

AREA FORUM (OXTON AND PRENTON)

Tuesday, 3 February 2009

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	P Williams (Chair)	
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	A Bridson F Doyle	S Kelly P Southwood
	<u>Community Representatives</u>	Robbie Bell (Devonshire Park Residents' Association) Alan Dollery (Prenton Tenants' and Residents' Association)	Sarah Goulding (Friends of The Arno and Oxtton Fields)
	<u>Lead Officer</u>	Rob Beresford, Head of Regeneration	
	<u>Area Service Co-ordinator</u>	Louise Harland-Davies	
	<u>Wirral Primary Care Trust</u>	Martin McEwan	
	<u>Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust</u>	John Foster	
	<u>Merseyside Police</u>	Inspector Brian Griffiths	Inspector Paul Harrison
	<u>Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service</u>	Ben Ryder	
	<u>Council Officers</u>	John Entwistle, Corporate Services Eddie Fleming, Corporate Services John Kenny, Community Safety	Beldev Singh, Technical Services Joey Smith, Technical Services
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillors	S Holbrook	
		Jack Cuffe Gary Doherty	Patrick Toosey

1 **WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES**

The Chair, Councillor Williams, welcomed area forum members and 16 members of the public to the meeting in Prenton.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Holbrook, Patrick Toosey, Gary Doherty and Jack Cuffe.

On behalf of the Area Forum, the Chair extended congratulations to Patrick Toosey on receiving the Wirral Award for services to the Oxton Society and other charities, and best wishes to Jack Cuffe, who is in hospital.

2 **MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING FROM OCTOBER 2008 FORUM**

Matters arising:

The Area Co-ordinator's report contained updates on issues raised at the last meeting under the headings –

- Environmental Improvements on Woodchurch Road
- Litter in the area of Prenton High School
- Anti-social behaviour in Slatey Road.
- Speeding traffic on Mount Road/Storeton Road

Inspector Griffiths commented the Slatey Road area had been flagged up at the last area forum meeting as a 'hot spot' for anti-social behaviour and the Police had been asked to do a case study on the area. There were only two reported incidents of anti-social behaviour in Slatey Road during the period under review.

Enforcement in the Mount Road/Storeton Road area January 2009 had resulted in the issue of 60 fixed penalty notices, the seizure of one vehicle for no insurance, and a prosecution for being in possession of a radar jammer.

Inspector Griffiths responded to a comment by Paul Heywood that uniformed police officers defeated the object of the exercise and that more speeding motorists would be caught if the operation was more covert.

The report on Wirral PCT Integrated Care is still being compiled and will be presented at the area forum meeting in June.

Mr Dowling, Oxton, commented that there was no reference in the minutes of 'the storm waiting to erupt' in terms of the proposal to close many public buildings.

The Chair replied that the proposals arising from the Council's Asset Review had been announced after the date of the area forum meeting; therefore the issue had not been discussed at the last meeting.

3 **AREA CO-ORDINATOR'S REPORT**

The Area Co-ordinator drew attention to reports on Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, Wirral Anti-Social Behaviour Team, Community Safety and Equality and

Diversity. Colleagues from the Traffic Management Division were present and they would give a presentation on Integrated Transport Funding to Area Forums reported on pages 23/24 of the report.

4 INTEGRATED TRANSPORT BLOCK

In the 2007/08 financial year, two of the eleven Area Forums had opted to have a share of the Integrated Transport Block at their disposal to fund local schemes. The improvements for Heswall/Pensby/Thingwall included the construction of a pedestrian refuge, and for Bromborough/Eastham, a contribution to a traffic calming scheme, direction signing and a lowered kerb crossing.

The Council's Cabinet had received very positive feedback on the success of the pilot in the two areas and is now inviting each area forum to consider whether it wishes to receive de-centralised funding in 2009/10. The money can be used to provide lowered kerb crossings, modest local signposting and road lining schemes. Officer input will be available to all area forums to guide them in the decision-making process. The total budget for the Integrated Transport block is £180,000 which, apportioned across the eleven Area Forums, would equate to around £16,300 per Area Forum. The alternative would be to administer the funding centrally.

The report contained a recommendation that –

This Area Forum has been requested to:-

- i note the type of traffic management schemes which can be funded through the Local Transport Plan Integrated Transport Block allocation.**
- ii provide views as to whether or not it wishes to receive a decentralised one-eleventh share of the Local Transport Plan Integrated Transport Block Allocation equating to approximately £16,300 per Area Forum to carry out scheme(s) of a traffic management/road safety nature in the local area.**

Andrew Taylor commented that whilst it would be a good idea to devolve money to local area forums, he had serious reservations about the undemocratic nature of area forums and about representatives who are not elected to the area forum being allowed to spend Council money. As a member of an area forum in the past, he had refused to be responsible for any decisions that involved spending public money.

Councillor Kelly agreed that Andrew Taylor had raised some challenging questions. He explained that area forums already have jurisdiction over two pots of money – one is community initiatives funding and the other is 'You Decide' funding. The area forum makes recommendations to Cabinet on how they wish to spend the money, and the Cabinet has the powers to override any recommendations if it was felt they were inappropriate or not feasible.

The Chair commented that the issue of non-elected area forums is also challenging, and is something that area forums throughout Wirral will want to look at when the constitution of area forums is reviewed.

Considerable discussion developed on democracy, constitutional issues, community representation and voting rights by members of the area forum.

The Chair confirmed that all the comments have been noted but the issue of community representation is a Wirral-wide issue, not something that can be resolved by this area forum in isolation. Vacancies for community representatives are advertised in the local Press, and anyone interested in become a community representative can complete an application form and submit it to the Council.

Paula Southwood commented that the agenda item under discussion – the integrated transport block – had become obscured by the discussion on issues that clearly this area forum does not have the power to address. She suggested that democracy and constitutional issues are considered as a specific agenda item at another meeting, and that attention is focussed at this meeting on whether or not this area forum wishes to receive decentralised funding.

Andrew Taylor stated that he agreed in principle that the money should be devolved, but he would like to see a more democratic approach.

The Chair stated that it would not be appropriate for everyone present to vote on the issue. She invited Elected Members on the area forum to vote whether they are in favour of the recommendation on page 26 of the report on the Allocation of Integrated Transport Funding to Area Forums.

The Elected Members on the Area Forum all voted in favour of the Chair's proposal to accept the recommendations outlined on page 26 of the report.

The Chair thanked the Council officers for the presentation.

5 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

John Entwistle, Corporate Services Department, gave a presentation on the Local Development Framework. The new style Development Plan is a single document that replaces the Unitary Development Plan for Wirral dated February 2000, and will operate alongside the Regional Spatial Strategy. The framework provides guidance for assessing planning applications and allocating land for new developments for the next 15-20 years.

The consultation on the core strategy has just begun and Wirral Council will be pleased to receive comments on the various parts of the document.

The next stage will be to translate the objectives into spatial policy options and identify the preferred options. The draft core strategy will be compiled and submitted to the Secretary of State for approval. The proposals will be subject to public examination by an independent inspector. The intention is to adopt the Core Strategy in 2011.

Members of the public can become involved in the consultation by asking for a copy of the Plan, by adding their names to the contact database, or by submitting comments by letter, email or fax. The deadline for comments is 5 pm, on 27 March 2009. The contact details are: Strategic Development, Corporate Services, Town

Hall, Wallasey. CH44 8ED. Email hazeledwards@wirral.gov.uk, phone: 691 8225 or fax 691 8188.

In response to a comment by Paul Heywood, John Entwistle acknowledged that the letter sent to people on the database did not include a link to the website. He hoped that people would be able to access the documents directly through an on-line consultation system in future stages of the consultation, but it was not possible to provide that facility at present.

Robbie Bell stated that residents' associations are directly involved with planning issues and it was important for all residents' groups as well as individuals to contribute to the consultation process.

Councillor Bridson asked for information on the number of people on the database. She stated that it would be interesting to know at the end of the process how many people have shown an interest in the plan.

John Entwistle replied that a report will be presented to Cabinet that summaries all the comments received and will explain how those comments have been taken into account for the next stage. There no restrictions or limitations whatsoever in terms of the people who want to become involved and put forward suggestions. At the end of the process, the document will go to full Council for final approval and adoption.

The Chair advised that the consultation has been placed on the Council's website, and the expectation is that the local Press will pick up the issue and publicise it.

Sarah Goulding asked if account had been taken of the fact that priorities have shifted due to the downturn in the economy. Whilst the planning system plays an important role in protecting the environment, it is equally important to facilitate and take advantage of economic regeneration when opportunities come forward.

The Chair thanked John Entwistle for the presentation.

6 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Area Co-ordinator read out an email submitted by Mr David Bird about Osmaston Road, and the reply received from Technical Services Department on the issues raised.

The Area Co-ordinator would be speaking to Mr Bird in person.

A member of the public agreed with everything in the email. The problem is also about the condition of the road and the pavements. The pavements are particularly dangerous for elderly and infirm people. Three requests have been made for an inspector to come out and look at the area.

Councillor Doyle commented that people cause blockages by using the road for all-day parking. Both he and Councillor Holbrook would support a proposal for parking to be restricted in some way.

Local residents who were present stated that they do not want a parking scheme to be introduced in the area.

The Chair suggested the need for a meeting with the Ward Councillors to find a way forward.

The Chair continued that she is receiving an increasing number of complaints from residents about the hazards caused by parking. People who live in West Knowe have great difficulty in egressing their properties due to cars parked near and outside St Saviour's Church, and from residents in Storeton Road leading up to the Maitland Church and beyond. She has brought the attention of Streetscene to the problems on a number of occasions and the Police and CSOs have taken action to deal with the situation.

Inspector Harrison replied that he is aware of the parking issues and two colleagues spend a lot of time trying to resolve them. There has been a suggestion that some of the congregation of St Saviour's Church park their cars outside West Knowe, but most people park in nearby side streets, or in and near the Carnarvon Castle car park, rather than in front of West Knowe. Stretches of Bidston Road near the Catholic Church and the Birkenhead School, are affected by parking.

During a general discussion on parking, Ben Ryder explained the problems faced by emergency vehicles in gaining access to properties and to responding to road traffic accidents, particularly when there is a concentration of parked cars on narrow roads.

The Chair raised the issue of the school patrol crossing in Holm Lane and that she had been unaware of the issue until after the decision was made. She had made representations to the Council that there needs to be a full risk assessment before a crossing is removed from any school. The Council had agreed and full risk assessments will take place.

Councillor Bridson reported on a very positive meeting with Biffa contractors last week. Due to their size, bin lorries can easily skid in bad weather and cause damage to parked cars. The company is working with the gritters in terms of trying to avoid accidents and has taken steps to ensure a safer collection of the bins.

Ian Patterson stated that he is a resident of St George's Avenue, and last week his home was burgled for the third time in as many years. He had enquired about alley gates and had been told that funding is no longer available.

John Kenny, Community Safety, confirmed that funding for alley gates has now ended. Residents in an area have the option of raising their own funding for alley gates, which cost in the region of £1,500 each, but every resident has to agree. An entry system in the area referred to would require two double and two single gates and cost in the region of £11/£12,000; it is highly unlikely that every resident would agree to contribute. When a planning application was agreed for the disused bakery at the rear of the properties, the Planning Officers did suggest that the provision of alley gates would allow greater security for nearby residents. Alternatively, funding may be available from 'You Decide'.

Councillor Bridson explained that the first planning application was refused because of the nature of the building. The Council has stipulated alley gates, but alley gates have not been included in the second planning application. The main reason for stipulating alley gates was because the nature of the entry system in that area tends to encourage thieves to go into the area, and many Police resources are used trying

to catch them. Councillor Bridson offered to continue the discussion with Ian Patterson after the meeting.

Alan Dollery raised the issue of the proposed closure of the Prenton Dell Library. As Chair of the Prenton Tenants' and Residents' Association he had witnessed the demise of the Prenton Dell area in general. Prenton Dell had a youth club and a library but the Council had decided to sell the youth club to build private housing. Pathways had provided funding for 23 computers which were located in the Library. In December, residents had received a newsletter from the Liberal Democrats stating that the Prenton Library will close early in the New Year. There is also the threat of two landfill sites in the Prenton area.

There was no prior consultation and no Councillor had approached the Residents' Association. The six week consultation period was inadequate and had been done at the wrong time.

The association had taken the landfill problem 'by the horns' and had invited Frank Field to a meeting. In addition, more than 1,800 households had signed a petition. Residents had protested about the closure of the library and between 600/700 names had been collected on a petition. Letters has also been sent to local Councillors, but clearly none of those responses had been taken into account. The library forms a vital part of the local community. It is used by elderly people and by schools for early learning, as well as for other educational and recreational classes.

Allan Dollery quoted from the performance indicators for the Prenton Library. The library had 63,000 visitors last year, an increase in footfall of 51%. Ignoring staff costs, the running cost for all other services was £20,000, and achieving this modest saving will deprive people across all the age ranges of books and computer use. The building is in the ownership of Wirral Partnership Homes on a 100-year lease at a peppercorn rental of £5 per year. To travel by public transport to Upton Library from Prenton would cost an adult and two children approximately £8.50.

In conclusion, Allan Dollery asked the Area Forum, and the Councillors here tonight to think hard before they make a decision at the Council meeting next Monday, to consider the impact on the local community and vote to keep a facility that is badly needed in the area. If the library goes, Prenton will have nothing left.

Mike Cooke, Secretary of the Friends of Prenton Library, introduced himself. He asked Elected Members on the Area Forum if they agreed that the proposal to close Prenton Library is disgraceful, adding that anyone who votes to support the closure should be ashamed of themselves.

The library has been refurbished at a cost of £30,000. Clearly, if it closes this is a waste of public money. The friends of Prenton Library also provided £1,000 for equipment. The refurbishment has been a success and the number of books issued [36,235] represents a 19.2% increase over the previous year. The number of people using the library [63,001] in 2007/08, increased by 51.1%. Prenton Library is the kind of asset that Wirral needs and there should be more investment in the facilities, not closures. The closure of the library will affect the financial viability of the local shops because fewer people will come into the area. Wirral Council react to circumstances for which it has no policies and no control. The decision to close a valuable asset is brought about by crisis management.

Allan Dollery urged Councillors here tonight to support the retention of Prenton Library and to encourage their Council colleagues to do the same.

Finally, he thanked the library staff for their dedication and hard work that has made the local library such a success for local people.

Shelia Kelly, Prenton, asked the direct questions: 'Why are local councillors not backing our fight to keep the library open? Why would the local Council want a library to close?'

Steve Gregson, Richard Neale, and other members of the public commended the previous speakers on their presentations and endorsed the comments made about the qualities of the staff and the facilities they provide for local people.

The Chair asked Councillor Kelly, as a Cabinet member, to address the Area Forum.

In a lengthy submission, Councillor Kelly, stated that it is right and proper that people here tonight should make their views known, but it is equally important to understand the rationale for the Cabinet going forward with the proposals.

Elected members have a responsibility towards the people who live in the wards they represent, but they also have a responsibility for the residents of Wirral as a whole, and the budget that is available to Wirral. When making decisions, Cabinet members have to take a council wide view rather than considering just the impact the decisions may have on the people they represent.

The background is that effectively Wirral has been living 'hand to mouth' in terms of its budget and trying to balance its books at a time of world-wide recession and at the same time respond to local pressures. For example, at Budget setting later this month the Council will be asked to respond to issues raised at Haringey and the Baby 'P' case by making a significant investment in Children's Social Care to address fostering arrangements and to recruit more social workers.

As a member of the Cabinet, Councillor Kelly has a duty to everyone in the Borough, but specifically to people who cannot attend these meetings and need expensive care packages, and to protect children and young people who are the victims of abuse etc. The Local Authority cannot raise funding by raising the Council tax any longer. Council tax can only rise by a maximum of 5% to avoid a clawback.

The asset review was undertaken by professional officers and resulted in a set of recommendations which the Cabinet considered and a consultation was launched in November. More than 2,000 people attended a public meeting, comments had been received by email, and feedback is still being received. All the feedback had been reported to Cabinet and the Cabinet had made a number of recommendations. The decision to close Woodchurch Leisure Centre was rescinded, and Pensby and Upton libraries will remain open, but others will close. Government standards require local authorities to provide libraries within a two-mile radius of people's homes. 99% of the population of Wirral live within two miles of a library.

At a local level, Councillor Kelly stated that along with other local Councillors, partnership organisations and community representatives, he wished to preserve

local amenities, and there will be opportunities for local schools to replicate the provision that the libraries make. There is already some duplication in the facilities available in Prenton Library and in Children's Centres, and he would be happy to work to ensure that the services carry on through the Children's Centres. In addition, there will be massive capital investment in the Shaftsbury Centre that will cater for young people of all ages.

It is important for Councillors and the Council to balance all the pressures and the way to do this is to take the proposals forward. Whilst closures will take place, he would be happy to work with communities to re-provide as many of the services that currently exist, including a home book system for the elderly.

