



Walsall Council

Minutes of the **MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 19th April 2010 at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House.

Present

Councillor J.G. O'Hare (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillor A.G. Clarke (Deputy Mayor)

" K. Aftab
" A.J.A. Andrew
" T.G. Ansell
" D.A. Anson
" M. Arif
" C.M. Ault
" J.M. Barton
" L.A. Beeley
" M.A. Bird
" C. Bott
" P. Bott
" R. Carpenter
" B. Cassidy
" J. R. Cook
" S.P. Coughlan
" C.U. Creaney
" B.A. Douglas-Maul
" A.E. Griffiths
" A.D. Harris
" L.A. Harrison
" E.F. Hughes
" P.F. Hughes
" M. Longhi
" S.W. Madeley

Councillor Mrs. B.V. McCracken

" Mushtaq Ahmed
" M. Nazir
" T.S.Oliver
" A.J. Paul
" G. Perry
" K. Phillips
" D.J. Pitt
" M.G. 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
" R.A. Walker
" G. Wilkes
" V.G. Woodruff
" M. Yasin
" Zahid Ali

94. **Apologies**

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Chambers, Flower, Johnson, Martin, Munir, E.E. Pitt, Underhill and Young.

95. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22nd February, 2010, copies having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as a correct record and signed.

96. **Declarations of interest**

The following members declared their interest in the items indicated:

Councillor Oliver	Non-Executive Director of NHS Walsall
Councillor Robertson	Question relating to European funding – member of company which received European funding

97. **Petitions**

The following petitions were submitted:

- (1) Councillor Creaney – restoration of the Bell Public House in Willenhall Town Centre
- (2) Councillor Andrew – parking restrictions on Walsall Road, Darlaston

98. **Questions by members**

(1) **Proffitt Street flats**

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

Given that on 4 February 2010, a written answer by the Minister of State (West Midlands), Regional Affairs, in the House of Commons revealed that with regard to the local authorities with the highest proportion of social rented dwellings that are vacant for six months or more, Walsall is rated the second highest in the country with a figure of 831 vacant properties (3.4% of social dwelling stock), can the portfolio holder tell me, this Council and the public:

- (a) how many years and months has the block of flats 79 to 101 Proffitt Street, Walsall been empty and why and
- (b) how many more years and months is the block of flats likely to remain an empty, boarded up eyesore in this residential area?

Councillor Andrew said that the properties belonged to WHG and not this Council. A letter was sent to Councillor Smith from the Chief Executive on 17 April which explained the situation. WHG would be able to give a date for the demolition as this matter was being discussed at their next Board meeting.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Was Councillor Andrew fully aware that from the day of his election he had been in correspondence with WHG and it was out of frustration that he was asking this question tonight? The fact was that the property was an eyesore and he was having no success with the matter and hoped that something could be resolved.

Councillor Andrew replied that he was not aware of this and asked why Councillor Smith was raising the matter just before the local elections.

(2) European funding

Following a written request from Councillor Oliver, the Mayor allowed Councillor Nazir to ask the question and not Councillor Robertson as stated on the Council Summons.

Councillor Nazir asked the following question of Councillor Towe:

What is the up-to-date loss to this Council and the Council tax payers of Walsall of the decommitment level of European Regional Development Grant and European Social Funds?

Councillor Towe replied that the relevant ERDF programme totalled £4.205m, from which £2.604m had been de-committed, and from the ESF programme, totalling £8.053m, £268k had been de-committed.

In total £2.872m had been de-committed from a total programme of £12.258m.

On the point of the up-to-date loss to the Council and Council taxpayers, Councillor Towe said that as Council tax income was only one source of income received, the financial cost of the de-commitment was only proportionally borne by the Council taxpayer. The proportionate cost to the Council tax payer in 2008/09, when the de-commitment was accounted for, would be £1.235m. The balance of £1.567m would come from external funding.

Councillor Towe said that this information was presented to the Audit Committee on 24th March.

Councillor Nazir asked the following supplementary question:

Do you agree that if this loss had been prevented it could have saved £3.8 million in cuts?

Councillor Towe said he could not accept this.

(3) Telecommunication services

Councillor Robertson asked the following question of Councillor Towe:

What was the cost to the Council in the last financial year of telecommunication services broken down into (a) blackberries with call costs, (b) other mobile phones and call costs and (c) landline telephone costs including line rentals and the internal phone network and what level of redundant telephone lines are still in operation?

Councillor Towe replied that the number of T-Mobile blackberry devices was 497 with rental costs of £62,267 with call costs of £20,990. There were 1,298 T-Mobile voice/phone devices at a rental of £8,327 with call costs of £75,441. With regard to BT landlines, there were 585 lines at a rental cost of £193,285 and call costs of £65,512.

Councillor Robertson asked the following supplementary question:

We should encourage people to use internal systems as much as possible?

Councillor Towe agreed.

(4) Walsall Library and Museum

Councillor Robertson asked the following question of Councillor Harris:

What is the budgeted costs for the refurbishment of the central Walsall library and museum with details of any cost overruns, changes in contract or investigations into the procuring process?

Councillor Harris replied that the budget cost for the refurbishment of the Central Library and Museum was £250,000, provision for which had been made within the Council's 2009/10 capital programme. There were no overrun costs and could not give an exact figure for the actual costs at this stage as the final account was being agreed, but he confirmed that it would be comfortably in budget.

There had been no changes to the contract. The project was procured in accordance with financial and contract rules and was fully compliant with EU procurement rules. There were no current investigations in the procurement process. It was very important that the historic value of the buildings needed to be restored as well as looking at safety issues.

Councillor Harris said that in August 2008 property services viewed the stonework and on investigation damage was found which resulted in work being carried out to restore the integrity of the building.

(5) Spending cuts

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Towe:

“Would the appropriate Portfolio holder/Cabinet member tell me, this Council and the public whether he accepts that;

- (a) morale amongst the staff employed by Walsall MBC is at an all time low, no doubt exacerbated by scaremongering statements that suggest that up to 50% of the Council's workforce (approximately 5000 workers) could lose their jobs depending upon the severity of cuts made by the next Government and
- (b) that one of the motives for such speculation is to pave the way for pay cuts in real terms for local authority employees over the next few years by scaring employees into believing that the choice is pay cuts or job losses?
- (c) that a future Government could drastically minimise or even possibly avoid spending cuts to local authorities, including Walsall MBC if, instead, it made other choices such as; deciding to put greater effort into collecting the estimated £125 billions of tax avoided and evaded mainly by the very wealthy sections of our society, deciding to scrap the replacement Trident nuclear submarine programme and save approximately £97 billion over the next 25 years and deciding to pull British troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan that has so far cost the British taxpayers £18 billion as well as the priceless loss of life?”

With regard to part (a) of the question Councillor Towe said that the recession and consequent concerns about public spending levels had created much speculation in the press about the effects on local authority services and jobs. There was no doubt that staff would be concerned by these reports and that this would affect the morale of staff in Walsall as elsewhere. However, we had no reason to believe that morale was as low as suggested and Walsall Council employees were continuing to provide high levels of service to the people of borough. Members are aware from discussions over last few months as James Walsh gave a presentation on this issue.

In reply to part (b) Councillor Towe said that Council was committed to providing the best possible services to the people of Walsall within the funding available. One way in which we would ensure this was by providing good support and accurate information to staff and their representatives and engaging them in decision making about the future.

With regard to part (c), Councillor Towe said that he could not verify the figures used.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

In noting that morale is not at an all time low, would you not accept that all main parties are attacking wages and pensions and that all parties are the same?

Councillor Towe said he could not accept this and hoped that when the Conservative government was in post these issues would be dealt with.

(6) New Deal for Communities – new Pavilion in Leamore Park

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

“As the Council is the accountable body for New Deal for Communities, could the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public

- (a) Why it is that New Deal for Communities has not honoured its earlier commitment to build a new Pavilion in Leamore Park for which plans were drawn up and presented at public meetings some years ago and
- (b) what has since happened to the money allocated for this project, assuming that at the time, money was budgeted for it and finally
- (c) what assistance, if any, will now be given to helping the Blakenall & Leamore Senior Citizens Club to remain with a base in the Park following the closure and demolition of the Council owned old Pavilion that they had used since 1974?”

With regard to part (a) of the question Councillor Andrew said that the proposals which were drawn up to develop the park were a progression of the £1.6m investment in the park over previous years by NHCE. The pavilion was part of a package which was being looked at within wider proposals for the development of a Trust to provide community maintenance and management of the park in the long term.

However, after exhaustive work from Senior Officers at Walsall Council and NHCE it was not possible to make a viable business case within the funding timescales of 2008/09 NDC grant programme. As a result of this NDC grant was at risk of being lost and so the Directors of NHCE decided in March 2009 to stop any further development work on the Trust proposals.

He said that it should be noted that the viability of the business case raised a number of issues:

- The ability of the Council to pass responsibility for the park to a separate company from the 1930s Trust agreement under which the park is held.

- Income generation and sustainability of a new facility
- Membership of the BLSCC and demand (exclusivity and numbers).

All which needed to be addressed to the satisfaction of grant rules.

In reply to part (b) Councillor Andrew stated that the funding identified in the 2008/09 Delivery Plan was allocated to alternative projects within the NDC area, the majority to the affordable housing scheme “Homebuy”, a project to assist people getting on the housing ladder.

Finally with regard to part (c) Councillor Andrew said that Friends of Leamore Park (which includes in its membership representatives from BLSCC) were working with the Councils external funding officer to identify possible sources of external funding for both the pavilion and BLSCC. NHCE had no further plans to develop any further facilities within the park in the foreseeable future.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Would Councillor Andrew like to comment on the view in Blakenall that it is a question of new deal for the few, raw deal for many and no deal for most?.

Councillor Andrew said that you could not please all of the people all of the time.

(7) **New Deal for Communities – Communications budget**

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

“As the Council is the accountable body for New Deal for Communities, could the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public;

- (a) What was New Deal’s “Communications” budget for each of the last 5 financial years (2009/10, 2008/9, 2007/8, 2006/7, 2005/6)
- (b) What is New Deal’s “Communications” budget for 2010/11 and finally
- (c) How much money does the cumulative amount spent by New Deal on “communications” in the above years (including the current year) equate to “per household in the New Deal’s footprint area?”

With regard to parts (a) and (b) of the question Councillor Andrew responded as follows and this amounted to £41.37 per household:

Communications Budget	NDC Grant Annual Allocation	Annual Comms Budget	Cost per household (approx 4,570)	% of Annual NDC Grant Allocation
2005/06	£8.774m	£190,585	£41.70	2.2%
2006/07	£6.570m	£226,049	£49.46	3.4%
2007/08	£5.682m	£287,389	£62.89	5.1%
2008/09	£6.412m	£185,307	£40.55	2.9%
2009/10	£5.620m	£150,699	£32.98	2.7%
Budget 2010/11	£2.508m	£94,485	£20.68	3.8%
Total over period 2005 - 2011	£35.566m	£1,134,514	£248.26	3.2%

In reply to part (c) Councillor Andrew said that there were approximately 4,570 households in the New Deal foot print area and over the six year period, the cumulative spend was £1,134,514 which equated to £248.26 per household.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Does Councillor Andrew accept that £200 per household was an excessive amount in the footprint area?

Councillor Andrew said that this should be addressed to the Board of Directors. People did not engage in this area and he thought it was good value for money

(8) **Senior Citizens Clubs and Sons of Rest Clubs**

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor McCracken:

Can the Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public;

- (a) How many Senior Citizens Clubs and Sons of Rest Clubs there are in the Borough that are financially supported by Walsall Council's Social Care & Inclusion department, mainly with regard to premises and running costs and
- (b) which Senior Citizens Clubs and Sons of Rest Clubs have been informed that future financial support from Social, Care and Inclusion is no longer forthcoming and
- (c) whether it is the Council's intention to withdraw financial support from all of these clubs at the same time or rather to pick them off one by one if and when the time comes to condemn the buildings being used as not fit for purpose and

- d) whether you think it fair and equitable for a situation to prevail whereby some Clubs in certain parts of the Borough will continue to receive support with running costs whilst others, whose Council-owned premises have been allowed to deteriorate to a state of being “not fit for purpose” will not receive such similar support?

Councillor McCracken replied to the question as follows:

- (a) 14 Senior Citizens Clubs and Sons of Rest
- (b) None
- (c) No intention to withdraw financial support
- (d) Not equitable or fair.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Why have you picked on Blakenall senior citizens?

Councillor McCracken said that the situation was unfortunate and regrettable. In the 1990's when community development was at its height dozens of clubs were set up from the cradle to the grave with no proper provision for their future. This was an historical situation and over time properties housing the organisations had become unfit for purpose. Organisations that had found themselves homeless would be and continue to be offered alternative premises. Leamore Sons of Rest was not a suitable building and the Council would assist groups and organisations with funding through grants and outside applications.

99. **Recommendations of Cabinet**

(a) **Early years strategy**

The report to Cabinet on 17th March 2010 was submitted.

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

Resolved

That the Early Years Strategy as set out in Appendix A of the report, be approved.

(b) **Connecting to Opportunities Fund**

The report to Cabinet on 17th March 2010 was submitted.

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

Resolved

That approval be given to the Council acting as the accountable body for the Connecting to Opportunities Fund.

100. Recommendation of Development Control Committee - Change in name to Planning Committee

It was **moved** by Councillor M.G. Pitt, duly seconded and:

Resolved

That the name of the Development Control Committee be changed to "Planning Committee" from its meeting on 27th May 2010.

101. State of Walsall debate

The report was submitted.

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

Resolved

That Council Procedure Rule 17 be amended to allow for the debate to be held at the first ordinary meeting of Council in the Municipal Year.

102. Local Government Act, 1972 – attendance at meetings

The report was submitted.

Resolved

That approval be granted to allow an extension of absence until the end of the municipal year 2010/11 to Councillor Eileen Pitt as a consequence of her ill health.

At this point in the meeting, the Council sat as charitable trustees when considering the following item when the normal Council procedure rules did not apply.

103. Annual report of Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee

The report was submitted.

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

Resolved

That the report be noted.

104. Notice of motion – Gardening recycling scheme

The Council noted that the report should refer to Councillor Smith and not Councillor Oliver.

The report was submitted.

The following motion, notice of which had been duly given was **moved** by Councillor Smith, duly seconded and:

Resolved

This Council congratulates all those who have played a part in bringing about the policy and its implementation this year which for the first time, now extends the “Brown Bin” Gardening Recycling Scheme to every household in the Borough with a garden. This will not only be welcomed by thousands more households, now able to be included in the scheme but will also add to Walsall’s recycling success story to date.”

105. Notice of motion – Bank charges

The notice of motion in the names of Councillor P. Hughes and I. Shires was withdrawn.

106. Notice of motion – The Surgery Abbey Square, Mossley

The report was submitted.

The following motion, notice of which had been duly given was **moved** by Councillor Phillips and seconded by Councillor Robertson:

This Council notes and shares the concerns raised by local residents as to the proposed closure of The Surgery, Abbey Square on the Mossley estate, Bloxwich, following GP retirements. We therefore call on NHS Walsall to extend the current interim arrangements in order to allow full consultation and to explore options for continuing to provide primary care within the local Mossley community.

Amendment moved by Councillor D.J. Pitt and duly seconded:

That the following words be added to the motion:

“whilst working towards addressing the general lack of GP services located in the north west of our Borough and secondly striving towards reducing the east west mortality divide that sees premature death occurring on average 8 years earlier in the west of Walsall.”

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared carried.

The substantive motion was put to the vote and declared carried and it was:

Resolved

This Council notes and shares the concerns raised by local residents as to the proposed closure of The Surgery, Abbey Square on the Mossley estate, Bloxwich, following GP retirements. We therefore call on NHS Walsall to extend the current interim arrangements in order to allow full consultation and to explore options for continuing to provide primary care within the local Mossley community, whilst working towards addressing the general lack of GP services located in the north west of our Borough and secondly striving towards reducing the east west mortality divide that sees premature death occurring on average 8 years earlier in the west of Walsall.

The meeting terminated at 7.50 p.m.