

AREA FORUM (WEST WIRRAL)

Thursday, 6 October 2011

Present:

Councillor G Ellis (Chair)

In attendance: Councillors

D Elderton
JE Green
G Watt
E Boulton

Lead Officer David Ball

Area Service Co-ordinator Tracey Smith

Merseyside Fire Service Paul Murphy

Merseyside Police Sgt Andy Carter

Council Officers David Green

1 **WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES**

The Chair, Councillor Gerry Ellis, welcomed forum members and 70 members of the public to the West Wirral Area Forum meeting at Melrose Hall, Hoylake.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor John Hale.

2 **MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING:**

RESOLVED: To confirm the minutes of the meeting of the Area Forum on 29 June 2011 as a correct record.

Matter arising:

Bridge Court: The Chair explained that Wirral Partnership Homes cleared the site because the properties did not meet new Government standards. The Primary Care Trust has been searching for alternative site for the West Kirby Health Centre for some time, and negotiations have begun on the possibility of the PCT acquiring the land to develop a health centre.

3 **NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS UPDATE:**

A Neighbourhood Plan is being developed for every community in Wirral to reflect each area's unique characteristics needs and potential. Members of those communities are encouraged to think about and identify the key challenges for those who live and work in that community and, by completing

a questionnaire to suggest where Wirral Council should focus its resources and how it should deliver local services to improve the area.

Questionnaires were available at the meeting, or can be completed on line at www.wirral.gov.uk/neighbourhood.

The responses received will be collated and reported to the community via the Council website and local media and community events in October/November 2011.

Question: How are focus groups being consulted?

Answer: We ask people to get in touch with us. We have been going along to speak to particular people. We had a good response this year. People contacted us and we went out and spoke to them.

Question: Only 51 questionnaires have been returned from the whole of West Kirby, Hoylake, Meols etc?

Answer: Yes, so far. Forms are being received daily. The closing date is on Friday.

Councillor Green stated that the consultation provides a real opportunity for local residents to determine what they want for their area and he hoped that as many residents as possible would participate. He thanked Tracey Smith and her team for their efforts in co-ordinating the exercise.

4 **DAVID GREEN, DIRECTOR OF TECHNICAL SERVICES, UPDATES ON:**

The Director of Technical Services, David Green, gave verbal updates on the issues:

4.1 Parks and Countryside Services Procurement Exercise [PACSPE]:
In June 2008, Wirral Cabinet commissioned a review of the arrangements for the maintenance of the Council's parks, open spaces, cemeteries and crematoria, with the aim of delivering a cost-effective, more manageable service for less money.

The process began with a major consultation exercise, which included Area Forums. Everyone who used the parks was given the opportunity to contribute to the specification and to inject imagination and innovation into future provision.

The Council set a budget of £7.5 million for the project and in July 2010, the Cabinet made a decision that an in-house bid should not be submitted. Seven contractors were invited to apply, the price quoted by six of the seven bidders was below the target figure of £7.5 million, and a preferred external provider was identified. The timetable envisaged a contract being let to commence in January 2012.

A report was submitted to Cabinet on 22 September 2011. At the same meeting, the Cabinet received a highly critical independent report on the

Council's Corporate Governance arrangements which, among other things, referred to Wirral Council '*not being able to commission, manage, and where necessary, dismiss failing contractors and suppliers*'. The Cabinet made a decision NOT to award the PACSPE contract but had made a series of recommendations, extracts from which are quoted below:

The difference in cost between the current Council budget and that of the preferred tenderer is sufficiently marginal for the difference to be eroded over a period of three years by the contractual cost of inflation'

At these rates over the ten year life of the contract for every £1 million value in the contract, inflation would increase the £10 million cost to £11.46 million. Over the following seven years the continued impact of the contractual inflation provision would be likely to work to the Council's disadvantage at a time when the Council is being required substantially to reduce its annual expenditure.

In the current severe economic climate, local authorities are facing unprecedented levels of reduction in their funding and Wirral will face having to save in excess of £86 million over the next three years.

In the light of the above, the Cabinet does not believe that it would be in the Council's best interests to let this contract to an external contractor and agrees to retain these services in house.

The Cabinet had stated that it has every confidence in the skills and abilities of its workforce and their commitment to the services they provide and is confident that with appropriate support and good management they will co-operate in delivering a high quality service for the people of Wirral in the future. Cabinet recognised however, that it is essential to improve the quality of the service provided in a sustainable way, within the budget provided, and that to do so will mean substantial improvements in the management and operation of the contract and some capital investment to assist in achieving efficiencies.

The Cabinet instructed the Director of Technical Services to report back in November with a detailed three-year business plan demonstrating how this will be achieved.

Martin Harrison, Parks Steering Group and Secretary to Wirral Parks Friends' Forum commented that members had been involved from the beginning when they were asked to identify the key problems. After months of involvement, members came to the conclusion that Wirral Council had failed to grasp the issues over many years and therefore something had to change in the method of delivery of parks and open spaces services. Despite some reservations, the steering group came to the conclusion that the only way to improve quality and save money would be to contract out the services.

Martin Harrison continued that, collectively, contractors have spent vast sums of money preparing the bids, and Wirral Council has wasted staff time and wasted money paid to consultants, but none of this was mentioned in the Cabinet report. He asked the Officers to tell the people of Wirral what amount

of money and how much time has been wasted on this exercise and how can the required savings be achieved? He commented that this Cabinet decision was taken on the day of announcement of the Kronowski report criticising the Wirral Council organisation. Martin Harrison concluded by asking how services would now deliver the required improvements if delivered in house?

Councillor Green stated that he absolutely agreed with every point made by Martin Harrison. He was not satisfied that there had been a fair discussion on the reasons at the Cabinet meeting; there was no evaluation of the risk, and crucially there was no discussion about the major investment that would be needed to replace worn out and obsolete plant, machinery and equipment.

Councillor Green explained the Council's 'call-in' system, which means that a decision cannot be enacted until the 'call in' has been considered by Cabinet. As leader of his party, he was the first signatory on a motion to 'call in' the decision and the leader of the Lib Dems was the second signatory. The Cabinet has executive powers and others can only make recommendations and in the circumstances he had requested that the 'call in' is referred to a Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Green and David Green responded to issues raised in the subsequent general discussion.

4.2 AKA Report

Q. Recently Wirral Council received a report by Anna Klonowski Associates that examined the way that Wirral Council is run with particular reference to the handling of the whistle-blowing allegations from former social services employee, Martin Morton. Many of us here tonight that have observed the way Wirral has been run and handled relationships with the public over the years believe this extends beyond this issue alone I feel that this is more an issue about the culture of the Council from top to bottom. Indeed Cllr Foulkes has accepted this in his response to the report. Martin Harrison asked that the Council outline how they will address this serious issue, seek the views of the public in defining the problem and engage with the public in communicating the plans to reform the culture of the Council."

In response to this question, the Lead Officer, David Ball commented on the independent review on Wirral Council undertaken by AKA, the trading name of Anna Klonowski and Associates by referring to the Cabinet report of September 22, 2011 which was in the public domain and accessible through the Council's web site.. DB advised the meeting that the Leader of the Council and the Council's Chief Executive have accepted the criticisms and recommendations in the report unreservedly.

On 22 September 2011, the Cabinet agreed a series of recommendations to begin to address the issues identified. The Leader of the Council undertook to set up a specific Cabinet Committee to take forward the changes that need to be made within the Council. The Committee will include the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council and five Labour Councillors. An external adviser will be appointed to support the work of the Committee. The Chief

Executive has been charged with the task of developing an action plan to address the issues in the AKA Report, the Director of Finance has been asked to look at the audit arrangements and the Director of Law has been asked to look at the legal issues..

One of key problems identified in the report is a breakdown of trust between the Council and the people of Wirral. Work is already underway to rebuild that trust and to look at ways in which the Council, its Councillors and staff, can better work with the community. The Chief Executive is working with a group of people on an action plan to address these issues.

In response to a question concerning whether or not the Martin Morton Report will be made public Councillor Green explained that AKA's lawyers have advised that the report and the executive summary must not be published until those named in the report have had an opportunity to exercise their right to reply. The right to reply process is under way.

4.3 ALDI Development: Work is scheduled to start on site on 31 October, with a completion date of May 2012. The Council granted a request for road closure in August with a rider that a closure will not be granted on an alternative date if there is another delay. The dates of the closure will be advertised.

4.4 Women's Open Golf Championship 2012: The Women's Open Golf Championship will be coming to Wirral on Sunday, 9 September 2012.

The Director of Technical Services gave an assurance that there will not be a repeat of the problems experienced in 2006 around parking and disruption to the bus service in 2006. A management plan will be developed in consultation with agencies, partners, and members of the public, which will include contingency arrangements for diverting traffic and parking. Residential streets will be protected and spectators will have a 'park and walk' arrangement.

The Open Golf Championship will be returning to Wirral in 2013.

A member of the public, speaking on behalf of businesses in Hoylake, commented that in 2006 the bars did well but businesses in general suffered greatly because the people who normally shop in Hoylake were unable to park. The focus was on making the Open a wonderful event but the people who are there all the time and rely on it for their 'bread and butter' were forgotten.

David Green gave an assurance that the issue would be addressed as part of the planning. He responded to a query from the Secretary of Hoylake Rugby Club and confirmed that there would be an opportunity for everyone to engage with the plan.

On behalf of the Area Forum, a member of the public thanked David Green and his team and Emma Degg, Corporate Manager, for a really stunning job on what was a really successful event in 2006.

5 REPORTS FROM PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Services

- There were only three house fires in West Wirral in the past six months – due to the impact of fire safety checks, risk assessments and the installation of free smoke alarms.
- The number of deliberate secondary fires in vehicles and buildings has increased.
- A bonfire strategy has been developed in conjunction with Merseyside Police and Wirral Council. From 17 October, leaflets will be circulated given free phone numbers to report incidents where combustible materials are being stockpiled.

Merseyside Police

- Crime and anti-social behaviour has reduced in the past month, with just 47 offences committed.
- Other statistics and contact details were included in the October 2011 neighbourhood newsletter. Questions and details of particular problems would be taken at the end of the meeting.

6 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME:

Information Sharing

- Wirral Partnership Homes are consulting on the use of the Hoose Court site, pending redevelopment. An open air consultation will be held on the site between 2 pm and 7 pm on Tuesday, 18 October.
- British Rail will be starting work in the vicinity during the weekend of 8 October.
- United Utilities will begin digging up the Birkenhead Road near Market Street on 17 October.

Question/Comment: [Representative Hoylake Businesses]: Anti-social behaviour in Market Street.

Response [Merseyside Police]: Information is needed on specific incidents. Details will be taken at the end of the meeting and will be investigated. Reported incidents of anti-social behaviour have fallen from 94 in 2006, to 69 in 2009, and to 32 this year. The Police hold regular 'Have your Say' meetings, Police surgeries are held regularly where people can raise concerns. Recent incidents of anti-social behaviour in and around Market Street have been addressed. A change to the winter shift pattern at the end of October will see patrols concentrating more on the night-time economy in Hoylake and West Kirby. Officers check compliance with licensing conditions

and planning regulations The number of assaults through drunkenness is falling.

Question/Comment: [Representative Hoylake businesses:] There has been an improvement and thanks are due to the Police Officers, but the problem cannot be totally eradicated. There was a lot of noise which started early on Friday evening and lasted until the early hours. Does that constitute anti-social behaviour? To be fair to the residents and everyone who tries to work here, there has to be a balance and when the night time economy stops and people are entitled to enjoy their property.

Response: Merseyside Police: I can reassure people that we will be look more closely at the night time economy and particularly the comments about the time licences finish. Holiday Express Inn are applying for a licence until 3 am, and that is a concern if granted, especially as other clubs will want to follow suit.

Response: [Director of Technical Services]: The Council has received funding as part of Aldi's planning application. There are plans for a puffin and a zebra crossing. If details are provided, the Traffic Manager will make contact and talk about the details.

Question/Comment: Letters to attend area forum meetings are now personally addressed to the recipient. This prevents letters being placed on notice boards and shop windows etc. A return to the old system could save money.

Response. [Councillor Green] Thank you for the suggestion. It would be worth checking how many such personal invitations are sent out by other Departments. There could be a saving there.

Question/Comment. [Councillor Watt]: The work undertaken by the Council last year to remove spartina grass from the shore was followed up volunteers who continued the work. Something needs to be done year on year, otherwise the grass will continue to grow. Is anything planned this year?

Response: [Director of Technical Services: The PACSPE contract includes a beach management plan agreed with local residents.

The Chair closed the meeting at 9.05 pm, advising that Councillors and Officers would remain after the meeting to answer questions.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

7 **DATE OF FUTURE MEETING:**