



Walsall Council

Minutes of the **MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 21st April, 2008, at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House.

Present

Councillor M.G. Pitt (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillor T.G. Ansell (Deputy Mayor)

“ A.J.A. Andrew
“ D.A. Anson
“ M. Arif
“ C.M. Ault
“ J.M. Barton
“ L.A. Beeley
“ Mrs. J. Beilby
“ M.A. Bird
“ C. Bott
“ P. Bott
“ B. Cassidy
“ K. Chambers
“ A.G. Clarke
“ J. R. Cook
“ S.P. Coughlan
“ B.A. Douglas-Maul
“ M. D. Flower
“ A.E. Griffiths
“ A.D. Harris
“ L.A. Harrison
“ E.F. Hughes
“ P.F. Hughes
“ A.D. Johnson
“ H. Khan
“ S.W. Madeley
“ Ms. R.A. Martin

Councillor Mrs. C. Micklewright

“ Mrs. B.V. McCracken
“ M. Nazir
“ M. Nazir
“ J.G. O'Hare
“ T.S. Oliver
“ A.J. Paul
“ G. Perry
“ J.D. Phillips
“ K. Phillips
“ D.J. Pitt
“ I.C. Robertson
“ J. Rochelle
“ B. Sanders
“ H.S. Sarohi
“ K. Sears
“ Mrs. D.A. Shires
“ I. Shires
“ P.E. Smith
“ C.D.D. Towe
“ D.J. Turner
“ W.T. Tweddle
“ A. Underhill
“ R.A. Walker
“ V.G. Woodruff
“ M. Yasin
“ P.A. Young
“ Zahid Ali

100. **Apologies**

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Creaney, Longhi, Mushtaq, E.E. Pitt and Wilkes.

101. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25th April 2008, copies having been sent to each member of the Council be approved as a correct record and signed.

102. **Declarations of interest**

Councillor Sears declared a personal interest in Acorn Home Care.

103. **Mayor's announcements**

(1) **Death of Mr. G. Porter-Williams**

The Mayor referred to the recent death of Mr. G. Porter-Williams and **moved** the following motion, which was duly seconded and:

Resolved

That this Council have heard with deep regret of the death of Mr. Geoffrey Porter-Williams, former Corporate Board Director for Resources and place on record their appreciation of his services to the borough over a period of many years and extend to the members of his family their sincere sympathy in their bereavement.

(2) **Death of former Councillor F. Honan**

The Mayor referred to the recent death of Mr. F.N. Honan and **moved** the following motion, which was duly seconded and:

Resolved

That this Council have heard with deep regret of the death of Mr. F.N. Honan, a member of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council from 1988 to 1992 and place on record their appreciation of his services to the borough over a period of many years and extend to the members of his family their sincere sympathy in their bereavement.

Members and officers stood in silence as a mark of respect.

104. **Petitions**

The following petitions were submitted:

- (a) Councillor Arif – misuse of parking area at the Pines
- (b) Councillor Martin:
 - (1) Reduction in No. 374 bus service
 - (2) Application No. 09/0203/FL – McColls Newsagent and Post Office at 175 Broadway North, Walsall
- (c) Councillor I. Shires – withdrawal of No. 64 bus service by Arriva
- (d) Councillor Sears – hoarding on Anchor Bridge

105. **Questions**

(a) **From members of the public**

Leisure services in Walsall

Mr. Keith Astin of 142A Lichfield Road, Brownhills asked the following question of Councillor Harrison:

“I understand that a review is underway to overhaul the delivery of leisure services in the Walsall Borough, I would like to know whether there will be a reduction in costs for using leisure services and whether under 12’s will have free use of facilities?”

Councillor O’Hare replied on behalf of Councillor Harrison. Officers are currently in the early stages of developing an outline plan for the modernisation, refurbishment or replacement of the Council’s five leisure centres (Gala Baths, Oak Park Leisure Centre, Darlaston Swimming Pool, Willenhall Leisure Centre and Bloxwich Leisure Centre). This is very much at concept stage. He said that some of the facilities are over 70 years old and we needed to put in place a realistic and achievable plan for some of our major assets which will give residents the best facilities we can. It is not possible to say whether there will be a reduction in the costs for using leisure services as this review is about the actual facilities and not the pricing policies. Clearly prices will need to be re-considered later on within the business planning phase.

Councillor O’Hare said that first and foremost we need to ascertain what Walsall actually wants and needs. Likewise the question of whether under 12’s will have free use of facilities is a separate issue. Like Glasgow, Walsall could allow free use of facilities, but there would be a cost that would have to be met by the Council from elsewhere.

Mr. Astin asked the following supplementary question?

“Would there be full consultation with different groups relating to this present review?”

Councillor O’Hare said that he would advise Mr. Astin in writing on the public consultation proposals.

(b) From members of the Council

(1) Ring Road

Councillor J. Phillips asked the following question of Councillor Harris:

“Could the Cabinet member responsible for Transport issues, Councillor Harris, please confirm if the works on the Ring Road from Pleck Road to the Arboretum are scheduled for completion on time, and could he inform us of the projected completion dates and tell us if there is any projected delay in the completion of these works?”

Councillor Harris advised the Council that good progress is being made on this complex civil engineering project particularly at the Arboretum junction, along Blue Lane West and at Littleton Street West where you might have seen the beams, deck and parapets for the new road over the railway bridge that were recently put into place.

All the new carriageways and footways should be completed by September and usable by traffic and pedestrians. The works to improve the existing road will take a little longer and should be completed by the end of October. This should then only leave the final finishing touches to be completed such as elements of hard and soft landscaping and signing or signal connections and fine tuning. This will ensure that the benefits to traffic and the community will be established before the run up to Christmas.

The project is large and complex and, with the recent start of other major developments adjacent to the road corridor such as the Business Learning Campus and Manor Hospital, has meant a need for extensive liaison and coordination in order to minimise congestion whilst of course at the same time maintaining good progress on the new road. Councillor Harris said that if any members want a tour they should contact him.

He went on to say that he could also advise that, after liaising with Walsall Regeneration Company and British Telecom, we have taken the opportunity to lay ducting for future state of the art fibre optic communications associated with these developments and others such as the waterfront and office corridor. This requirement was not flagged up until after the contract had started and the programme has had to be changed to accommodate this exciting opportunity.

One of the most difficult issues for us has been the performance of the statutory undertakers and the impact on the contractor due to the many and complex diversions that have been necessary along the length of the road, added to which contractors were called away due to the floods last year. As this was emergency work we could not be critical of them.

All in all, I am satisfied that, when taking account of the large volumes of traffic using the ring road, the temporary traffic management arrangements are working well.

Communications are vital on projects such as this and we have continually kept people informed along the way and held regular Stakeholder Forums to give those directly affected the opportunity to discuss all aspects of the scheme. We have issued 75 press releases, responded to a further 34 press and radio enquiries, and held 3 Stakeholder Forums.

I am pleased that John O'Hare, Leader of the Council, visited the site on the 5th February and I accompanied the Neighbourhood Scrutiny Panel on the site visit on 4th April where we were all able to see at first hand the significant progress of the project.

As I have already said, this project is extremely complex and, with the added difficulties as new developments have commenced, has made the need for good coordination and communication so important in order to minimise any impact on both transport and businesses. The project is key to the future success of the town and borough and it is crucial that we get it right.

Councillor Phillips asked the following supplementary question:

“Can Councillor Harris give further assurances that a meeting will take place with contractors and report further to Council if any further slippage and details of any compensation?”

Councillor Harris said that he meets contractors on site every 2 weeks and also meets with officers regularly. If slippage occurs it is because of other factors. Contractors have been excellent on this project and health and safety on railway bridges is paramount. He assured Councillor Phillips that he keeps a close overview on the contract.

