

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday 29 November, 2011 in a Conference Room at the Council House

Panel members present: Councillor L. Harrison (Chair)
Councillor I. Azam
Councillor S. Coughlan
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor I. Shires
Councillor A. Young

Co-opted member present: Mr. Philip Holmes J.P.

Portfolio Holder present Councillor Z. Ali (Communities and Partnerships)

Officers present: Jamie Morris - Executive Director (Neighbourhoods)
Keith Stone - Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods)
Chris Holliday - Head of Leisure and Community Health
Steve Billings - Bereavement and Registration Services Manager
Tracey Evans - Lead Accountant
Andrea Gabbitas - Policy Manager (Police Authority)
Craig Goodall - Scrutiny Officer

Witness present: Chief Superintendent Kevin Bullas - West Midlands Police

110/11 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Creaney, K. Sears and F. Westley.

111/11 Substitutions

Councillor L. Jeavons substituted for Councillor F. Westley.

112/11 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

113/11 Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 October, 2011, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

114/11 Budget Consultation Feedback 2012/13

Members considered the report to Cabinet that reported the responses to the consultation that is taking place on what local people's priorities are and how they think they should be reflected in the budget.

The Lead Accountant presented the consultation findings that were in the remit of the Panel. This included that according to residents and stakeholders Leisure, sport and recreation is the priority spending area for 2012/13.

Resolved

That the budget consultation feedback be noted.

115/11 Second Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals 2012/13 for Consultation

The Panel considered changes to the first draft budget reported to Cabinet on 14 September, 2011, including the effect of the announced Council Tax freeze grant for 2012/13. The report also contained details of those savings proposals requiring an executive decision.

The Executive Director (Neighbourhoods) highlighted the changes to the proposed revenue savings in the Communities and Partnerships and Leisure and Culture Portfolios. He also highlighted savings proposed in the Catering Service following changes in the management arrangements of local schools.

The Panel discussed issues around libraries and were re-assured that there were no budget proposals to close libraries in the 2012/13 budget. Members were advised that discussions had taken place on the future library service which could include community run facilities. The Panel urged capacity building work with local voluntary and community sector organisations to continue.

Resolved

That the draft revenue and capital budget proposals for 2012/13 be noted.

116/11 Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2011/12

The Panel were informed of the predicted revenue and capital position for 2012/13 based on performance for Quarter 2 (1 April to 30 September 2011) for services within the remit of the Panel.

The Executive Director (Neighbourhoods) reported that a net overspend of £46,000 was currently predicted. This was mainly due to under-achievement of an income target in the Creative Development Team. He re-assured Members that everything possible would be done to reduce this overspend.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

117/11 Police Front Desks

The Panel considered the issue of police front desks (PFDs) in Walsall.

Chief Superintendent Kevin Bullas explained the current situation to the Panel. The principle points of his presentation were as follows:-

- West Midlands Police (WMP) was required to make £126 million of savings over four years;
- As part of the need to make these savings, services were being re-designed. Three priority areas had been identified as critical to the success of WMP. These were:-
 - 24 hour response to incidents;
 - Sufficient capacity to take offenders into custody;
 - 24 hour contact centres;
- WMP had reduced 21 Operational Command Units (OCUs) to 10. This included making as many OCUs as possible coterminous with Local Authority boundaries. This was the case in Walsall down to Ward level;
- It was proposed to close the PFD at Bloxwich police station between the hours of 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 a.m. This decision was based on foot fall as there were, on average, only 2 visitors an hour to the PFD. Five staff would be re-deployed. The remaining facilities at the station, such as the custody suite, would remain open 24 hours a day;
- Walsall police station would retain a 24 hour PFD and was approximately 2 miles away from Bloxwich;
- Across the region, 10 PFDs were closing, however, all residents would be within 4½ miles of a 24 hour PFD;
- A consultation was currently taking place on the proposals. It had been unfortunate that the proposals had been published in the press before consultation letters had reached significant number of stakeholders.

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- Members were concerned about the perceived lack of a co-ordinated communication plan to consult on the proposed changes. The majority of Members had heard about the proposals through the press first;
- Concerns were expressed about the lack of information in the consultation letter once it had been received;

- Concerns were expressed about the extremely short timeframe of the consultation which implied the proposals were a fait accompli;
- Concerns were expressed about the reduced service to the public who had to travel further to report concerns to a PFD;
- It was noted that Willenhall residents would experience a double blow as access to both Wednesbury and Bloxwich PFDs were set to be reduced;
- Concerns were expressed that feelings of insecurity for local residents could increase due to the potential reduced opening hours of PFDs.

The Panel were informed by their Co-opted Member, Philip Holmes, J.P., that the Police Authority were seeking to extend the consultation period until 31 January, 2012. Members strongly supported this proposal as it was important that local people were able to contribute their thoughts and ideas for an open and transparent consultation process.

Resolved

That the Chair write to the Police Authority expressing the Panel's views on the proposed closures of police front desks, including:-

- Members concerns on the consultation process and its short time span and the lack of information available as part of the consultation;
- Support of the Panel in the Police Authority proposal to extend the consultation deadline until 31 January, 2012.

118/11 Response to Petition to Council on 7 November 2011 regarding Cemetery Rules and Regulations

Members considered a petition regarding the management of lawn memorials in the Council's cemeteries following the receipt of a petition to Council on 7 November, 2011.

The Executive Director (Neighbourhoods) explained the cemetery rules and regulations to the Panel and highlighted that a number of issues had arisen with a small number of Muslim graves where families had added a strong demarcation and memorials to the grave which created difficulties for maintenance. Following the raising of issues from Muslim graves, consultation work had taken place with the Union of Muslim Organisations (UMO) which led to an agreed way forward of graves being left with a raised crown that was significant enough to denote a grave but still low enough for a motorised lawnmower to pass over. He explained that enforcement action only took place after a written letter to the grave rights owner had been sent first requesting removal of the unauthorised memorials.

The Chair invited the lead petitioners, Javed Rahmen and Kosor Praveen to address the Panel. The following were the principle points of their presentation:-

- Islamic etiquette made it a sin to step on graves as it causes pain to the dead. It was not acceptable for a motorised lawnmower to pass over a grave;

- It was alleged that Articles 8 and 9 of the Human Rights Act had been breached;
- No consultation had taken place prior to the agreement of cemetery rules and regulations by Cabinet;
- The Council's previous tolerance of demarked Muslim graves, despite their breach of cemetery rules and regulations, had caused upset to many families when letters were received requesting them to remove articles that had been added to the grave sites;
- Families were only informed of cemetery rules and regulations after their loved ones had been buried, therefore, there was no opportunity to make informed choices;
- It was suggested that Muslim graves should be allowed to be crowned with grass trimmed by a strimmer rather than a lawnmower;
- Other Local Authorities, for example Slough, were able to deal with this issue sensitively.

The Chair invited Matloob Hussain, Chair of the UMO, to address the meeting. The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- The Council's decision to enforce its cemetery rules and regulations and remove additional memorials from grave sites had caused concern in the Muslim community;
- Upon hearing of the enforcement action taking place, the UMO called a meeting to discuss the issue to agree a way forward. UMO took the advice of Islamic Scholars to help develop a way forward;
- This had led to a meeting with senior officers and Councillors where it had been agreed for Muslim graves to be crowned;
- It was a sin to step on a grave and it would be preferable not to tend Muslim graves with lawnmowers.

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- The cemetery rules and regulations had been in place for a number of years and had been developed to provide a framework to manage cemeteries for the benefit of all users. The Council was simply enforcing these rules which had then highlighted the issues with Muslim graves. The Council had actively worked with the UMO to resolve these issues so as pro-actively communicating with the families of those graves which broke the rules;
- If grave crowns were too high, then it would not be possible to use motorised lawnmowers. This would increase the cost and time it took to maintain cemeteries. Previous use of strimming in cemeteries had caused a high number of complaints due to residual grass causing the cemetery to look untidy and stick to gravestones;

Members recognised this was a very sensitive issue which could only be solved through partnership working and negotiation.

Resolved

That Cabinet:-

- (1) undertake engagement with the lead petitioners and the Union of Muslim Organisations to seek agreement on the preferred method of tending to Muslim graves in Walsall;
- (2) investigate best practice with regard to Muslim graves elsewhere in the country;
- (3) cease enforcement action against those graves which currently breach cemetery rules and regulations until a preferred option for tending to Muslim graves has been agreed;
- (4) provide a report back to Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel on the outcome of this issue on or before 10 April 2012.

119/11 Work Programme 2011/12 and Forward Plan

The Panel considered its work programme and the latest version of Cabinet's Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

Resolved

That the following items be added to the Panel's work programme for 2011/12:-

- (a) The Art Gallery;
- (b) Illegal travellers.

120/11 Date of next meeting

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 6.00 p.m. on 17 January 2012.

The meeting terminated at 8.01 p.m.

Signed:

Date: