

NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday 22 January 2009 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present

Councillor C Towe (Chair)
Councillor C Creaney (Vice-Chair)
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor D. Pitt
Councillor I. Robertson
Councillor V. Woodruff

Portfolio Holders present

Councillor A. Andrew – Deputy Leader
Councillor L. Harrison – Leisure & Culture
Councillor A. Griffiths – Finance & Personnel
Councillor R. Walker - Environment

Officers present

Jamie Morris	Executive Director – Neighbourhood Services
Stuart Wootton	Finance Manager – Neighbourhoods & Regeneration
Craig Goodall	Acting Principal Scrutiny Officer

58/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors L. Beeley, R. Martin and A. Harris.

59/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor B. Tweddle substituted for Councillor L. Beeley for the duration of the meeting.

60/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

61/08 MINUTES

The following amendments for the minutes of the meeting on 4 December 2008 were agreed:

- Councillor P. Bott be listed as present.
- Paragraph 4 of the Green Spaces section of the minutes be amended to read ‘two parks in Darlaston South had improved’ rather than ‘the boroughs parks had improved’.
- Paragraph 1 of the Walsall Partnership section of the minutes be amended to read ‘the costs of operating the Neighbourhood Partnerships and Programmes Service was £1.9m a year. The cost of Local Neighbourhood Partnerships’ to the Council was about £100,000 a year’ rather than ‘the cost of Local Neighbourhood Partnerships was £1.9m a year’.

In response to a number of resolutions from the 4 December 2008 Jamie Morris clarified that funding for community safety projects was derived from Council, NHS funding and the Area Based Grant. He noted that services such as the Police had no financial resources to provide additional revenue funding to Safer Walsall Partnership.

With regard to sponsorship of the First Stop Bus Jamie Morris reported that the First Stop Express bus had been delivered and sponsorship of the bus's activities would be sought.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meetings, as amended, that took place on 25 November and 4 December 2008, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

62/08 FORWARD PLAN

02/09 Equality and diversity policies

Jamie Morris announced that the Council had successfully been awarded level 3 of the national standard for equalities and diversity following an equalities peer review. The Chairman congratulated everyone involved in the inspection.

105/08 Contract for treatment, recovery and final disposal of municipal waste

In response to a question from a Member of the Panel Councillor Walker explained that the Council was working with the Links to Work service to ensure that the service was able to continue when the Council extended its recycling collection scheme, which the Links to Work service currently used as a source of work and income.

A Member of the Panel noted that Members of the Health, Social Care and Inclusion Scrutiny and Performance Panel had been invited to visit Links to Work and suggested that this may be of interest to other Panel Members.

Resolved:

That a request be made for Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel to be able to visit the Links to Work Service.

63/08 NEIGHBOURHOODS DIRECTORATE 3RD QUARTER BUDGET MONITORING

The Panel received an update on the 3rd quarter budget outturn figures for the Neighbourhoods Directorate during 2008/09.

Jamie Morris reported that the predicted £1m overspend at the end of quarter 2 had now been reduced to £200,000.

In common with other local authorities car parking income was vastly reduced which had led to an investment bid for next year's budget.

Further information was requested on the £95,000 paid for back dated utility bills in sports centres.

Resolved:

That further information be provided regarding the £95,000 back dated utility bills for the borough's sports centres.

64/08 ACTION REQUESTS FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

a) Update on information requests from previous meetings

Members were updated on the range of information requests made at their last meeting where the information was available. The following are the principle points from the ensuing discussion:

- All volunteers who could potentially be employed by the Libraries and Heritage Service would be required to undergo Criminal Records Bureau checks.
- The usage figures for Walsall Wood Library were from before it was refurbished.
- A two-for-the-price of one admission offer for the Walsall Illuminations had been published in Walsall Pride. This reduced the price per visit but had resulted in an increased attendance from local people at the 2008 event.
- Work was underway to increase income generating use at Darlaston Town Hall.
- The Council's use of the Bryntisilio facility would be considered by the Panel during the next municipal year.
- Members wanted different and easier ways to pay car parking charges introduced, for example by using bank notes, debit cards and mobile phones.
- All crematoriums in the country were required to have mercury abatement facilities by 2011. It was unlikely that a private sector provider would want to pay for this investment and take on the operation of the crematorium.
- Public protection prosecutions had been made for fly tipping, against loan sharks, and food premises. These prosecutions were publicised.
- Walsall's spending on street cleansing was very low. Work was to continue benchmarking this service to identify good and bad practice.
- It was important that town centre food retailers were made responsible for the waste their customers dropped as litter.

b) Update on Community Action Tasking

The Panel received an overview of the Community Action Tasking (CAT) approach that had recently been approved by Cabinet.

Following expressions of concern about local Member involvement with CAT's, Councillor Andrew explained that Cabinet shared the same concerns so had made additional decisions to ensure that Councillors were fully involved in determining the priorities for CAT's, including the receipt they should receive updates on CAT activity in their wards as soon as practicable after CAT meetings.

Following comments from Members Jamie Morris explained that LNP's were the body that would set CAT agendas.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. Alternative ways for customers to pay for car parking charges, including accepting bank notes, debit cards and other electronic methods, be investigated;**
- 2. As part of any planned replacement of car park ticket machines consideration should be given to introducing ticket machines that print car registration numbers on tickets to the transfer of tickets between vehicles;**
- 3. the Panel consider the Council's use of Bryntysilio and potential alternative facilities as part of their work programme for 2009/10;**

and;

- 4. the Panel monitor and evaluate the Community Action Tasking process at a future meeting.**

65/08 DRAFT NEIGHBOURHOODS DIRECTORATE BUDGET 2009/10

Members considered the draft budget for the Neighbourhoods Directorate for 2009/10.

Jamie Morris took the Panel through the financing costs, new investments, savings/efficiencies and fees and charges. He highlighted investment bids required due to a decline in car parks income, anticipated savings in waste disposal because of increased recycling rates and the proposed decision to not hold an Illuminations event next year before the Arboretum refurbishment began. He noted that many savings were proposed in Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning. He explained that many of the proposals related to posts being made redundant but it was hopeful that the majority of these would be met through voluntary redundancies across the Directorate, however, it was still anticipated that there would be some compulsory redundancies.

The Chair reported that the Children's and Young Peoples Scrutiny and Performance Panel had referred efficiency and saving proposal 17 'withdraw funding for Ready Steady Summer' to the Panel for consideration. Members felt that this was a worthwhile scheme that provided activities for young people during school holidays and helped to prevent anti-social behaviour. Councillor Harrison reported that when the scheme had initially begun it had significantly more funding than the £50,000 that was currently available for savings. Current level of activity did not deliver significant benefits and it had not been possible to gain any further funding from partners. She explained that alternative youth activities were operated throughout the borough. The Panel felt that it was important that these activities were actively promoted throughout the borough for the benefit of young people. Jamie Morris reported that the Council had received a Play Finder grant to improve play facilities in the borough which it had used to purchase two vehicles which contained transportable play facilities and performance spaces. Following a request from Members Jamie Morris agreed to provide further information on this topic.

Members were concerned about the proposed reduction in standards for grounds maintenance (saving/efficiency 26). Councillor Walker explained that this saving was being met through the deletion of two long term vacant posts so the impact should be

limited. Members were concerned about the negative impact this could have, especially on the boroughs two green flag status parks and the Arboretum.

Members noted further savings in the greenspaces team (saving/efficiencies 24, 27 and 28) as they were concerned that standards would decline to minimal levels.

Following questions from Members Councillor Harrison explained that the reduction in library opening hours (saving/efficiency 40) would see all libraries across the borough close for one day a week. Those libraries that were already closed on a set number of days would close for an additional day. Some Members questioned the value of keeping those libraries open at all if services were to be reduced so drastically. Councillor Harrison reassured the Panel that this additional closure day would hopefully be a temporary measure.

The Panel felt that the proposal to stop funding the Local Neighbourhood Partnership community cash scheme (saving/efficiency 44) should be reconsidered by Cabinet. This was a valuable resource that benefited local communities and enabled the Council to secure match funding from partners. Members gave examples of the Police providing match funding to anti-social behaviour prevention schemes.

In answer to a question from the Chairman, Councillor Walker explained that an £80,000 increase in income from the sale of recyclable materials (fees and charges 5) was achievable.

In response to further questions Councillor Walker explained that the Councils MOT service was promoted throughout the borough. Members felt that this service could be more widely promoted through Walsall Pride. Councillor Andrew reported that car park charges were increasing for long stay parking only and that no consultation had taken place regarding the introduction of Sunday car parking charges and that a flat rate for the day may be used.

Councillor Walker reported that the Council did not charge residents for the control of rats. Members requested more information on this issue.

Councillor Woodruff asked for it to be recorded that she abstained from voting on all of the Panel's resolutions.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. Jamie Morris provide further information regarding the play finder grant scheme;**
 - 2. Cabinet reconsider efficiency/saving proposal 44 'NPP – stop funding the LNP community cash scheme' as this is a valuable resource to local neighbourhood partnerships to help deliver local projects and programmes across the borough;**
 - 3. the Councils car MOT service be promoted through Walsall Pride;**
- and;**

4. further information on the Council's pest control service, including an explanation of why no charges were levied for rat control, be provided to Members.

66/08 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR WORKING GROUP

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

The Chair reported that the working group had recently held an interesting meeting with many of the boroughs Registered Social Landlords on tenant anti-social behaviour. The Working Group was attending a good practice visit to Manchester City Council that was open to all Members of the Panel.

67/08 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting of the Panel was noted as being 19 February 2009.

The meeting terminated at 7.52 p.m.

Chair:

Date: