

CORPORATE AND PUBLIC SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 21st January 2016 at 6.00pm at the Council Chamber, Council House, Walsall

Panel Members Present

Councillor M. Nazir (Chair)
Councillor I. Shires (Vice-Chair)
Councillor S. Craddock
Councillor S. Cooper
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul
Councillor K. Ferguson
Councillor A. Hicken
Councillor I. Jeavons
Councillor A. Nawaz

Portfolio Holder

Councillor M. Bird – Leader
Councillor A. Andrew – Deputy Leader and Economy, Infrastructure and Development
Councillor M. Arif – Shared Services and Procurement
Councillor A. Harris – Community, Leisure and Culture

Officers Present

Simon Neilson – Executive Director, Economy & Environment
Sue Grainger – Head of Libraries, Heritages and Art
Steve Pretty - Head of Planning, Engineering and Transport
Lorraine Boothman – Trading Standards and Licensing Manager
Chris Knowles – Services Finance Manager
Nikki Gough – Committee Business and Governance Manager

56/15 Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors G. Sohal and L. Rattigan.

57/15 Substitutions

Councillor A. Hicken substituted for Councillor G. Sohal and Councillor B. Douglas-Maul substituted for Councillor L. Rattigan.

58/15 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

59/15 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

It was noted that there were no items to be heard in private session.

60/15 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting that took place on 25th November and 26th November 2015 were considered.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meetings held on 25th and 26th November 2015 were approved as a true and accurate record.

61/15 Resource Allocation 2016/17 to 2019/20: Draft Revenue Budget, Draft Capital Programme and Update on Financial Position

The Services Finance Manager presented the report which included feedback from consultation on the draft revenue budget proposals. It also included the draft capital programme for 2016/17 to 2019/20, information from the autumn statement and an update on the 2015/16 corporate financial performance. The Chair suggested that the Committee focused on the draft capital programme as a response had already been prepared and sent to Cabinet on the draft revenue budget proposals.

It was questioned if there was any risk of losing services to the Combined Authority. The Leader stated that the intention was to provide increased opportunities to bid for schemes.

Resolved:-

That the report be noted.

62/15 Petition: Remove the Bus Lane on Bloxwich High Street

A petition containing in excess of 500 signatures was submitted by Councillor Shaun Fitzpatrick. The petition requested the removal of the bus lane in Bloxwich High Street. Officers responded to this request stating that the Council had a statutory duty to work with bus operators to improve bus punctuality. The West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan emphasised the contribution of local bus services to making Walsall a better place to live. Members were advised that in 2011 the enforcement of moving traffic offences for driving in bus lanes was transferred to Local Authorities. In 2013 a CCTV

car commenced this enforcement following a major publicity campaign to improve the level of compliance. A static enforcement camera was installed on Bloxwich High Street in September 2015. The main bus operator of services along this route had provided positive feedback about the enforcement of the bus lane.

The Committee were asked to consider paragraph 18 of the report which contained options for Members to consider. The Head of Planning, Engineering and Transportation stated that he recommended that the bus lane was retained in its present form although the concerns raised were recognised.

The Lead Petitioner spoke to explain that this had caused concern for Ward Members as they were not informed about the static enforcement camera in the bus lane by Officers but found out about this through social media. A large number of residents had contacted him as a Ward Member. Issues included difficulty with flow of traffic and turning into a housing estate. Officers agreed that better communication with Ward Members was needed and committed to improve this in the future. It was emphasised that the bus lane was operational at peak times only, for 100 yards, and that there had been no recent complaints received by the Council. Members discussed the signage of the bus lane stating that it was not clear when it was in operation. Officers agreed that signage could be improved and informed Members that at the moment the Council complied with statutory minimum signage.

Resolved

That:

The Committee:

- 1. note the petition and the concerns raised;**
- 2. note the improved compliance following the enforcement camera;**
- 3. welcome the assurance of improved communication;**
- 4. recommended that the Council continues to enforce the bus lane;**
- 5. recommended that improved signage and lane marking is progressed.**

63/15 Response to the Petition: Protect our New Invention Library Service

Members were informed that the petition opposed the proposed closure of New Invention Library as part of the budget proposals concerning the library services.

Officers referred to the report (annexed). The Committee were informed that significant consultation had taken place. This included drop in sessions. Members were informed that the nearest alternative libraries were Bloxwich Library, which was 2 miles from the current library site, or Willenhall Library, which was 2.9 miles from the current library site. By 23rd December 2015,

1090 questionnaires had been received. 51% of respondents walked to the library and 85% regarded the library as very important to them. The information gathered from consultation would be fed into the Cabinet report.

The lead petitioner explained that he had started the petition as he considered it to be important that residents had a voice. It was also noted that the number of visitors had gone up and it was used for a variety of activities such as craft and job searches. Members were informed that discussions were ongoing with Beacon Primary School to allow the service to continue. The Leader congratulated Councillor Hicken for pursuing alternative provision for the service and working for a solution in his area.

The Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) stated that work would be done on the issue and feedback from the last Scrutiny Committee was considered in order to minimise impact which included alternative options. Firm expressions of interest were received from a number of organisations which were being actively pursued;

- Beechdale Library – a firm expression of interest from Friendship and Care Housing in providing book exchange facilities from the existing library premises.
- Blakenall Library – there was potential to develop book exchange facilities in the new Bloxwich Active Living Centre, and by retaining a mobile library to support in the centre Blakenall by visits from this vehicle.
- New Invention Library – a firm expression of interest has been received from Beacon Primary School to provide book exchange facilities from the school premises.
- Pleck Library – an expression of interest has been received from a local group and is in the early stages of negotiation.
- Rushall Library – a firm expression of interest from Manor Farm Community Association has been received to provide book exchange facilities from the existing library premises.
- South Walsall – an expression of interest has been received from a local group and is in the early stages of negotiation.
- Walsall Wood Library – there is a firm proposal to establish book exchange facilities in the Oak Park Active Living Centre when it opens in June 2016.

Members expressed concern that a book exchange was not a library and did not provide the wider range of services that a library does. A Member expressed concern that libraries were needed in more deprived areas and expressed the view that it was not sustainable to be run by volunteers. Members acknowledged that they had heard new information and expressed concern that bus routes had been factored into the methodology when proposing which libraries to close but the Committee had also heard that residents mostly visited on foot or by car. It was also noted that New Invention Library was part of a hub, which if shut, would leave an empty building.

The Committee were informed that Sue Grainger (Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts) would be leaving the Council. Members thanked Sue for the value she has added to the Council and the community.

The Committee agreed to consider the next item on the agenda before making a recommendation.

64/15 Feedback on Consultation regarding the Budget Proposals under consideration for the Library Service

The Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts introduced the report and stated that the resource allocation process for the Council's budget 2016/17 to 2019/20 had required the Library Service to identify ways to significantly reduce its revenue budget. Key messages from the current consultation would be fully examined.

It was noted that consultation feedback indicated that a large number of library users visited on foot or by car. Concern was raised by Members that the location of bus routes in proximity to libraries was taken into account when considering proposed library closure sites.

Susan Blakemore, a member of the public, spoke to the Committee. She stated that Rushall Library provided more to the community than 'books'. She went on to state that for example young mothers met there, craft activities took place, and people played chess. It was a place of comfort and learning. She stated that locality was important and emphasised the importance of keeping smaller libraries open.

Resolved

That:

- 1. the Overview and Scrutiny Committee stresses the importance of libraries being at the centre of communities and providing more than just a book exchange, and;**
- 2. the Committees original recommendation to Cabinet should be reiterated:**

That this Overview and Scrutiny Committee urges Cabinet to rethink and change its methodology for library closures and base their decision on educational attainment, achievement, life chances and deprivation. Further to this capacity should be created in the third sector to develop a volunteer base to improve the long term sustainability of the library service.

65/15 Review of Unauthorised Encampment Policy

Officers introduced the report which outlined the issue around unauthorised encampments and how they were managed in Walsall over the last 12 months. Members were informed that 2015 saw an unprecedented increase in the number of unauthorised encampments to a total of 85 reported. Officers undertook an initial response to all reported unauthorised encampments. The Committee were informed that the process of managing unauthorised encampments had to comply with legal requirements so that any action was enforceable and not subject to legal challenge by way of appeal or judicial review.

Members considered the environmental impact of the unauthorised encampments including clean up costs as detailed within the report (annexed). Officers explained that in the future the service, which dealt, with unauthorised encampments would be part of a restructure and this would mean that a bigger pool of officers to deal with unauthorised encampments would be available.

Members were informed of the work with the neighbouring Black Country Authorities and the intention to introduce a single joint protocol with the police. Issues around traveller sites which opened up on borders with other authorities were discussed.

The following were the principal points ensuing from discussion;

- Police funding would affect response and cooperation. Officers confirmed that the majority of cases were dealt with without police support. Also the majority of cases were vacated before it was taken to Court.
- Funding from Area Panels could be sought to assist with the additional preventative measures identified in the report
- Officers confirmed that the welfare of people on encampments was always considered.

Councillor Shires took the Chair.

It was suggested that the Community Cohesion Working Group should engage with the Gypsy Council to obtain knowledge and improve tolerance.

Resolved

That

- 1. the report be noted, and;**
- 2. The Community Cohesion Working Group is requested to engage with the Gypsy Council as part of its review into community cohesion.**

66/15 Combined Authority and Devolution Deal Update

Councillor Nazir took the Chair.

The Executive Director stated that the process was at the ‘super-clarification’ stage and was subject to democratic decision. It would come to Cabinet later in the year. The parliamentary process was described along with timelines. Members were informed that the Council had agreed to take consultation on behalf of the Secretary of State.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

67/15 Areas of Focus 2015/16 and Forward Plans

The areas of focus 2015/16 and forward plans were noted.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8.45pm.

Signed:

Date: