

NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday 4 December 2008 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present

- Councillor C Towe (Chair)
- Councillor C Creaney (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor L. Beeley
- Councillor R. Martin
- Councillor D. Pitt
- Councillor I. Robertson
- Councillor B. Tweddle

Officers present

Jamie Morris	Executive Director – Neighbourhood Services
Tim Challans	Assistant Director – Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning
Steve Pretty	Head of Engineering & Transportation
Craig Goodall	Acting Principal Scrutiny Officer

53/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mushtaq Ahmed and V. Woodruff.

54/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor B. Tweddle substitutes for Councillor Mushtaq Ahmed for the duration of the meeting.

55/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest.

56/08 NEIGHBOURHOODS DIRECTORATE BUDGET OPTIONS 2009/10

Members considered recommending budget proposals to Cabinet for the Neighbourhoods Directorate for 2009/10.

Jamie Morris gave a presentation highlighting the range of services which the directorate provided and the significant issues affecting each service.

(annexed)

Following consideration of Jamie Morris' presentation the Panel reviewed each service area and considered making recommendations.

Adult Learning

Adult Learning was nearly 100% funded through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) so therefore had a minimal impact of the Council's budget.

Members noted the importance of ensuring effectiveness in this area due to targets set in the Local Area Agreement (LAA).

Arts and Events

Following questions from a Member of the Panel it was reported that there was no increase in income as yet from the refurbishment of Darlaston Town Hall. Investigations were being undertaken to decide whether or not to use the buildings for civil ceremonies. A Member urged officers to maximise the income generating possibilities of this venue.

The Panel discussed the Forest Arts Centre. Jamie Morris noted that the centre currently received £600,000 through the Standards Fund. This grant had been in place for two years and he was hopeful that it would continue. In response to a question about what course of action would be taken should the grant end Jamie Morris explained that a sponsor for the venue could be found or even charges to schools could be introduced.

A Member raised concerns about the cost of using Council contractors to switch on the Willenhall Christmas lights.

Catering

Members considered uptake on free school meals (FSM). It was noted that current provision was down 10%. Tim Challans reported that the introduction of healthy options FSM had seen a reduction in FSM take up which needed to be improved. Jamie Morris reported that with the current economic downturn it was likely that FSM provision could need to be increased. It was noted that the Council provided FSM for all primary schools and in the borough plus six secondary schools.

Community Safety

Members were informed that the budget for this area was £1.4m.

In response to a question Members were informed that the Council contributed £400,000 a year towards policing projects. Following further questions Jamie Morris reported that the Council and the NHS were the major funding contributors in this area. Other partners contributed mainly through resources and activity.

The Panel requested that investigation be undertaken to develop more pooled budget and joint appointments in this area.

Customer Services

Some Members questioned the use of the Customer Service bus and questioned whether or not local council offices could be opened on Saturdays rather than sending the bus to sit in a local car park? Tim Challans noted that only Willenhall and Darlaston had local offices. He explained that the customer service bus could deliver a wide range of services and required only two staff so was more cost effective than opening an area office.

The cost of the bus was £50,000 a year. It was suggested that the possibility of sponsorship for the bus be investigated.

Members discussed reducing 'failure demand' customer contact and whether or not this would save money? Jamie Morris reassured Members that reducing all avoidable contact with the council would save money.

Elections

A Member suggested that the Council changed its election cycle to all out elections once every four years to make savings on the current election cycle of a third of Members each year.

Members enquired about the cost of gaining a copy of the marked election register.

Engineering and Transport

Members requested additional information on the council changing its car parking ticket machines to ones which printed registration numbers to prevent customers swapping tickets.

In response to a question Steve Pretty explained that car parks provided an income of £300,000 a year to the Council. However, this was still short of its income target. Jamie Morris added the during the last few financial years car parks had achieved their income target so the current under achievement was probably linked to the current economic downturn.

A Member suggested introducing charges on all Council owned car parks. Jamie Morris suggested that a further option could be to introduce on-street car parking charges. Steve Pretty reported that on-street parking charges would bring a net income of £100,000 a year to the Council after the installation of parking meters. Members were not in favour of introducing on-street car parking charges.

Following a question Steve Pretty informed Members that the Council employed 3 road inspectors.

In reply to a question from the Chairman, Jamie Morris reported that an investment figure for the Tarmac contract had not yet been agreed. There were a number of sources that made up this fund including the Local Transport Plan and capital programme.

Steve Pretty added that the cost of highways maintenance was going to rise with the Tarmac contract but in return the Council was going to receive a better quality service, reduced procurement and less ongoing maintenance.

The Panel discussed gully cleaning. Steve Pretty reported that this was a part of the Tarmac contract but Severn Trent water could also be responsible. The Panel requested that Steve Pretty write to all Members to identify problem gully's.

Green Spaces

Maintenance of the boroughs Green Spaces cost £1.8m a year.

Members expressed concern about the poor level of grounds maintenance service that was currently received. It was feared that if the current level of service continued then the green flag status on two of the boroughs parks could be lost. Jamie Morris noted that some grounds maintenance could be improved and explained that it was planned to deliver a consolidated grounds maintenance service in the future.

Some Members noted that employing park rangers would help to maintain local parks and act as a deterrent to anti-social behaviour.

A Member added that he felt the boroughs parks had improved. He felt that the Council should offer more help to local community organisations who assisted in the upkeep of parks to bid for external funding. This would bring extra money into the Council to upkeep its parks.

Libraries and Heritage

The Panel discussed the number of volunteers employed by the Libraries and Heritage service (not including the New Art Gallery) compared to neighbouring local authorities and queried whether or not the use of volunteers could increase. Tim Challans explained that the reason neighbouring authorities such as Birmingham used higher amounts of volunteers was because they had more museums. Museums were much more likely to use volunteers than libraries as libraries required professional staff with qualifications. The Panel noted this but wished for the potential of using volunteers in libraries to be increased to be investigated in light of the number of libraries that existed in the borough. The Panel also asked for data on the number of staff who were customer facing and the number back office staff.

Tim Challans reported that, for its size, Walsall had more libraries than required to meet the national library standards. One of the national library standards was for all local residents to live within two miles of a library. In response to a question from the Chairman, Tim Challans reported that there were a number of libraries in the borough that could close whilst still maintaining the national library standards. Jamie Morris added that all branch libraries could be closed. A Member noted that libraries were being closed in Wolverhampton.

The following were the responses to questions asked by Members:

- There were 16 libraries in Walsall
- Low usage libraries were located at: Rushall, South Walsall, Walsall Wood and New Invention.
- The Council also operated 3 library buses which well used
- Security guards were employed at Beechdale and Willenhall libraries only
- The majority of costs for each library was staff
- Many people accessed libraries to use computers and view the internet

Members were of the opinion that the library network could be carefully rationalised if necessary and requested library usage figures for the borough including a breakdown of loans and numbers of PC users per library.

New Art Gallery

It was noted that the Arts Council would need to be consulted if the Council planned to make cuts to current funding levels.

Public Protection

The Chairman acknowledged that a lot of savings had been made in this area in previous years.

Following a question from a Member of the Panel Jamie Morris informed the Panel that the Council pursued all public protection prosecutions and publicised them as a deterrent to others.

Members noted the required future investment at the Crematorium, following a question Jamie Morris reported that the investment required investment would be over £1m. Members asked if there were any examples of the private sector taking over the operation of local authority crematoriums? Officers were unaware of any examples of this taking place and agreed to investigate this matter further. Members also requested crematorium usage data.

Sports Development

Members were informed that the Bryntisilio facility cost the Council £400,000 a year for 11,000 visits. The facility was used in term time by local schools and then by a camp trust in the school holidays which meant that there was limited availability for any commercial use of the premises. The facility was leased annually and there was capacity at other similar centres nearby to accommodate Walsall's requirements.

Members requested that investigations be undertaken to establish cheaper alternatives to the Bryntisilio centre.

Sports and Leisure Centres

Tim Challans reported that there was no statutory duty for the Council to operate leisure centres. He noted that there were current issues concerning the attractiveness of the leisure centres. Free swimming was now available for under 16's and over 65's and it was hoped that this would increase paid use from other family members.