(2) Charges for Neighbourhood Care Officers

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor McCracken:

“Would the portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public of the details of any plans being considered to introduce a charge on those older and disabled residents, who are not in receipt of housing and Council tax benefits, for visits by Neighbourhood Care Officers (NCOs) whose service they presently receive for free?”

Councillor McCracken replied that this question was purely an election campaign which frightens the vulnerable and the elderly. The budget process ensured many millions of pounds went into social care in this borough.

Investment in social care was not about keeping Council tax at a low level. Any reduction in funding was as a result of reductions in government grants to this Council. All Councils across the country have been experiencing the same problems with not enough money being made available for social care. Councillor McCracken went on to say that this Council cannot pretend that this is not the case and therefore we have to manage the budget as best we can like other Councils in the area.

She said that statements made by Councillor Smith just frighten the vulnerable people in the community. She emphasised that no recommendations had been made to introduce a charge and no discussion either formally or informally had taken place at Cabinet or elsewhere.

Councillor McCracken said in conclusion that it was deplorable that these untruths can be issued without any redress. This matter will be subject to policy discussions before any decisions are made. At the moment there are no recommendations to introduce charges either now or in the future.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

“If this is so untrue why has an elderly lady informed me that a Neighbourhood Care Officer has informed her that discussions are taking place to bring changes in?”

Councillor McCracken replied that she was unable to comment on third party statements and asked Councillor Smith to request the person concerned to give her details.

(3) Demolition of properties in Blakenall

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

“Would the Portfolio holder guarantee me, this Council and the public that there will be no further demolition of houses, flats or bungalows in the Blakenall ward in the next 10 years at least other than those that are empty and awaiting demolition and those properties where residents have already been informed that their homes are due to be demolished?”

Councillor Andrew replied that he could not look forward 10 years, but detailed the position as of now. He said that the Goscote Lane Corridor was identified as one of the ten transformational projects to be undertaken as part of Walsall's Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) guiding regeneration over the next 10-15 years. The transformation of areas within the SRF has been a key priority for this administration and will result in thousands of new homes and community facilities which will improve the lives of many people in our Borough. The boundary for the Goscote Lane Corridor was agreed by the Project Reference

Group including our key partner Walsall Housing Group and ward councillors and local residents. The project includes all the anticipated major redevelopment sites in the area. This boundary and the SRF Strategy for the area were subsequently approved by Cabinet in September 2007.

As part of the programme of regeneration a number of key sites are identified for comprehensive redevelopment which includes demolition of properties within the Goscote Estate (Middle Crescent, Hildicks Crescent and Goscote Lodge Crescent).

The remaining properties to be included within the area for redevelopment of the Poets Estate (a pair of semi-detached properties on Tennyson Avenue) were acquired by whg in late December 2007 and have since been demolished which now completes the demolition works in this part of the area.

Other than those dwellings that are empty and awaiting demolition and those dwellings where residents have already been informed that their homes are due to be demolished it is not anticipated that other dwellings will be demolished.

It should be recognised that the Council continues to work with whg and take proactive action to improve both neighbourhoods and tackle empty properties throughout the borough to enable them to be brought back into productive use. As part of this work there are unfortunately occasions when the cost of refurbishment / structural repair works actually exceed the value of the property and where this does occur demolition clearly needs to be considered. In addition, Walsall Housing Group has a comprehensive Asset Management Strategy which includes major works programmes which presumably contains properties in Blakenall ward. From time to time where it is not cost effective to refurbish dwellings selective demolition of properties is necessary.

For reasons such as this I am unable to give 100% assurances that demolition of dwellings will not take place within the next 10 years.

(4) Planning permissions

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

“Would the Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public how many cases there are at the moment, that have been brought to the Council’s attention of businesses that are operating in the Borough of Walsall without appropriate planning permission?”

Councillor Smith said that he assumed Councillor Smith was referring to car washes popping up on various sites. He said that planning enforcement is concerned with breaches of planning control that may arise at individual businesses, and all other sorts of property. As a result, the recording system is tightly focussed on individual properties, and the issues being raised about them.

There are of the order of 1,500 active cases of all sorts under consideration by planning enforcement, but records are not kept about categories of properties such as factories, shops or offices, as such categories are not relevant to the tight focus on specific addresses which is central to the planning enforcement process.

However, enhancements to the present computer recording system are being explored and offer the possibility that such data might be available at some point in the future, as an offshoot of the main activities in enforcement.

It would be impossible to test every business in the Borough for all breaches, but officers are confident that a combination of watchfulness coupled with responses to complaints and enquiries identify the worst cases (and many other less serious cases), which are then examined and acted on, as necessary.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

“With regard to enforcement can Councillor Andrew tell us why Pallets Racking Systems have been operating for 4 years without permission?”

In response Councillor Andrew said that as recently as today a fine of £10,000 had been awarded to the Council with enforcement costs which shows that the Council is taking action where necessary. Officers will be in touch tomorrow with reference to the specific case mentioned by Councillor Smith

106. **State of Walsall debate**

Over the past twelve months the emphasis has turned ever more towards partnership and regional working. We all know of the work of the LSP and we are currently seeking to reconstitute the Board of that organisation to make it slimmer but sleeker and more fit for purpose - a forum for the decision makers who can make things happen and see ideas through to fruition.

The regional agenda is the Governments idea, it may have benefits but it also has hazards that we have to be wary of. The provision of an integrated strategy across the West Midlands is a good thing - but only provided Walsall reaps its fair share of rewards. Government has moved the funding pot to a regional basis on many issues and - like it or not - we are in competition with our neighbours for many of the prizes.

I and officers have attended not just the Black Country Consortium, but also the West Midlands Joint Committee, the City Region Growth and Prosperity Board, the Regional Forum of Leaders, the West Midlands Local Government Association and the West Midlands Regional Assembly. One sometimes wonders who is minding the shop back at home.

Unfortunately if that's where the money is - that's where you have to go. But when you do get home then let's look at what you find.

Roadworks, after all these years we have a ring road under construction. Its hard to live with at times but we know it will be worth it when it's completed. Not just the road but all that goes with it. The new college, the office corridor, the proposed Gigaport and on the old college site a new supermarket to be built. At the other end of the road - the new hospital development. Work has started on the Waterfront Development, the new Asda store opened. Unfortunately Shannons Mill burnt down but from that will rise a new comprehensive retail shopping development and we will - I promise you - finally see the end of the Overstrand.

But it's not just the town centre which is being renewed - but underway or planned are Pleck, Birchills, Willenhall, Moxley, Bentley. And others to follow.

All of this supported by a planning department and a Building Control Service that exceeds government targets. In fact amongst the top performers.

Walsall has for many years not been a high achiever in education but things are changing and now we see improved results across the board. From Key Stage 2 ranking joint top in the Black Country to all of our schools reaching the governments targets at Key Stage Four for passes of 5A* - C. And more sixth formers staying in higher education - up from 53% in 2005 to 85% in 2007. And better than ever at getting school leavers into employment or training. Exclusions are down Attendances up.

These are real and tangible results - results that give confidence for us to enter into a new contract to provide the very best of education for our youngsters.

And for looked after children – the top performance in the country for being in education employment or training. Something we can be really proud of.

And new schools too. Fibbersley completed on time and within budget and Mary Elliot to be completed in September.

Not just our children and young people but we have been working for the elderly. Housing 21 is a £40m investment from the private sector to renew our residential and day care provision.

A new community meals service with greater choice for those that live in their own home. Creating a community that cares for and values our elderly.

High praise for our adult protection unit - seen as a national model.

And recognition for our crisis service for people with mental health problems.

Improving homes throughout the borough by obtaining increased funding from the Housing Corporation, the Evolve Housing Market Renewal Project in the Birchills.

On target for making decent homes occupied by the vulnerable.

On target with the Health Through Warmth Scheme.

On target for adapting homes for the disabled.

And providing, in the current financial year, £4.4m for aids and adaptations - helping people to live comfortably in their own homes.

Turning to the environment there are improved services and facilities. 16,500 further brown bins, 18,000 tons of waste diverted from landfill and used to produce energy. The proposals developed for the reorganisation of domestic waste collection to achieve more recycling, improved facilities at the waste tips.

We look forward to the result of the lottery bid for the Arboretum. We were awarded Green Flag status for Palfrey Park. Our libraries are being refurbished or replaced. £2.3m for a new library in Bentley. The Art Gallery has seen almost a 50% increase in visitors. We were awarded the chartermark for our sports and leisure services and for the first time in the competitions history - Walsall won the Black Country Youth Games.

Most importantly we have kept financial stability. Our council tax increase of just 2.9% being a measure of how we respect the public purse and want to ensure that our citizens keep as much of their own money as possible.

And it wouldn't be right not to mention the revenues and benefits section - a department previously seen as performing poorly – now transformed into the one of the top quartile. No wonder they collected three trophies at the team awards. And were nominated for a national award by the Local Government Chronicle.

It has been an invigorating year and many of the plans made will come to pass in future years. I have every confidence that the path we have set is taking us where we want to go.

The year has not been without its setbacks. Old issues continue to dog us and distract from the way forward. Perhaps their persistence is more politically motivated than one of concern for those involved.

We have undergone two major inspections this year - the CPA and the JAR. We do not know the final outcome but we do have feedback, and I have every confidence that the results will lead to us congratulating our staff on the outcomes.

But there is one thing that happened this year that was badly needed for stability. The appointment of a new Chief Executive. He carries for us many of our hopes for the future and I have every confidence that we have chosen wisely.

Part of his role will be to help us ensure that we keep the governance arrangements under review. I shall be arranging, early after the elections, briefings so we can all consider and understand fully the implications of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act of 2007. It could have far reaching ramifications for us. We need to consider the Constitution so that everyone has a fair opportunity to ask questions at Council question time. And I am happy to consider representations to secure a more effective role for scrutiny panels and their involvement in the decision making process.

We have a busy year ahead.

Finally Mr Mayor a separate word about your mayoral year. You have raised the profile of the mayoralty in the eyes of many people. You've been great.

Councillors Oliver and I. Shires responded to the statement made by the Leader.

107. **Recommendation of Cabinet**

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The report to Cabinet was submitted.

Councillor Harris reported that Cabinet at its meeting on 16 April had noted the decision of the Neighbourhood Scrutiny and Performance Panel following the call-in of the Cabinet decision on 19 March and accordingly he **moved** the following recommendation which was seconded by Councillor O'Hare and it was:

Resolved

That Walsall Borough's Rights of Way Improvement Plan be adopted as approved Council policy.

108. **Corporate risk management**

A report was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Arif, duly seconded and:

Resolved

- (1) That the report and appendix which sets out the range of activities that have embedded risk management in all Council activities be noted.
- (2) That the work undertaken by the Audit Committee in ensuring that risk is being actively managed within the organisation be acknowledged.

109. **Annual scrutiny report 2007/2008**

A report was submitted

It was **moved** by Councillor Towe, duly seconded and:

Resolved

That the annual scrutiny report for the 2007/08 municipal year be noted and that this will inform the further developments of the Council's scrutiny function.

110. Annual report of Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee

A report was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Andrew, duly seconded and:

Resolved

- (1) That the Council congratulates the significant progress made in relation to the management of the Trusts affairs and of the site since the establishment of the management committee,
- (2) That the bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for improvements to both the site and specifically, for the refurbishment of the Memorial, be supported.
- (3) That the proposal for the Trust to enter into a lease agreement between the Trust and the Council in respect of the "lodge", be supported; that negotiations be entered into accordingly, and that a further report be submitted in due course.

The meeting terminated 8.15 p.m.