

NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday 25 November 2008 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present

Councillor C Towe (Chair)
Councillor C Creaney (Vice-Chair)
Councillor L. Beeley
Councillor R. Martin
Councillor D. Pitt
Councillor I. Robertson
Councillor V. Woodruff

Officers present

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| Jamie Morris | Executive Director – Neighbourhood Services |
| Keith Stone | Assistant Director - Built Environment |
| Tim Challans | Assistant Director – Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning |
| Vicky Buckley | Head of Corporate Finance |
| Chris Holliday | Head of Culture and Leisure |
| Mark Rickard | Group Leader – Transportation Forward Planning |
| Jo Sheeran | Senior Rights of Way Officer |
| Kathryn Parr | School Travel Advisor |
| Sabina Afzal | School Sustainable Travel Advisor |
| Craig Goodall | Acting Principal Scrutiny Officer |

40/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor P. Bott.

41/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions were made for the duration of the meeting.

42/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

Councillor Martin declared a personal interest in item 11 'Neighbourhoods Directorate Budget Summaries' as a member of the College of Continuing Education Governing Body.

43/08 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 29 JULY 2008

(annexed)

Craig Goodall outlined some minor editorial changes that had been made since the publication of the draft minutes in the agenda papers which included the listing Councillor Ian Robertson as a 'Panel Members Present'.

In response to a question Keith Stone explained that the introduction of decriminalised parking was still subject to the receipt of the statutory approval from the Department of Transport. Steps were being taken to resolve the issue as a matter of urgency.

The Chair noted that the recommendations made by the Panel regarding Walsall Adult and Community College had been accepted by Council and by the College.

Resolved

That the minutes, as amended, of the meeting held on 4 September 2008, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

44/08 DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Members noted the available development opportunities.

45/08 FORWARD PLAN

88/08 Highways Repair and Maintenance Service

Keith Stone explained the decision by Cabinet to award the contract to Tarmac for four years subject to the satisfactory conclusion of a number of outstanding issues. Negotiations over the detail in the contract were continuing. A review of outstanding work has indicated that the likely start date of the new partnership will be 1 March 2009.

46/08 CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair explained that on 11 October 2008 Jamie Morris had contacted him about a Cabinet report regarding Bereavement Services.

The item was on forward plan but the report was not ready to be sent out with the cabinet papers in order to allow community responses to be included. Therefore the report needed to be included as urgent business which requires the permission of the relevant scrutiny panel chair to go ahead. The Chair explained that he gave permission for this to take place on 10 November 2008.

47/08 WALSALL ILLUMINATIONS

The Panel were informed of the outcome of the 2008 Illuminations.

Tim Challans reported that this years attendance figures had been below expectations. 111,000 people had attended the event against a planned target of 150,000. This had led to the event recording a loss of £167,000. The cost of the event had been reduced from £820,000 in 2007 to £620,000 in 2008.

Attendances had been poor during half-term week due to adverse weather conditions. However targeting of customers had been successful and coach bookings from uniformed groups such as scouts and guides had been well used.

Tim Challans explained that Members needed to consider the future of the Illuminations. It was currently hoped that an external funding bid would provide for a refurbishment of the Arboretum in 2010 and 2011 which would prevent the Illuminations from taking

place for two years. It was suggested that Members may want to consider not holding an event in 2009 as well and wait for the refurbishment of the Arboretum to conclude before relaunching the Illuminations.

Members were disappointed that the event had lost money three years in row and seriously questioned the future of the event. Members recognised that the Illuminations brought a national profile to Walsall and was a historic event so recognised the value in retaining the event. However it was critical that the event was financially sustainable and at the very least not record a loss. The Chair referred to the minutes of the Panel meeting on 28 January 2008 where it had been suggested that the business plan for the event should be based on lower expectations for visitor figures.

In response to a question Tim Challans explained that securing external and partnership funding was managed internally by the Council. Members commented that they were disappointed with the small return and asked if large national sponsors had been approached? Tim Challans explained that advice from consultants had been that the event was not attractive enough at the current time to attract that calibre of sponsor so no national sponsors had been approached. The Panel expressed disappointment in this matter. Members requested a detailed breakdown of Illuminations expenditure including the price of admission for each year and hidden costs such as officer time spent planning the event.

Members suggested that market research should be undertaken with people who did not attend the Illuminations to build an understanding of the issues that persuaded people not to attend the event in order to assist planning and increase visitor figures in future years. In response to a question Chris Holliday explained that children were questioned as part of exit surveys to gain feedback on what parts of the attraction they enjoyed or otherwise.

It was commented that maybe the event was becoming too expensive for families once the cost of the entrance fee, food, fair rides and novelties was taken into account. Tim Challans commented that as the Council did not operate the fair rides and food stalls so did not control prices. Approximately £25,000 of income was received from the fair ground rides. It was suggested that a one off entrance fee that included unlimited access to fair ground rides maybe more attractive to families.

The majority of Members wanted the Illuminations to take place in 2009 but at no extra cost to the taxpayer. It was important that the event paid for itself at the very minimum. Although it was questioned whether or not different types of events such as foreign and farmers markets or street theatre may be a better way of attracting people to Walsall.

Resolved

That:

- a) Cabinet continue with the Illuminations in 2009, on the understanding that the viability of the event is based on realistic financial and visitor expectations;**
- b) Members be provided with a full financial breakdown of all costs associated with the Illuminations 2008, including the costs of:**
 - i) staff wages**
 - ii) preparation work**

- iii) **light refurbishment**
- iv) **replacement lights**
- v) **fitting lights**
- vi) **income received from concessions**

and;

- c) Members be informed of gate prices for the Illuminations from 2003 through to 2008.**

48/08 SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL TO SCHOOL POLICY

The Panel considered the Sustainable Travel to School Policy (STSP) before it was sent to Cabinet for formal approval. Copies of the latest draft of the STSP were tabled at the meeting.

(annexed)

Mark Rickard explained that the STSP was a compilation of all the initiatives and policies regarding children travelling to school. He reported that the number of children walking to school had declined since 1994. This was linked to a rise in childhood obesity. Current research suggested that if this trend continued then up to 50% of all children could be clinically obese by 2020.

The STSP also had an impact on the one of the targets that the Council was measured on. National Indicator 198 tasked the Council to reduce car use by 1% each year.

Each school was being encouraged to complete travel plans with the incentive of capital funding on completion of a travel plan.

The following are the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Walsall Council would receive £22,863 per annum to meet the duty to promote sustainable travel.
- £625,000 of additional capital funding had been received by schools in borough for completion of physical works as a result of travel plans that have been prepared.
- It was not possible to force schools to create a travel plan. The majority of schools in the borough had completed one but there were some reluctant schools remaining. Additional independent schools were also required to complete a travel plan but with no capital funding incentive.
- Civil parking enforcement could have an impact on school travel through the discouragement of parents from parking in the vicinity of school premises.
- As well as walking initiatives such as car sharing were also encouraged.
- Travel plans were commended by the Panel. One Member gave an example of the impact that a travel plan had had on reducing the number of cars at a local primary school.
- It was suggested that those schools who were reluctant to produce a travel plan could have elected Members on the Board of Governors. If so, Members should encourage those schools to complete a travel plan. Members requested briefing material so they could brief their political groups on this important matter.

Resolved

That briefing material be provided to all Members of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel so that Members can promote the Sustainable Travel to School Strategy and Travel Plans in their political groups.

49/08 GATING ORDERS POLICY

The Panel considered the draft Gating Orders Policy (GoP) and the proposed next steps in its development.

Mark Rickard explained that this policy was to be a part of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) and was to replace the current extinguishment order policy which had not delivered the level of closed footpaths as anticipated.

Due to the problems with the previous policy it had been decided to trial the GoP on two public rights of way before any decision was taken to formally implement it. In order to secure a footpath closure under the GoP a record of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) was required. Joanne Sheeran clarified that incidents should be reported to the Police and stated that residents should be encouraged to keep an incident log to collect evidence.

In response to a question Mark Rickard explained that funding for the implementation of the GoP was still to be secured through the budget drafting process. It was anticipated that it would cost between £12-30,000 to implement a gating order.

It was clarified to Members that there was no direct access to crime prevention funding to pay for gating orders nor was the scheme eligible for Working Neighbourhoods Fund.

Once a gating order was in place there would be an appointed person who was responsible for opening and closing the gate each day. Local residents would have a key to access the gate if required to access property.

In terms of consulting footpath users the Panel felt that only those in the immediate vicinity of the footpath should be consulted over closures. It was appreciated that a closure could affect others but it was important that those people who may be suffering due to ongoing crime and ASB had the greatest say. Mark Rickard emphasised the need to bear in mind how footpath closures could affect users.

Joanne Sheeran explained to the Panel that under the GoP only the Police, Fire Service and Ambulance Service could object to footpath closures.

Resolved

That a future report on the outcome of the trial Gating Orders and the final Gating Orders Policy should be received by the Panel before it is submitted to Cabinet and Council for adoption.

50/08 NEIGHBOURHOODS DIRECTORATE BUDGET SUMMARIES

Members were provided with an overview of each service operated by the Neighbourhoods Directorate.

Vicky Buckley gave a presentation on each service in the directorate including financial data for the last three years and other key information including some benchmark and key performance indicators.

(annexed)

The following are the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Libraries and Heritage – the Lock Museum was no longer included as part of the service so would therefore be showing as a saving on the overall financial performance.
- Advertising had been secured in some locations on street lighting within the context of the private finance initiative contract but it was becoming more difficult to fill the space in current market conditions.
- Verge parking – the £50,000 bid was a nominal sum that recognised the problem in the borough but would realistically only make a minimal impact on addressing the issue.
- There was an annual requirement for all heavy goods vehicle drivers employed by the Council to complete training (CPC 125)
- Many children in the borough eligible for free school meals were not claiming the meals they were entitled to.
- Members expressed concern about tree management in the borough and the problems overgrown trees and hedges caused by narrowing pavements and assisting anti-social behaviour.

Resolved

That Keith Stone provide financial figures regarding income received through the private finance lighting contract.

51/08 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR WORKING GROUP UPDATE

The Panel were updated on progress to date with the Anti-Social Behaviour Working Group.

The Chair explained that the good practice visit to Manchester was now likely to take place in January 2009. A meeting investigating anti-social behaviour by young people was set to take place at the Collingwood Centre.

The Panel noted the revised action plan for the working group that was tabled.

(annexed)

Resolved

Craig Goodall to email Members of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel regarding the working groups meeting at the Collingwood Centre.

52/08 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Before the Chair closed the meeting the Vice-Chair expressed his thanks to the Councils road marking team who had completed the remarking of the boroughs roads with an under strength team.

The Panel also requested a visit to the new recycling centre in Aldridge.

Resolved

That a visit for the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel to the Councils recycling centre in Aldridge be arranged.

The meeting terminated at 7.58 p.m.

Chair:

Date: