

DARLASTON NORTH/BENTLEY/DARLASTON SOUTH AREA PANEL

Tuesday, 11 November, 2014 at 5.30 p.m.

at Darlaston Methodist Church, Slater Street, Darlaston

Present

Councillor Burley (Chair)
Councillor Chambers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Underhill

In Attendance

John Batchelor - Interim Area Manager
Kate Bowers - Neighbourhood Services
Stuart Wootton - Financial Planning Manager

78/14

Apology

An apology for non-attendance was submitted on behalf of Councillor James.

79/14

Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September, 2014, a copy having previously been circulated to each Member of the Panel be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

80/14

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

81/14

Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

82/14

Funding Report

The joint report of the Interim Area Manager and Area Partnership Manager was submitted:-

(see annexed)

The Interim Area Manager (John Batchelor) enlarged upon the report and explained the project contained therein.

Bentley Community Centre

The Interim Area Manager reported that a request for new signage at Bentley Community Centre had been requested. Funding in the sum of £2,150 was required and matchfunding of £3,437 was to be provided by Old Hall People's Partnership.

In response to questions from Members, John Batchelor reported that the former Youth Centre was to be used for a new and extended range of activities and services. The signage would encourage new users and groups to join and take advantage of the activities and services provided.

Members asked whether youth activities would still be provided at the Centre. John Batchelor agreed to investigate whether youth activities would still be provided at the Centre and report back to Members.

Members felt that the funding request should be approved in principle provided that the Centre was named the Bentley Youth and Community Centre to confirm its dual role.

Resolved

- (1) That the funding report be noted;
- (2) That funding in the sum of £2,150 be approved for the scheme set out in Appendix 1 to the report now submitted provided that the building is called the Bentley Youth and Community Centre or something similar to confirm its dual role.

83/14

Area Manager's Report

The joint report of the Interim Area Manager and support officer was submitted:-

(see annexed)

The Interim Area Manager (John Batchelor) enlarged upon the report for the benefit of the Panel and drew attention to the following matters:-

- Problems of illegal motorbike and quad bike use in ABC Park, Bentley where it is planned to introduce CCTV camera surveillance to gather evidence and provide re-assurance to residents;

- The Community Trigger Procedure to be introduced into Partners' Tasking meetings to identify areas where residents have made three or more complaints of anti-social behaviour in six months, or where any incident of hate crime has been reported;
- Grace Academy pupils have joined the Apax-Mosaic Enterprise Challenge, a competition for 11-16 year olds which supports schools with mentors to develop business ideas;
- The £26 million road improvement scheme centering on the junction of Darlaston Road and Bescot Road has commenced. The scheme is supported with £14m of central government funding and is a key infra-structure component of the Black Country Enterprise Zone which aims to create 3,000 jobs. The project is scheduled to be completed by February, 2016;
- Darlaston Town Centre Partnership sought expressions of interest for an operator of Darlaston Market in late September. Three private operators had expressed an interest and a tender exercise was planned;
- The Waverley Road City Ground (formerly Darlaston Town Football Club) site has been listed as an Asset of Community Value.

After discussion it was,

Resolved

That the Interim Area Manager's report be noted.

84/14

Dates and venues for future meetings

The dates and venues for future meetings of the Panel were submitted.

Resolved

That the dates and future venues of meetings be noted.

85/14

Budget consultation exercise

A booklet entitled "Draft Budget Proposals: Have your Say" was circulated to Members present at the meeting:-

(see annexed)

Councillor Burley welcomed those members of the public present to the meeting and reminded everyone that the Council would have to save £86 million over the next four years. She referred to the booklet which explained the proposed savings to be made over the next two years. She added that these proposals would lead to a reduction in services and the people of Walsall would be affected by them.

Councillor Burley re-iterated the fact that these were, at present, only draft proposals which would be subject to consultation until 10th December, 2014. If representations were received regarding a particular scheme, then it was possible that changes could be made.

Councillor Chambers reported that the Council was required by law to set a balanced budget and this would be determined at Council on 26th February, 2015. If the Council did not set a budget by 31st March, 2015, then Central Government could intervene and take control. If this happened, then the Council would be unable to enter into contracts and the Local Authority would be unable to function. This could not be allowed to happen. He continued that as a result of the reduction in Government grants to Local Government, services would have to change. Where buildings were closed and disposed of, the way services were provided would change and would be carried out in other ways.

Councillor Chambers referred to the first consultation exercise carried out on the proposed budget for 2015/16 which had led to 4,600 responses suggesting ways savings could be made.

Councillor Chambers indicated that the second phase of consultation on the draft budget proposals had commenced on 30th October and would end on 10th December, 2014. It was almost certain that there would be changes over time but he did not want to pre-empt the views of the community on the proposals. He continued that savings of £29 million would be required in 2015/16 and it was proposed to save £16 million with a review of senior management, back office and support functions and a reduction in the use of agency staff.

Councillor Chambers also referred to the fact that the use of buildings for Council functions was being reviewed. Staff were being moved into the Civic Centre where open plan layouts and hot desking had been introduced. Where possible, buildings surplus to requirements would be sold off to provide a capital receipt. Government funding opportunities would also be pursued.

Councillor Chambers referred to the draft budget proposals booklet and to the 54 proposals contained therein. He also referred to the questionnaire in the centre of the booklet and urged members of the public to complete this and return it to the Council House by 10th December, 2014 using the freepost address quoted. He added that all responses would be reported to the Cabinet for consideration.

Stuart Wootton (Financial Planning Manager) reported that the Council got the bulk of its funding from Central Government. In the current financial year, the Local Authority was spending £633 million. Government grants were being reduced year on year so the Council had to make savings. Of the £29 million of savings to be made in 2015/16, £21 million arose as a result of the cuts in Government grants. He added that annual costs to the Council were increasing which was adding to the

pressure on finances. This was not unique to Walsall, however, as every other Council was in a similar position.

Councillor Burley asked how much money came from Council Tax. Mr. Wootton replied that the Council collected £86 million in Council Tax. As the Council had spent £633 million in 2013/14, Council Tax alone did not provide a significant sum.

Councillor Burley referred to a Town Centre meeting held on 10th November, 2014 when the reduction in grass cutting, brown bin collections and the introduction of pay and display car parks in District Centres had been discussed. These measures had all caused concern to delegates, as had the proposal to reduce street cleansing activities. It was felt that the reduction in grass cutting could lead to the area looking run down which might hinder attempts to regenerate Darlaston.

A local resident commented that a charge of £1 for four hours parking in District Centre car parks was not unreasonable. Councillor Underhill commented that residents were concerned that this would set a precedent and once parking charges had been accepted, they would be rapidly increased and drive shoppers away from the District Centres.

Mr. Myatt (local resident) referred to the fact that there were only 2 Council owned car parks in Darlaston Town Centre. If charges were introduced on them, then shoppers would park on the Asda car park which would benefit Asda rather than the Council.

Councillor Underhill expressed concern over the reduced emptying of grey bins which contained food waste and non-recyclables and drew attention to possible health hazards.

Mr. Myatt suggested that if grey bin collections switched to a fortnightly service, then the grey and brown bins should be swapped so that the larger brown bins could be used for food waste and non-recyclables and the grey bins could be used for garden waste.

Councillor Chambers reminded the meeting that although the savings proposed seemed draconian in many cases, there would still be considerable sums of money spent on services.

John Batchelor (Interim Area Manager) referred to the increase in grounds maintenance fees for sports clubs and drew attention to the knock on effect this could have for the health of the Borough's population if sports clubs ceased to operate. Stuart Wootton reported that it had been proposed to increase grounds maintenance fees in 2014/15 but as a result of petitions and complaints from sports clubs, it was not carried out.

A local resident asked what would happen about youth provision in Darlaston and whether there was still a designated youth worker for the area. Councillor Chambers replied that despite the proposed reductions, almost £800,000 would still be spent on youth provision in the Borough in 2015/16. John Batchelor reported that youth provision had been put out to tender approximately three years ago and NACRO had won the contract to provide youth workers across the Borough.

Councillor Burley stated that she was concerned about reductions in the allocation for youth provision because of the effect this would have on anti-social behaviour in Darlaston. The local resident referred to the fact that the mobile provision was working well in signposting youths to Council activities but added that young people were not interested in youth clubs and organised youth activities anymore. They wanted something different.

Joe Myatt (local resident) referred to the need for safeguarding checks to be carried out by all persons involved with children or vulnerable adults and asked whether the Council could liaise with West Midlands Police to reduce the costs of CRB checks.

Councillor Burley referred to concerns raised by residents over the proposals to close five libraries in 2015/16 and a further three in 2016/17. She asked what would happen to those buildings after the closures. Mr. Wootton replied that if they were owned by the Council, then the Council's property review would consider the future use, including the potential to be sold to generate capital receipts. If they were owned by private individuals, then the space occupied by the libraries would presumably be leased for other uses.

Mr. Wells (local resident) asked if it was known which Children's Centres would be closing. Councillor Chambers replied that this had not been decided yet. Reference was made to Catherines Cross and it was reported that although Catherines Cross had been closed because of a bad Ofsted report, there were proposals to re-open it with help from Rowley View, which had received a good Ofsted inspection.

Mr. Myatt (local resident) referred to the review of respite care at Fallings Heath (Reference 152). He was concerned about what would happen to those people who used it if it was closed. He felt that such actions meant that the most vulnerable in society were being hit hardest.

Mr. Myatt asked if empty Council buildings could be leased to Community Organisations or stakeholders on short term leases so that the fabric of the building was maintained until they were sold off, rather than leaving them empty to deteriorate or become eyesores because of vandalism. Councillor Chambers agreed that officers were looking at providing such venues for voluntary organisations to use.

Councillor Burley referred to the fact that libraries were used more for IT rather than the loaning of books today. She felt that children in deprived areas needed libraries to gain access to computers so that they could do their homework, school assignments, etc. She asked if these buildings could become internet cafés to fulfil this demand.

Councillor Underhill referred to the review of the Council Tax discounts for vacant properties (Reference 164) and was pleased that privately owned empty properties would be liable for Council Tax when they had been unoccupied for seven days, rather than the current three months.

A local resident referred to the poor condition of the former Darlaston Multi-Purpose Centre and asked why it had not been sold. It was reported that the building had been sold but the sale had fallen through.

Mr. Myatt (local resident) referred to the good work done by Community Associations. He asked if their role could be increased. Councillor Chambers reported that no two Community Associations seemed to have been dealt with in the same way. Standardisation was needed and officers would be looking into this.

Kate Bowers (Neighbourhood Services) reported that lots of voluntary groups could do more if they were given appropriate support. Her service was keen to encourage this.

Councillor Burley then thanked those present for their ideas and comments and asked them to remind their friends and colleagues to make comments on the draft budget proposals as it was only through feedback that acceptable changes could be made.

Resolved

That the verbal comments on the draft budget proposals be noted.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.15 p.m.

Chairman

Date