Members of the public challenged some of the statements that Councillor Kelly had made. Wirral is proposing to look what other authorities in the North West are doing and how they are making savings. Other authorities are not closing libraries, they are making savings by removing some of the tiers of management. It costs about £82,000 to run Prenton Library. That is almost half the salary of one of the Directors. There are other ways of saving money and managing budgets more effectively.

A member of the public asked if the Area Forum is aware of the area the library is situated in. If the library goes, all Prenton will be left with is a bookies, a chippy and a pub. Any savings made will need to be reinvested to address an increase in anti-social behaviour that will inevitably arise due to the lack of facilities.

Milly Hancock asked what has happened to the investments the Council has made in Icelandic banks.

Councillor Kelly replied that it is a 'red herring' that the council has two million pounds. invested in banks. The investment is in bonds, which are very secure. The budgetary crisis has not been caused by the loss of money invested in Icelandic banks.

Overall, the Council has a budget of half a billion pounds, from various sources. Last year, astute investment in various banks by Treasury Management attracted £0.5 million to the savings strategy. Other Councils have lost money in investments in foreign securities; Wirral has not.

A member of the public raised the issue of home care for the elderly, given that most care homes have been privatised. The Council has opened one-stop shops and libraries to provide information, and now it is closing libraries. There is a need to look at the public buildings staff work in and stop putting money into those buildings, stop wasting money on old buildings and leave the libraries for the children and the community to enjoy.

The Leader of the Council had to go to the public auditor to find out how much had been spent on Cheshire Lines. It was £2 million.

Councillor Kelly stated that there will be a separate review of administrative buildings, and if a decision is ultimately made to close Cheshire Lines it would still be necessary to accommodate the staff and the call centre. Sometimes it is more economical to lease a building than it is to own and maintain it.

Members of the public commented:

- the concept of keeping schools open for longer. It would be more expensive because of overtime and heating costs.
- elderly people go to the post office to collect their pension, and they go to the library to socialise and meet people. They don't want a home delivery service for books, they want someone to talk to. There are many elderly people who live on their own and they are lonely.
- the Council had employed consultants to undertake the Strategic Assets review. when there have been pleas of poverty. It is poverty which its own officials create and people are paying the price in terms of libraries and youth clubs in this area.
- you have told us significant capital investment will be made available for the Shaftesbury Centre to extend its activities. There has been no consultation with young people through the Young People's Parliament.

Councillor Kelly stated that from a Wirral Council point of view it is necessary to make certain difficult decisions; from a local Councillor point of view he wishes to continue working with the local community to re-provide as much as possible in the community.

Councillor Bridson stated that she had been asked which way she would be voting on Monday, adding that she was upset at the thought of closing Prenton Library.

Members of the public interrupted and challenged some of the statements made by Councillor Bridson in a lengthy submission. They asked the direct question: 'Are you going to support keeping the library?'

Councillor Bridson replied that she would be voting in support of the budget, which means that the library will close to which opposition was met by members of the public

Councillor Doyle stated that his position was the same as that of Councillor Kelly.

A member of the public had enquired if it was correct that Councillors receive £12,000 expenses, even though they have full time jobs.

Another member of the public commented: 'Councillors are talking about balancing the books. It is ironic when talking about libraries. We must invest in the children and in the future. How many children will lose out if they cannot go to the library? I suggest the best way to save money is to get rid of some of the councillors'.

In drawing the discussion to a close, the Chair stated that she supports the Strategy Asset review, although she has significant concerns about the way the matter has been dealt with and she has made her views known on this. If the matter had been handled differently the Council would not be in the position it is in now.

Several members of the public directed their anger towards local Councillors. They expressed their opposition to the proposed closures in no uncertain terms and expressed their extreme dissatisfaction with the stance being taken by their elected representatives.

The Chair stated that it was necessary to curtail the agenda due to time constraints. Reports from various agencies and partners are available to read outside the meeting. If anyone has an issue they wish to raise they should speak to one of the representatives present, or contact the area co-ordinator.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

TUESDAY, 16 June in the Oxton Ward. Venue to be confirmed.

9 OTHER BUSINESS

A member of the public stated that the Cabinet has approved a plan to close Rock Ferry High School and Park High School and to create an academy. A total of ten potential sites for the academy are being looked at - one is Ingleborough fields.

Councillor Doyle replied that he would raise the issue when he meets with the Director of Children's Services on 11 February, and a response would be passed on.

A member of the public thanked the Chair for chairing a stormy meeting.

The Chair thanked everyone and closed the meeting at 9.15 pm.