The Chairman noted that this was the opportunity to question how many leisure centres the Council operated and consider whether or not they were needed.

A Member noted that with the 2012 London Olympics approaching an increase in use could be recorded.

Tim Challans noted that the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme could present opportunities for the future of the boroughs leisure centres. The strategic review of leisure centres was delayed whilst this opportunity was being investigated.

Street Pride

The Chairman asked if privatisation of the services that Street Pride offered had been considered? Jamie Morris reported that other than highways maintenance no other services had been considered. He added that there was potential for the waste

collection service to be operated by an outside contractor but this would have to wait until after the new recycling scheme had been introduced.

Jamie Morris acknowledged that a large amount of finance had been lost along with the Walsall Housing Group contract following a question from a Member.

In response to another question from the Panel Jamie Morris reported that sponsorship of roundabouts; planters and street lighting had not been as successful as hoped. This was currently being investigated by an outside company.

Members requested data on the costs of other local authorities grass cutting, street cleansing and litter picking operations. Jamie Morris explained that this data was available, however, it would still be difficult to compare like-for-like operations.

Walsall Partnership

In response to a question Stuart Wootton reported that the costs of operating Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNP's) was £1.9m a year. Some Members questioned the value of LNP's whereas others believed they were an important body. It was felt that LNP's should be reviewed and areas of good practice identified to enable all LNP's to be more effective.

A Member raised a question about Community Action Tasking (CAT) groups which received no input from Members. Jamie Morris explained that CAT had been piloted in the Blakenall and Bloxwich LNP area as a way to action concerns and tasks raised at LNP meetings. This pilot had been successful and was set to be rolled out over all LNP areas.

Some Members expressed concern about the introduction of CAT and expressed the desire to consider the issue before it was sent to Cabinet for approval.

Resolved

That Cabinet consider the following resolutions from Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel:

Budget

- 1. investigations be undertaken to identify opportunities where the numbers of volunteers and other third sector input could be employed by the Libraries and Heritage Service;**
- 2. ensure that income generation possibilities are maximised at Darlaston Town Hall;**
- 3. negotiations be undertaken to secure increased financial contributions from partners towards community safety priorities;**
- 4. further opportunities for pooled budgets with partners should be sought at all levels with particular reference to community safety activity;**

5. further opportunities for joint appointments with partners should be sought at all levels with particular reference to community safety activity;
6. the possibility of sponsorship for the First Stop Bus should be investigated;
7. there be no extension of current car parking charges;
8. assistance be provided to voluntary and community safety organisations with their external funding bids associated with the boroughs parks;
9. investigations be undertaken to establish the possibilities of the Councils crematorium being operated by the private sector;
10. investigations be undertaken to establish potential and cheaper alternative facilities to the Bryntisilio centre;
11. consideration be given to delivering Streetpride services through the private sector;

Information

12. Tim Challans to advise the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel of the numbers of staff employed by the libraries service and their roles within the service;
13. Library usage figures be provided to the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel to identify low use centres with the view to rationalising the local network to make future savings whilst still meeting national library standards;
14. Councillor Tweddle be advised of any costs incurred by the Council to fund dog training classes;
15. the cost of providing marked electoral registers to Members be provided to the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel;
16. investigations be undertaken to establish the cost of modifying car parks machines to include functionality to print car registration numbers on tickets;
17. Steve Pretty to write to all Members of the Council to ask them to identify problem drains in their wards which are constantly flooding;
18. the number of prosecutions made under public protection legislation be reported to the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel;
19. the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel be informed of the number of deaths and cremations in the borough per year;
20. financial benchmarking data be provided to the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel on costs for:
 - a. grass cutting/grounds maintenance

- b. Street cleaning
- c. Litter picking

21. the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel be provided with the full costs of resourcing Local Neighbourhood Partnerships and their sub-groups;

Other

22. no decision be taken by Cabinet on the establishment of Community Action Teams until the issue has been considered by the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

57/08 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting of the Panel was noted at 22 January 2009.

The meeting terminated at 8.44 p.m.

Chair:

Date: