

# AREA FORUM (LISCARD AND SEACOMBE)

Wednesday, 10 October 2012

<u>Present:</u>	D Dodd (Chair) AER Jones
Councillors	C Jones B Mooney J Salter
Community Representatives	Jos Lee, Carole Thomas, Carol Seery
Lead Officer	Mark Camborne
Community Engagement	Michelle Gray
Street Scene Manager	Chris Jones
Community Safety	Jim Thompson, Steve Preston
Merseyside Police	Trish McLeod
Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service	Natalie Hayes
In Attendance	Viv O'Leary (Finance), Helen Gallagher (Minute Taker)

## 1 WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair, Councillor Darren Dodd, welcomed forum members, new community representatives and 20 members of the public to the Liscard and Seacombe Neighbourhood Forum meeting held at Wallasey Town Hall. Apologies received from Councillor Janette Williamson.

- **Neighbourhood Funding Statement** Mark Camborne 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.

Residents asked how the Council has got in to a £17million overspend. What failures occurred for this to happen? Cllr Adrian Jones observed that it was inherited in the budget from the outgoing administration.

Joe Lee stated that projects being funding by such things as Neighbourhood Funding are saving the Council money in the long run so why is this being cut?

Cllr Dodd said that this Fund had not presently been cut but has been suspended until the Council is in a better position to make decisions about future spending.

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

A discussion took place on whether the £100million was per annum and how much of the left over £200million is spoken for.

Cllr A Jones commented that the Council hasn't cut this £100million, Central Government has taken it away. The Council has to do its best to run as many services as it can with what's left over. Cllr A Jones followed on to say public consultation has never been popular, but we need to know as many residents priorities as we can as one persons (priorities) are different from the next.

Joe Lee said that 2 years ago 1,200 people went on voluntary redundancies. He asked "Where has that saving gone?" Cllr A Jones said the Council administration then in power funded it by borrowing £9million for the voluntary redundancies 2 years ago and this will take approximately 25 years to pay back.

A resident told the Forum, Cllrs in Southampton Council have said that Central Government cuts are attacking society so much that they are opposing the action Government have told them to carry out. The Southampton Cllrs have called for Cllrs all round the Country to oppose this action.

Will we hear in our press the same good news rather than the scandal we keep hearing?

Cllr A Jones said "We are being asked to 'refuse to implement the cuts', but you can't refuse to implement cuts that somebody else has implemented already, The cuts are being made by the government. We can't say to the Government 'We're going to

spend the money you're not giving us'. When the government cuts the Council's money, it's just not there to be spent by the Council in the first place."

Cllr Dodd suggested residents complete the questionnaire and put their ideas and suggestions on paper.

Cllr Mooney said Cllrs are doing their very best to deal with the difficult decisions being put on them. "Don't know how we're going to stand up against Central Government but all Cllrs are going to fight as far as they can".

A resident suggested that the Council employ debt collectors to retrieve unpaid Council Tax.

Cllr Dodd responded to say we have a 97% collection rate and we have a team who work very hard to get this money back.

### 3 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT/BENEFITS

Viv O'Leary 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup> 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 started on – Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September – and is ending on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> 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 OSS or a Library near to you, or returned in the post. Viv 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 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2013. However the proposed regulations have still to be passed by Parliament.

## **PARTNER ORGANISATION UPDATES/GENERAL PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

**Community Safety:** Jim Thompson gave an update on crime statistics saying the Home Office predicted crime rates would sore, in fact they have fallen in Wirral. Jim went on to stress that Winter is on it's way and residents are asked to keep a light on or to invest in a timer as having a dark house is only highlighting the fact there's no one in. Jim also reminded residents to lock UPVC doors and not just lift the handles.

Following an earlier comment from a resident, Jim said they've seen a significant increase in referrals of domestic violence. This doesn't mean domestic violence is on the rise it just means they are being reported which is a good sign.

Cllr Salter/Jim urged residents to lock their alley gates and to make sure they don't lose their keys as they are quite expensive but also if they aren't in stock it will take up to 4 weeks for another to arrive.

**Merseyside Police:** Trish McLeod gave an overview of crime in the Liscard and Seacombe area stating overall crime is down. Burglary is an area that Merseyside Police are concentrated on at the moment – offenders of specific crimes are being targeted. Trish went on to talk about 'Operation Banger' and the positive work Merseyside police are doing going in to schools in these 'hot areas' of anti-social behaviour giving presentations. Trish mentioned how great it was that local businesses are helping with funding to get children involved in other activities to get them off the streets.

Trish asked residents to be a bit more vigilant on the run up to Christmas with their belongings, the amount of 'drippings' rise at this time of year. Also to make sure presents are out of site.

A resident asked Trish to pass on his thanks to Joan (PCSO) who was asked to attend the Older People's Parliament. Joan gave an update and answered numerous questions.

Cllr Salter/Trish reminded the Forum that the 'Have Your Say' meeting is on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012 everyone is welcome.

**Merseyside Fire & Rescue:** Natalie Hayes said that all Fire Fighters have gone on to do their Safeguarding training; this will assist Merseyside Fire & Rescue to identify vulnerable people and be able to signpost them on if necessary.

Arson is down in Liscard, 65 schools are being educated in fire safety by Merseyside Fire & Rescue, Merseyside Police and Council Officers. Jim Thompson/Natalie made the Forum aware that 'Operation Banger' has a free phone number if residents see piled up wood, pallets etc, anything that can make a fire/bonfire then they should call this number and the team will com out and pick it up: 0800 731 5958.

**Streetscene:** Chris Jones told residents that Technical Services have a statutory obligation to maintain a safe standard of highway, so if anyone knows of any problems they must call 0151 606 2004. Residents to be assured that Technical Services are finalising gritting arrangements and will have 10 primary routes with officers on standby 24/7 over 21 weeks.

**Actions:**

- Cllr Mooney - Withens Lane has a very large hole which was previously been filled but has gradually got worse. Chris said he will take this back and make sure it is sorted.
- Carole Thomas thanked Chris for sorting the blocked gutter by Bank but said the gutter by ASDA Liscard now needs clearing too. Chris said he will take this back to his team.
- Residents suggested cars be made to park on certain sides of the road when street sweeping is taking place. In other Countries this works well having set dates and set sides of the road to allow the sweepers to do a proper job.

**Older People's Parliament:** on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2012 there will be voting for the Police Commission for Merseyside.

**5 DATE OF NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM MEETING WILL BE:**

**The Chair, Cllr Darren Dodd thanked all who attended the meeting and announced the next Neighbourhood Forum would take place on: Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2013, 6.30pm at Wallasey Town Hall, Committee Room Two, Brighton Street, Wallasey, Wirral CH44 8ED.**