

AREA FORUM (BIDSTON AND CLAUGHTON)

Wednesday, 3 October 2012

Present:

Councillor	D Roberts (Chair)
Councillors	J Crabtree G Davies S Foulkes AR McLachlan
Community Representatives	Jim Parsons
Lead Officer	Ian Brand
Community Engagement	Michelle Gray
Merseyside Fire and Rescue	Paul Murphy
Community Safety	Jim Thompson, Steve Preston
In Attendance	Kay Smith (VCAW) Neil Powell (Finance), Ema Boddison (Minute Taker)

1 **WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES**

Councillor Denise Roberts, welcomed forum members and 20 members of the public to Bidston Avenue Primary School, Tollemache Road Claughton. Apologies received from Harry Smith due to other council business, Pat Landsborough and Jean McIntosh.

- ***Neighbourhood Funding Statement*** Ian Brand read a statement out regarding the suspension of the Neighbourhood Fund:

In September the Director of Finance reported to Cabinet that if urgent action is not taken, the Council would face an over spend of around £17 million by the end of the current financial year. Clearly, we have had to take immediate action, which includes freezing all non-essential Council spending and releasing reserves we no longer require. Unfortunately, this has meant that the Council have taken the extremely difficult decision to suspend the 'Neighbourhood Funding' grants programme until we are in a position to make a definite decision on whether we can still afford it. This does not mean the fund has been cancelled, or removed from the budget to offset the over spend. This is a suspension of the Fund, until we are in a position to make a recommendation to Council later in the year as to how we can move forward. That report will be within the next two months, so by the end of the calendar year groups will know the full status of their applications.

2 BUDGET CONSULTATION

Michelle Gray explained that over the next three years, about a third of the Council's funding from Government [equating to around £100 million] will be removed. On 10 September, the Council launched a consultation exercise, *'What Really Matters'*, asking members of the public what they think the Council's priorities should be and to express their views on the decisions needed to transform and improve the Wirral's services to its residents. People's views are vital and will make a difference and it is important therefore that as many people as possible participate in the consultation.

Paper copies of the questionnaire are available at Council One Stop Shops, Libraries, and other public buildings, or the questionnaire can be completed on line on the Council's website.

Urged residents to take a questionnaire for themselves and family/friends to be completed by Friday 19th October 2012.

Public Member You don't have to make cuts – you could just say 'no we are Not going to make these cuts'. You are going to bring universal credits in next April which will be another attack on the poor. All powers have been taken away from Councillors. There was a means test crisis in 1932 which was another attack of the poor because of errors of the rich! Unless elected members do something people are going to parliament into their own hands.

Cllr Denise Roberts – unfortunately we are dependent on the money the Government give us.

Cllr Steve Foulkes – at the end of the day there will be significant cuts. We need to match our priorities with the peoples priorities.

Public Member – we should have been meeting tonight for community groups with regards to funding which has now been suspended. A lot of people are disappointed. I don't understand how you have got a £17 million overspend.

Cllr Steve Foulkes – cabinet meeting described that non-essential spending will be suspended i.e priority was to create jobs and improve youth activities. When we prioritise where money goes then we can answer these questions later in the year.

3 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT/BENEFITS

Neil Powell gave a presentation on Council Tax and Support/Benefits. Council tax benefit is changing from April, 2013, it is being abolished and replaced by a local Council Tax support scheme. Because of the changes, the Council is required to carry out a consultation exercise with Wirral residents, and anyone else who has an interest in the changes. As part of the Localism Bill 2011 and the Welfare Reform Act 2012, the Government is abolishing Council Tax Benefit. As a result, every council has to replace it with a new local scheme, this will be known as Council Tax Support, and will start from 1st April, 2013.

Under the new local scheme, the Government will give the Council a sum of money that will be at least 10% less than is currently paid out in Council Tax Benefit. This means the shortfall in funding for Wirral Council is anticipated to be in the region of £3.2 million for next year, 2013/14. However any increases in claims during 2013-14 has to be paid for by Wirral Council, this was previously paid for by Government, so we will need to build in a contingency to meet these claims. In real terms the cut will be greater than £3.2 million.

With the new scheme come some government guidelines that we must follow, such as we have to protect pensioners and vulnerable groups, councils must decide who it considers vulnerable. The Impact of the changes will mean that all current claimants who are of working age are likely to be affected by the council tax benefit changes. This represents 50% of the current client base approximately 19,000.

- They are likely to have to pay more towards their council tax bill and in some cases have to pay Council Tax for the first time.
- The £3.2 million cut in government grant will be spread across people who claim for help towards their council tax bill and as already mentioned that would only affect those of Working Age.
- It means that there will be a reduced amount of financial support available for people and that people who previously received support may no longer do so.

