

AT A MEETING
of the
**REGENERATION ENVIRONMENT
HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE
PANEL** held at The Council House,
Walsall on **Tuesday 20 February 2006**
at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor I. Shires (Chair)
Councillor Arif
Councillor Anson
Councillor McCracken
Councillor Robinson
Councillor Yasin
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Robertson

Councillor M.G.Pitt (Portfolio Holder)

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Young
Councillor Sarohi

Officers in Attendance

Jamie Morris (Executive Director - Corporate Services)
David Martin (Executive Director Social Care & Supported Housing – Chair of Safer Walsall Borough Partnership Board)
Lyn Reed (Safer Walsall Borough Partnership)
Inspector Gwyn Bevan (Safer Walsall Borough Partnership)
Chief Superintendent Bruce Gilbert (West Midlands Police)
Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Officer)
Nikki Ehlen (Scrutiny Officer)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for non attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor Rose.

SUBSTITUTIONS

The chairman advised the panel of the following changes to the membership of the committee for the duration of the meeting: -

- Delete: Councillor Aslam
- Substitute: Councillor McCracken

- Delete: Councillor Harrison
- Substitute: Councillor Rochelle

- Delete: Councillor Johnson
- Substitute: Councillor Robertson

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Arif declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in that that his nephew was employed as a community warden.

DECISION BY CABINET ON COMMUNITY WARDENS SERVICE POST APRIL 2006

Councillor Shires introduced himself to the panel and invited Councillors to clarify the reason for the call in of the Cabinet decision.

(annexed)

Councillor Robertson explained that Councillors had called in the decision by Cabinet because of concerns regarding the lack of evaluation and consultation with the public, police and wardens, and also the consequences of providing a reduced warden service.

Councillor Shires outlined the call-in procedure and instructed the panel that in order to obtain a clear resolution, discussion should not deviate from issues surrounding lack of consultation and the consequences of a reduced service.

(annexed)

Councillor Shires asked whether there were any stakeholders who wished to express their opinions.

Vera Whitbrook, a member of public, told the panel that, in her opinion, community wardens were very effective and did a good job when the police were unable to respond quickly enough to residents concerns and that they were successful in diffusing difficult situations.

Councillors Shires thanked Mrs. Whitbrook for her input. There being no further stakeholders wishing to express an opinion he invited the signatories to the call-in to speak to the Panel.

Councillor Robertson welcomed the chance to scrutinise the issue and articulated his concern that an award winning service was to be cut with nothing in place to immediately replace it and that wardens had a wealth of training which would be lost. He stated that, in the long-term, this was a concern for Walsall because its vulnerable residents had come to rely on the warden service.

Councillor Sarohi stated that wardens made a lot of difference and provided a direct contact for the police.

Councillor Young alerted the panel to the fact that community wardens put themselves in danger and that there should be no dispute that they do an excellent job. She then asked what level of discussion had been undertaken with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and would this affect any future bids for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF)

Councillor Anson stated that primarily Councillors were concerned that the reduction of community wardens would have an impact on crime levels.

Councillor Shires thanked the signatories for their input and invited Councillor Melvin Pitt (Portfolio Holder: Housing & Community Safety) to respond.

Councillor Pitt gave a presentation outlining the issues and proposals for future provision of similar schemes and referred to a handout containing a list of questions posed by Councillor Robertson and answers provided by Councillor Pitt.

(annexed)

Councillor Shires thanked Councillor Pitt for his input and asked the panel if they had any questions of clarification.

Councillor Robinson stated that the Cabinet report inferred that all LNPs had been consulted about the reduction in the warden service and asked if this was the case.

Jamie Morris replied that not all LNPs had been consulted.

Councillor Shires informed the panel that Willenhall LNP had requested that funding for wardens be on their agenda. The result of this discussion was that this particular LNP had used a proportion of its budget to fund the employment of a warden in their LNP area. He concluded that the reason for this LNP considering this item was a result of the strategic community plan rather than as part of a consultation exercise.

Councillor Pitt explained that the value of the Police Community Safety Officers (PCSO) had been obtained from an ODPM survey conducted by MORI and referred the panel to the answer given under question 3 in the handout provided.

Councillor Robinson expressed concern that lack of consultation did not fit in with the councils priorities under Vision 2008.

Jamie Morris explained that there had been consultation at a national level, and the ODPM report showed that PCSOs reduced the fear of crime, and that, although there had been no local consultation, assumptions had been made on the basis of national research.

Chief Superintendent Gilbert stated that each Local Neighbourhood Partnership had its own sub-group addressing crime issues and that it was fair to say that everyone wanted wardens but that there was no money to continue the current level of service.

Councillor Shires asked when the PCSO scheme was due to be rolled out and how they will be managed.

Councillor Pitt informed the panel that roll-out was currently scheduled for November.

Councillor Shires enquired about arrangements for the interim period between the ceasing of funding for community wardens and the roll-out of the PCSO scheme.

Jamie Morris clarified that management issues were an issue for Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership and not the council but that the intention was to reduce the number of back office staff to enable more funding to be allocated to wardens.

Councillor McCracken thanked Mrs. Whitbrook for her comments and expressed a wish to see the issue of community wardens on LNP agendas. She also asked for confirmation that it had always been the plan for this scheme to be short-term, with the opportunity to review and improve when the scheme came to an end.

Councillor Pitt confirmed that this scheme has always been time limited.

Councillor Rochelle asked whether wardens would be able to apply for PCSO posts.

Chief Inspector Gilbert replied that community wardens would be able to apply for PCSO posts subject to interview.

Councillor Rochelle then asked if there is an age limit on community safety champions.

Councillor Pitt replied that he was not aware of such a limit.

Councillor Arif told the panel that he had been substantially involved in the warden scheme and that he had seen the importance of the role of passing information on from the public to the police and stated that no one is disputing the good work that wardens do. He then asked for clarity on their numbers and deployment.

Councillor Pitt replied that this would be affected by the amount of money available and that they were looking at new funding streams. He also stated in three years a great deal had changed and that a different initiative was required, which would lead to an increased presence of uniformed officers on the borough's streets.

The panel discussed the cost of maintaining the service as it is now.

Jamie Morris added that discussions had been conducted with New Deal for Communities (NDC) to explore the possibility of NDC areas paying for their own wardens and that WHG were interested in doing the same thing in the financial year 2007/08.

Councillor Young asked whether the grant application would be jeopardised on the basis of NRF funding being used for this purpose.

Jamie Morris replied that he saw no reason why this should happen and that the idea of funding wardens through NRF was within the objectives of the NRF.

Councillor Sarohi asked how community safety champions would be appointed and if they would be paid expenses. He also raised concerns that members of the public may be reluctant to report crime to the police.

Councillor Pitt replied that they would be interviewed as for any other job, and he added that it is not intended that community safety champions would be confronting people but that they would be tackling low-level environmental crime.

Dave Martin explained to the panel that currently the process was being managed by the strategic partnership and that discussions had not yet been held around how the transition to the future would be managed.

Councillor Robertson asked whether the reduction in service would affect the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) warden and Youth wardens.

Jamie Morris said that he wasn't aware of how the BME warden would be affected, but that the youth wardens were funded by the council and so would not be affected.

Chief Inspector Gilbert explained that changes to the Local Area Agreement (LAA) meant that continuing to fund the community warden scheme would mean that the 'safer and stronger' pillar of the LAA would require more money from the SWBP. It was concluded that in order to do so would mean committing a substantial amount of money which can not be justified when PCSOs are to be introduced and when there are huge demands on this money. Chief Inspector Gilbert explained that other local authorities were funding the community warden scheme but that he recognises that Walsall Council could not afford to do this. He further informed the group that the police were willing to house wardens at Darlaston police station and provide management support.

Councillor Rochelle asked how the PCSOs would be funded.

Jamie Morris informed the panel that this would be funded through the ODPM for three years.

Councillor Robertson stated that a cost benefit analysis had been undertaken and that it was estimated that the wardens had saved in the order of £4.5m of the life of the scheme. He asked if this was a realistic figure.

Chief Inspector Gilbert replied that the wardens had been valuable.

Councillor Arif referred to the three partners of the Walsall Housing Regeneration Agency (WHRA) and asked what Caldmore and Accord Housing Groups were planning to do.

Chief Inspector Gilbert replied that the agencies merely managed what they were given and did not contribute themselves.

Councillor Shires then expressed his concern that the discussion had not taken place earlier in the financial year and that no exit strategy had been proposed. He also expressed alarm that the council was entering into another short-term arrangement and discussed the possibility of the council's partners funding a scheme.

Councillor Pitt agreed that there was no exit strategy but that PCSOs were a way forward and added that wardens could apply for jobs as PCSOs. He added that decisions could not be made until the final decision on the level of government funding was obtained.

Councillor Shires further expressed concern that a call in had been necessary to find out and discuss these issues. He stated that before a decision had been made by Cabinet it should have been taken to the Scrutiny panel.

The panel discussed issues around the possibility of partners funding warden schemes in the long-term. Councillor Robertson highlighted that partners who depend on safe communities should be involved in funding such schemes and should accept responsibility as partners.

Councillor Anson asked if the police would have authority over PCSOs and how they would be placed. Chief Inspector Gilbert explained that neighbourhood teams worked in communities and PCSOs would be briefed and managed by these teams. Allocation of PCSOs would be according to the needs of the area.

Councillor Robinson expressed concern that the work that had been done by the community wardens would be diminished in the interim time period between the community wardens scheme finishing and the PCSOs scheme starting. He said that he thought that there are a limited number of volunteers in the community and that he did not consider the concept of community safety champions to be an effective way forward.

Chief Inspector Gilbert reminded the panel that community safety champions were not designed to report 'people' but to report environmental crime such a litter and graffiti.

Councillor Pitt informed the panel that there is enthusiasm in communities for community safety champions and that it is anticipated that work would begin in early spring.

Councillor Rochelle expressed concern that the PCSO scheme would not be sustainable.

Chief Inspector Gilbert explained to the panel that the scheme would be funded for three years and he suggested that a review at that time would be appropriate as funding after which funding would be phased out.

Jamie Morris informed the panel that after 3 March 2006 there would be greater clarity with regards to resources and funding.

Councillor Robinson moved a resolution

- That there would be no cuts in the community warden scheme from 1 April until such time as the PCSO scheme comes on stream.

Councillor Robertson seconded the motion and suggested that this could be funded out of council reserve funds.

Council Shires said that he could not support this resolution until funding is organised and suggested asking cabinet to consider transitional arrangements.

Councillor Rochelle said that he did not consider it to be an effective decision to do take money out of reserves unless a saving is identified.

The panel discussed that this was not an effective/sustainable way of resolving a problem. The resolution moved by Councillor Robertson's was declined by a simple majority vote.

Councillor Shires suggested that a special meeting with cabinet be held to find out how the transitional period was to be dealt with. He also explored the possibility of obtaining funding from partners to fund this transitional period.

Councillor Shires then moved a resolution:

- That the panel wish to express their concern at the methodology used by the cabinet in arriving at its decision not to mainstream community warden scheme. Further that the panel express concern at the lack of an exit strategy in the current scheme and call for cabinet to canvas partners to enable the existing scheme to be phased out and the new scheme to be phased in.

Councillor Robertson seconded the motion.

Councillor Shires then moved that the meeting continue beyond 3 hours in duration.

Following discussions the motion was declined by a simple majority.

Councillor Arif stated that the panel may wish to request that cabinet come back to the panel with more information and moved:

- That officers consult with partners, through the Safer Walsall Borough Partnership, regarding possible additional contributions to the Community Wardens Service and to report back to a further meeting of the panel, following 3 March 2006 but before 21 March 2006, to discuss how the scheme can be funded in the transitional period before the implementation of the new Police Community Support Officer scheme.

The motion was seconded by Councillor Rochelle.

Following further discussion the motion was carried by a simple majority.

RESOLVED

That the Regeneration, Environment, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommend that officers consult with partners, through the Safer Walsall Borough Partnership, regarding possible additional contributions to the Community Wardens Service and to report back to a further meeting of the above panel, following 3 March 2006 but before 21 March 2006, to discuss how the scheme can be funded in the transitional period before the implementation of the new Police Community Support Officer scheme

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 9.15 p.m.

Signed.....

Date.....