreed that it would be possible to review the signage to car parks in the Caldmore area but felt unable to introduce a two hour parking limit based on the evidence available stating that there was sufficient turnover of spaces in the car park.

A discussion took place on the parking situation in the Caldmore area and further representations were heard from a local trader. It was noted that the survey had concentrated on establishing numbers only. The Panel felt it would be helpful if the wider community could be engaged for their views on the proposal in the petition and decided to refer the matter to the local Area Panel so this could happen.

**Resolved:**

**That the Walsall South Area Panel engage the local community regarding the petition to introduce a 2 hour parking limit at St Michael Street car park, Caldmore and report the outcome of this engagement to the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel.**

**40/15 Petition: reinstate public toilets in Willenhall Town Centre**

The Panel considered a petition to reinstate public toilets in Willenhall town centre that had been received at Council on 22 September 2014 and had over 500 signatures. This required a response for the appropriate senior officer at a Scrutiny and Performance Panel meeting.

Councillor S. Coughlan explained how the loss of public toilets in Willenhall had taken place and addressed the perception that local people had not been sufficiently consulted. He was aware of the problems the council faced in sustaining local services but still felt it was important that something was done about this issue. To this end he thanked the Portfolio Holder (Environment and Transport) for his work in engaging the private sector in the area.

The Assistant Director explained the history of the facilities noting that they suffered from recurring vandalism and anti-social behaviour. The toilets were closed in 2014/15. It was felt that nearby facilities provided by local shops would be utilised by local people as an alternative. It was proposed to close public toilets in Pelsall as part of the 2015/16 budget.

The Vice-Chair explained that he had visited Willenhall to take part in the consultation before the toilets were closed and the views of local people were that they were happy to use the toilets in Morrison's. A Member of the Panel added that it had been hoped to encourage pubs to allow their facilities to be used by the public but it had not been possible to get their support. Councillor S. Coughlan noted that the consultation took place in Morrison's car park and that many visitors to the supermarket did not visit Willenhall town centre.

The Panel reflected on the closure. The Chair reported now market traders setting up in the early hours of the morning had no toilets to use as Morrison's was not open when they started work. Members understood the need and demand for providing public toilets but noted the difficulties with maintaining them in the context of the need to make year-on-year budget reductions for the foreseeable future. It was clear that a new way forward was needed.

**Resolved:**

**That Cabinet consider alternative models to provide public toilets across the borough.**

#### **41/15 Highways maintenance strategy and asset management plan 2015-18**

The Panel considered the principal issues around the forthcoming Highways Maintenance Strategy (HMS) and Highway Maintenance Asset Management Plan (AMP).

The Group Manager (Highways and Environment) gave a presentation (annexed) highlighting details of the boroughs road networks, highways maintenance techniques, possible scoring criteria, potential projects and prioritisation details. The budget for highways maintenance was £5m.

Members were supportive of the highways maintenance scoring criteria. The suggested input from Area Panels was particularly welcoming. It was explained that the weightings had been set by officers.

Following a series of questions, Members were informed that engineers inspected all work undertaken by Tarmac and confirmed they were only paid for completed work. The Council was also able to order utility companies to redo poor road repairs or impose fines for poor quality workmanship.

A Member complained about the poor quality of pothole repairs on Bentley Lane. It was explained that the velocity patcher had been used on this area. The repairs had been intended to be a short term fix in order to prevent a worsening of the situation over winter.

Further information on completed road repairs was requested by Members.

#### **Resolved:**

**That information of completed road maintenance work, by ward over the last 6 years, be sent to Panel Members**

*The Chair, Councillor Creaney left the meeting. Councillor Towe, vice-chair took the Chair for the remaining business.*

*At this point, the meeting had been continuing for three hours. A majority of Members present agreed to suspend standing orders in order to continue the meeting.*

#### **42/15 Delivery of universal key stage 1 free school meals**

Members considered a report explaining how universal free school meals (FSM) for key stage 1 pupils had been implemented by the Councils Catering Service.

The Catering Services Manager reported the overall take up for FSM had been 80%. This was compared to national take up of 85% and a government target of 87%. However, take up varied across schools. The lowest take up was 60% whereas others were near to 100%. There were no particular patterns. A questionnaire to be circulated to parents was planned to gain a greater understanding of the discrepancies.



Following a question it was explained that schools were assisted with purchasing specialist foods, such as Halal meat, by request. Each school dealt with issues like this individually. For example, some schools didn't serve any meat at all.

It was noted that Academies and other schools not supported by the Councils Catering Service made their own arrangements for school meals. Members felt that it would be beneficial to engage these schools to understand their reasons and to promote the Councils Catering Service.

**Resolved:**

**That:**

- 1. Cabinet consider how schools can be supported to buy in specialist food products such as halal meat;**
- 2. the Chair write to schools who do not use the Councils Catering Service to understand their reasons why they choose to use alternative providers;**
- 3. a further report on the delivery of universal free school meals be considered by the Panel at the end of the academic year.**

#### **43/15 Quarter 3 Financial Monitoring Position for 2014/15**

The Panel were informed of the predicted revenue and capital position for 2014/15, based on the performance for quarter 3 (1 October – 31 December 2014) for services within the remit of the Panel.

The Executive Director reported that for services in the remit of the Panel a net revenue underspend of £539,000 was predicted. The capital forecast was an underspend of £493,000. Following a question, the Executive Director reassured Members that spending for the capital programme, as set out in Appendix 4, was on target for year - end.

A Member suggested that the name for 'Caldmore high street improvement' project in the capital programme should be amended to reflect its purpose to introduce a one-way system.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be noted.**

#### **44/15 Work Programme 2014/15 and Forward Plan**

**Resolved:**

**That:**

- 1. the following items be considered at the next meeting of the Panel:**
  - a. Final report of the Area Partnership Working Group;**
  - b. Street light lantern LED conversion;**
  - c. Unauthorised encampments;**
- 2. the forward plan be noted.**

**45/15 Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting was 9 April 2015.

*The meeting closed at 9.13pm*

Chairman: .....

Date: .....