A number of options have been looked at. Due to the tight timescales for the first year the new scheme will be similar to the current council tax benefit system with some changes; Some of the options we are proposing are:

- Financial support will only be given up to a maximum of 80% of a household's council tax liability, currently benefit is awarded up to 100%. This results in someone of a working age having to pay something.
- Introduce a standard non-dependant charge – set at £9.90, this will mean every household who have adults living there will pay something towards the household costs.
- Second Adult Rebate can be claimed because the claimant's income is too high however the adult living with them is on a low income and they can currently claim up to 25% off the Council Tax bill. The proposal is to remove this altogether.
- We will stop backdating claims; therefore if people do not claim on time, they will miss out on some support.
- Anyone of Working Age and has savings over £6,000 would not be offered support.
- Whether there should be a Discretionary Support Fund for those suffering genuine and exceptional hardship because of these proposed changes.

We intend to review the scheme in year one and may, based upon our experiences propose a change for year 2 onwards. If we do not design and implement a local support scheme by 31st January, 2013, the Government will impose a default scheme on us, which will not offer up any savings, therefore we have no choice in making the £3.2 million savings ourselves by changing the current system; alternatively the shortfall in funding would have had to have been found in some other way. We are legally required to consult on our new local scheme.

Consultation period 3rd September to 31st October 2012. To take part in this survey you can:

- Do it on-line via the Council website.
- Phone the Call Centre and a paper version can be posted out.
- Visit their nearest One Stop Shops to pick up a paper version
- Or their Local Library to use the Council website – free of charge or pick up a paper copy.

Paper forms can be handed in to the nearest One Stop Shop or a Library near to you, or returned in the post. Neil explained what will happen when the consultation period ends: The information gathered will form part of the formal reporting process to Members alongside our final scheme proposal - adjustments may therefore be made to the original scheme design. Our new local scheme needs to be finalised by 31st January, 2013. However the proposed regulations have still to be passed by Parliament.

Cllr Steve Foulkes – Government said you have to introduce a scheme that will save you £3.2 million – this will be implemented whether you agree to it or not. Every bedroom that is not in use, residents will get taxed on it. We need to make our voice heard. I do not support this in any way. The way to get us out of depression is to get people off benefits and into work. We as a Council try to be constructive.

Public member – is it the local authority who decide what people can live on?

Neil Powell – Government say this is the amount of money you can have.

Public member – what about the legal amount of money you can live on. If it is taken from council tax benefit will it be topped up from elsewhere?

Neil Powell – no it won't be topped up by anything.

Cllr Steve Foulkes – can I suggest that we have one big forum presentation with an expert here to explain to everyone?

Public member – if you can't live on it then what are you meant to do? The people who have made these decisions think we are plebbs!! People will starve.

Cllr Harry Smith – with regards to bedroom tax, WPH don't have enough 1 bedroom homes so people will just not be able to move and will be forced to pay the bedroom tax.

Cllr Steve Foulkes – social landlords availability to build new houses has been undermined – banks are not willing to loan them funding.

Public member – I work for a woman's refuge and we are seeing women coming in who are in absolute crises of what is going to happen.

Public member – I think your idea of informing people is good but you have to be creative on how you can advertise – think about how many voluntary agencies you will invite.

Action: Finance Department to look into holding an event/drop-in session for residents, community/voluntary groups to attend to be able to gain further advice and support on these changes and to give residents as much information to help them understand the changes that may effect them.

4 PARTNER ORGANISATIONS UPDATE

Community Safety – Jim Thompson – Wirral is a safe borough. We do have challenges but anti social behaviour and general crime continue to fall. If you go out of an evening don't leave house in darkness, don't leave windows open and ignore cold callers. 101 is the Police non emergency number. 80% of burglaries are opportunist so don't leave stuff on show.

Merseyside Fire and Rescue – Paul Murphy – with regards to budget deficit; £9.2 million cut from budget so the Fire Service you see today may not be what you see in the future. We are on target for 13,000 home fire safety checks and in this ward we have delivered 622. If you know someone who is vulnerable you can refer them through. I have been allowed to embed 5 supervising managers from the fire service into the Council in anti social behaviour, Wirral youth and NHS Wirral. With regards to bonfire night, we have the council and other partners behind us. Last year we had a 36% reduction in secondary fires. All partners have been planning since June. From 22 October we will be moving debris etc off the streets to stop setting fire to. Accidental dwellings last year were 11 and this year are down to 5. Deliberate secondary fires last year were 222 and this year are down to 74. Road Traffic Collisions last year were 3 and this year have stayed at 3. Figures across the borough are excellent. As of 22 October to report the debris you can ring 08007315958, this number is also for the fire safety checks.

5 DATE OF NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM MEETING

The Chair Denise Roberts thanked all who attended and closed the meeting and announced the next area forum would take place on Tuesday 5th February 2013 to be hosted at the St James Centre start time will be 6.30pm further information will be available on the Councils website www.wirral.gov.uk