

AT A MEETING

- of the -

**NEIGHBOURHOOD SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL** held at the

Council House, Walsall on

Thursday 7 December 2006 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Chair)
Councillor Burley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Beeley
Councillor Bott
Councillor Griffiths
Councillor K.Phillips

PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Perry Safer Stronger Communities,
Partnerships and Vision 2021

ALSO PRESENT

Mr. Llewellyn Arboretum Users Group
Mr. Jenkins Arboretum Users Group
Mr. Paxton Fire Service
Mr. Martin Fire Service
Mr. Ahmed Community Wardens Service
Ms. Gudgen Walsall Housing Regeneration Agency

OFFICERS PRESENT

Tim Challans Assistant Director for Leisure Culture
and Lifelong Learning
Chris Holliday Head of Leisure and Culture
Graham Hood Head of Green Spaces
Julie Ball Head of Neighbourhood Partnerships
and Programmes
Brian Holland Interim Director, Safer Walsall Borough
Partnership
Stuart Bentley Scrutiny Officer

35/2006. **APOLOGIES**

The Chair advised the panel that apologies had been received on behalf of Councillor Woodruff.

36/2006. **SUBSTITUTIONS**

The chair advised the panel there were no substitutions for this duration of this meeting.

37/2006. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

Councillor Beeley declared a personal and prejudicial interest with regards to Community Wardens. Councillor Bott declared a personal interest with regards to Community Associations.

38/2006. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Members noted that there were no items for consideration in private at this meeting.

39/2006. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved

- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 October 2006, a copy having been previously circulated to each member of the panel be approved and signed by the chair as a correct record of the proceedings subject to minor alterations.

(annexed)

Councillor Phillips wished that her appreciation of the quality of the minutes be noted.

40/2006. SUSTAINABILITY OF WARDENS SERVICE

Councillor Beeley, having declared an interest, left the room.

Brian Holland spoke to the paper, previously circulated, and highlighted that the issue would now go forward to the executive board of the Local Strategic Partnership for consideration and prioritisation through the target action plan. This process was now underway, but a decision was not likely to be made until February 2007.

(annexed)

Councillor Towe asked the portfolio holder for his comments. Councillor Perry replied that Council had amended and agreed a motion supporting option 3, as set out in the report, which had been considered by the partnership. There had been a healthy debate resulting in the proposal being sent to the Local Area Agreement (LAA) Pillar Executive Group for their consideration alongside other priorities. He added that he could not disagree with this process in light of other government set targets. Further, the Government Office for the West Midlands had advised that something along the lines of option 3 would have to have been undertaken in any case, if wardens were to continue, in order to prove value for money. He then stated that he had looked at other areas, such as Coventry and Sandwell. Initial findings indicated a link with Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs).

Councillor Towe asked if Brian Holland could confirm that the number of wardens in Coventry had increased to around 75.

Brian Holland replied that Coventry had taken a substantially different approach to the warden's scheme and had 4 types in operation, linked to enforcement powers. He added that a report on the findings of the review of other wardens services was due

shortly. However, other councils, notably from the Northwest, had withdrawn their wardens services.

Councillor Burley stated that it was a pity the wardens were not presenting at this meeting. She felt that there was a move to replace the wardens with PCSOs and street champions even though the champions were still only a pilot scheme. Referring to the paper she highlighted the national evaluation that had already been undertaken and suggested that this was duplication of that work. Further she stated that the present position was due to the authority's lack of commitment to the scheme and the reliance on short term Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) monies.

Brian Holland replied that the report had been prepared by an independent consultant and it was his view that there was no hard evidence. There was anecdotal data but this was the local view.

Councillor Perry added that Walsall was not unique as the government had decided to stop the funding, which had led some councils ceasing their wardens scheme. He added that a government advisor had been brought in and he felt that this was unhelpful. He was aware what the service delivered but also there was no hard evidence to support it. He added that it was not hanging a hat on the PCSOs as they were not going to be rolled out everywhere, only to hotspots. It would be nice to have 70+ wardens, but they would have to have an impact. The Police were vocal on this issue but not overly supportive especially in light of their concerns over the sustainability of the PCSO service.

Councillor Phillips stated that she did not think there was enough evidence of impact with only patchy coverage. She welcomed the PCSOs, which would have more power and wider coverage. Councillor Bott added that the PCSOs had a better response than the police. Further, they needed to be targeted.

Councillor Burley stated that there were not enough PCSOs to cover the borough and they needed to be extended along with the wardens. The two services were complimentary and in terms of the drive towards safer, stronger communities, the services were vital. She added that the report highlighted the limited powers of both wardens and PCSOs and that they needed to work together. Finally she added that she did not believe that the evidence was purely anecdotal.

Mr. Ahmed stated that the service had just won an annual best team award and, overall, the letters of support were positive. He added that there was evidence, but there was agreement that there was a gap in the information collected by the service and that data was needed for reporting to the partnership. There was some work needed to make the evidence tangible. Wardens were a huge issue nationally, but he was concerned about the impact on the service resulting in the loss of trained staff. There needed to be some assurance in order to retain staffing levels. If this issue was not resolved now, this would be an annual debate.

Mr. Martin stated that the Fire Service had recently instigated 2 schemes with the wardens, linked directly to the LAA targets, so as to have a truly solid method of contact with the public. This partnership working was invaluable and it was essential that the Fire Service retained it.

Councillor Towe asked if this evidence had been passed to the partnership.

Brian Holland stated that he did recognise the work of the wardens and the report does ask for agreed targets to be set. However, the entire scheme had to be judged next to other priorities, such as the reduction in domestic violence, and it would be a strategic choice made by the partnership.

Mr. Paxton stated that he was a member of a steering group and had been instrumental in introducing reporting mechanisms. In the previous 7 weeks he had received 100 reports from the wardens compared to less than 20 from the 50 Champions. He felt that the wardens were invaluable and was concerned about street champions replacing them. Street Champions should compliment both the wardens and the PCSOs, but as they were volunteers there would be no guarantee that sufficient numbers could be recruited in all areas. Further, PCSOs would have differing targets than both the wardens and the Fire Service so there would a massive void if they were to go.

Brian Holland replied that street champions are not meant to replace wardens; they were more a means of connecting with the community. When a full compliment of PCSOs was available, there would be far better coverage and the partnership were working with the police to roll this out. He re-emphasised the important issues about how to best use resources through strategic choices.

Councillor Perry stated that street champions were being evaluated before a decision would be made to roll them out borough wide. There were many schemes and there was a danger of fragmentation of the whole agenda. This may mean a mix of options to address different needs in different areas. There was also a need to work with the communities through the Local Neighbourhood Partnerships.

Mr. Paxton added that if wardens were to disappear, he believed there would be no reports on arson, etc. from the PCSOs, which will have a negative impact on LAA targets.

Councillor Burley asked if the portfolio holder was in favour of the service level agreements referred to in option 3 of the report.

Councillor Perry replied that it was why he had recommended the option to the partnership in order that the service could be evaluated.

Councillor Burley asked what commitment there was to retain the 11 remaining wardens.

Brian Holland replied that it was not a political decision and it was now up to the partnership to make that strategic choice.

41/2006. WALSALL ILLUMINATIONS

Councillor Towe stated that the panel and its working group had done some good work on this issue and he hoped that the panel would agree to pass the report forward to cabinet.

(annexed)

Tim Challans tabled some suggested amendments arising from the cabinet pre-agenda meeting and talked the members through them.

(annexed)

Councillor Burley asked whether the council would benefit from looking at alternative energy sources.

Tim Challans replied that this would be looked at through procurement.

Councillor Towe added that he was also mindful of this issue and that he and Councillor Griffiths were pursuing the issue.

Chris Holliday replied that all services regularly undertook a procurement process, but he agreed to check this had been done, with regards to energy costs, with the Illuminations.

Councillor Phillips stated that she was disappointed with the deletion of option 2 from the report as she felt that, as the fairground was now the main attraction, the traders were making money on the back of a loss for the council.

Councillor Towe stated that he was disappointed that Councillor Phillips was now giving such opinions as she had chosen not to be part of the working group.

Councillor Phillips added that the panel had a right to information with respect to the financial aspects of the fairground.

Tim Challans replied that the information could be made available but would, necessarily be in commercial confidence.

Councillor Burley replied that she had been to lights on more than one occasion and had spoken to the traders and it would appear that the loss made was in line with the reduction in takings noted by the traders. She felt that the traders should not be attacked as they were now an integral part of the Illuminations, so there was a need to engage them in the process. She added that it would be a disaster to have no Illuminations.

Councillor Towe stated that the panel were committed to moving forward by means of the working group.

Councillor Burley stated that there ought to be things that could be done easily and cheaply in the first instance, to move the Illuminations on in the next 12 months, but it would be an ongoing issue.

Councillor Towe stated that he felt the draft report to cabinet was a radical step forward. He added that the impact on the local economy should not be forgotten.

Mr. Jenkins stated that it was good move forward, but there was still a need to know where we were, how much had been spent and whether all the costs had been taken into account.

Councillor Towe replied that he had previously been assured that the Illuminations had been fully costed and the current figures could be relied upon.

Chris Holliday added that the lottery bid was crucial for the future and was an integral part of the arboretum project. The Illuminations was a commercial entity and had to be treated as such alongside the improvements to the arboretum site. The lottery bid would be submitted by March 2007 and all the key stakeholders would be engaged in the process. He added that the whole event needed to be redeveloped and repackaged.

Councillor Burley added that, in light of this, all the key stakeholders should be supplied with all papers relating to the Illuminations.

Councillor Bott asked for confirmation on the lower levels of turnout and asked why the dip had occurred.

Tim Challans replied that the reasons had not yet been identified but there was a general downward trend in attendance at such events across the country. In some ways, this review was timely.

Councillor Griffiths stated that he hoped the review would be undertaken in a business like fashion.

Councillor Bott asked that, if cabinet were to reject the proposals, could the private sector be used to continue the event.

Councillor Towe replied that the panel should wait for the decision of cabinet.

Resolved

- That the Neighbourhood Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommend that cabinet endorse the report on Walsall Illuminations, complete with the tabled amendments.

42/2006. FEEDBACK FROM THE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS WORKING GROUP

Councillor Towe reported that the working group had had a very productive meeting and the group were due to meeting again in January 2007 to consider benchmarking data and the condition surveys for the community buildings.

Julie Ball confirmed that the items were being collated and an information pack would be circulated early in the new year.

43/2006. UPDATE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FIGURES

Resolved

- That officers circulate a position paper to panel members.

44/2006. UPDATE ON THE LIBRARIES MODERNISATION PROGRAMME

Tim Challans spoke to the report, previously circulated and reported that everything was going according to plan subject to a few minor planning delays. However, the programme would be completed by the end of the municipal year as per plan.
(annexed)

He added that, with regards to Forest Gate / New Invention, he had recently that was a possibility to be able to continue with the existing ramp, which was good news.

Councillor Burley asked what criteria had been used to prioritise the programme.

Tim Challans replied that it had been partly based on need and what was already in place. It was also dependant on the funding linked to the sale of land. He added that he could circulate the full report for members' information.

Councillor Bott asked if the mobile library had a ramp for disabled access.

Tim Challans replied that there was certainly a legislative requirement to provide a ramp and he would check this.

Resolved

- That the full report on the libraries modernisation programme be circulated to the panel members.

Their being no other business the meeting terminated at 7:40 p.m.