

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL
DATE: 27 March 2008

RE: SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

Purpose

To agree the themes for the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel's section of Walsall Councils Scrutiny Annual Report for 2007/08.

Background

Each year each Scrutiny and Performance Panel at Walsall Council produces a summary on the success or otherwise of its work which is presented to Council.

Attached at Appendix 1 to this briefing note is a draft of the content for the annual report from the panel based on the minutes of the work that has been completed during 2007/08.

The Panel are invited to review the areas and content in appendix 1 that they would like in their section of the annual report and approve it for publication.

Once the content has been agreed by all Scrutiny and Performance Panels the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2007/08 will be presented to Council on 21 April 2008.

Recommendations

That the content from the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel to the Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/08 be agreed.

Author

Craig Goodall
Acting Principal Scrutiny Officer
☎ 01922 653317
goodallc@walsall.gov.uk

Walsall Illuminations 2007

During the course of the last year the issue the Panel considered most often was Walsall Illuminations.

Members were advised that the following four Illuminations steering groups had been formed and had met:

- Marketing
- Links with the town centre
- Development
- Investment

Members were informed of the activities that had been taking place in the steering group. This included a lantern procession from the art gallery to the illuminations, and coordination with the 'Christmas lights switch on'.

A corridor of lights was planned but there were some technical and resource issues associated with this as the lampposts were not owned by the council, Amey, who operate the lampposts, charge heavily for any additional items that are hung or wired into the lampposts. An agreement to put lights up on Lichfield Street and the Civic Centre, had been reached but this was very expensive to do due to the infrastructure that had to be put in place so it would be on an expanding programme with just a small number of lights up this year but growing year on year.

The arboretum users group had been involved at all stages to ensure the environmental impact of the Illuminations had been assessed. Members were also informed that bids had been submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund for restoration of the Arboretum which will make the environment impact more subtle.

Members were informed that the dates for the Illuminations had changed and would now be open 19 October – 2 December; the move in schedule would also allow the illuminations to open earlier as it would be darker.

It was explained by officers that the service was also considering introducing different zones with themes such as history and art. Also more interactive services, improved amenities, and a better visitor centre.

Members were advised that a business manager had been employed to increase the income potential of the illuminations.

The marketing of the event would focus on a drip feed approach and would be targeted through Radio as this was seen as being more effective. A text campaign was also in consideration.

A brochure was produced along with a comic to help promote the event with the under 8's which was to be distributed to schools. However, schools had been reluctant to organise school trips, as previously suggested, due to issue around security and health and safety but that they were doing a lot of work to involve children directly.

Sponsorship was secured with some key strategic partners including IKEA, Co-op, Walsall FC and the University of Wolverhampton. It was stated to members that whilst they had managed to secure some sponsorship, there had been difficulties with this.

Members were informed that Travel West Midlands had agreed to provide free buses to the arboretum. However, take up of the service had been severely limited. On reflection Members felt that it should be trialled again next year when awareness had been improved.

The Panel were informed that initial Illuminations surveys were good. 25% of visitors were new, 8.2 out of 10 visitors gave a positive perception of price and venue and 8.5 out of 10 were positive about the food. 88.5% said the event met expectations and was correctly promoted. 70% would visit again the following year. 95% said they came to the town solely to visit the illuminations. The website proved popular with over 1million hits.

However, visitor numbers at 120,000 was less than the expected 180,000. Compared to 160,000 the previous year, this gave an overall shortfall of £217,000.

The Panel was informed that the plan for 2008 was to base all budgets on visitor numbers of 150,000 and to look at all ways of increasing the levels of sponsorship. It was suggested by Members that the expectation levels needed to be lowered and the business plan should be based on target visitor numbers of 100,000 pointing to the fact that visitor figures suggested less and less people from Walsall were going and as Councillors they had a duty to consider tax payers money and how it was spent.

The Panel suggested holding the Illuminations earlier so that it ran during school half-term holidays and Halloween and with potentially better weather. These recommendations were contained within the report to Cabinet on 6 February.

The panel agreed to support an on-going, but scaled down, development of the Illuminations.

Car Park Strategy and Verge Parking

The Panel considered their involvement in decriminalised parking during the previous municipal year. Members were informed that the responsibility for parking enforcement will be coming to the Council in April 2008. A key requirement of this was that a formal car park strategy was in place. Members were informed that the Council had recognised that a more comprehensive strategy was required to allow it to consider the way parking was managed in the future, and in addition to this disabled parking needed to be improved. Members were asked to provide their recommendations on the strategy.

The Panel were informed that de-criminalised parking becomes the responsibility of the council from June 2008. This would mean the council would have responsibility for road safety and congestion and could direct resources to help control this. At present around 60% of councils have responsibility for de-criminalised parking. The Panel were advised that it has significant financial implications, particularly in the early years, and was not viewed as an urgent priority as the Council had a good partnership arrangement with the Police. However, as Police priorities have changed the council decided to push ahead with the decision to take responsibility from June 2008.

The Panel were advised that there is currently a review of existing traffic regulation orders for ongoing relevance, whilst noting locations where potential new orders may assist with the management of traffic congestion in the future. Prior to any new orders being implemented, a full and thorough consultation exercise would be undertaken with local residents. Implementation of new traffic regulation orders has to be done within a legal framework that includes an invitation to object to the proposal.

The council here were looking to offer subsidised drop kerb parking to encourage residents to park on their own property and not on verges. Wolverhampton and Dudley currently have free drop kerb scheme available for disabled residents but this is part of a strategic choice made by their Council.

Community Association Leases

Recommendations due to go to Cabinet had initially been delayed. Developments nationally with the Quirk Review meant that there was government incentive (via lottery funds) to transfer community association buildings into a third party trust. There was, however, still an issue of maintenance and specifically how the council could bring the current buildings up to an acceptable standard prior to transfer.

It was recommended to Cabinet that the overview of the bid process for community associations is overseen by the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

The Panel look forward to considering the issue in the future following a further review by Cabinet.

Highway Maintenance

The Panel was informed that there were still a number of options to be considered including the possibility of developing the Norfolk Place site.

A briefing note was tabled on 'Highways Repairs and Maintenance Partnership'. Members were advised that a project board had been established and Knowles Legal Services had been appointed to provide specialist procurement advice. Members were also advised that arrangements had been put in place to keep staff, and unions informed about progress.

The panel discussed how updates would be received, and decided that regular updates would be provided to the panel and a special meeting could be arranged if necessary to update the panel and seek their views.

Members considered the items for inclusion on the work programme for the 2006/07 municipal year.

Waste Management Working Group

At this meeting on 2 August 2007 the Panel established a Waste Management Working Group to consider the range of changes that the council would be required to make if it was to meet the challenging recycling targets being introduced by the Government.

The working group considered the results of the waste management options consultation and made a range of recommendations that were submitted to Cabinet,

The working group has recently considered the Waste Management Improvement Plan and is set to review a wide range of the council waste management policies during the coming months.

Community Call for Action (CCfA) Working Group

The introduction of a Community Call for Action followed the introduction of Police and Justice Act 2006 and the Local Government Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and led to NSPP to establish a CCfA Working Group.

Members and officers discussed the background to Community call for Action (CCfA) from both The Home Office and The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Members agreed that Walsall Council should consider the development of a set of guidelines and procedures even though The Home Office version of CCfA had been paused following the Flanagan review and that guidelines for the DCLG version were still being developed. It was acknowledged that changes to the original proposal from the Home Office had already been proposed including the removal of the right of appeal which now brought the two versions much closer in terms of process.

The working group have recently participated in a consultation from DCLG on CCfA. The results are expected during the summer and will be considered by the working group in due course.

Environmental Enforcement

The Panel heard how substantial progress had been made in tackling environmental crime and how the council was working effectively with other agencies to combat the issue.

Environmental Enforcement sought scrutiny's input prior to the Environmental Enforcement Improvement Plan going to Cabinet and the Safer Stronger Communities Board. The cabinet approved an action plan to increase environmental enforcement activity and also to try to increase public awareness of the scheme.

The report to Members revealed that a number of changes had been made within the relevant departments to increase enforcement action against dog fouling, fly tipping, graffiti and littering.

The Panel also heard how the council had successfully bid for local area agreement funding which enabled a 'litter hit squad' and 'graffiti removal team' to be established within Street Pride.

The report also revealed to the Panel that revenue raised through issuing Fixed Penalty Notices for littering and environmental crimes would be spent on educational campaigns and to assist in environmental enforcement.

It was noted that the Panel acknowledged the investments being made, particularly around parks, but were concerned that public perception was that it was not enough.

Bereavement Services – Review of Fees and Charges

At the request of the Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel, Neighbourhoods SPP monitored the fees and charges of the Bereavement Services.

An overview was given of the costs of the service and the proposed increases and provided a comparison of Walsall and neighbouring council's.

In addition to items already detailed the Panel considered the Draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan, the outcome of the Street Trading Review consultation, Community Safety and the Performance of the Neighbourhoods Directorate.