

AREA FORUM (LEASOWE, MORETON AND SAUGHALL MASSIE)

Thursday, 11 October 2012

Present:

Councillor	C Blakeley (Chair)
Councillors	S Mountney RL Abbey S Williams A Leech
Community Representatives	Steve Ledgerton
Lead Officer	Rob Beresford - Head of Regulation
Streetscene Manager	Chris Jones
Area Service Co-ordinator	Tracey Smith
Merseyside Police	Inspector Peter Kolokotroni
Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service	Lisa Hogan
Council Officers	Viv O'Leary Department of Finance

Apologies

Councillors	A McArdle
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1 **WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES**

The Chair, Councillor Chris Blakely, welcomed Area Forum members and five members of the public to the meeting in Leasowe Community Centre. Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ann McArdle.

MINUTES AND ACTIONS ARISING FROM JUNE 2012 FORUM

The minutes of the Area Forum meeting on 27 June had been distributed electronically in advance. Paper copies were available at the meeting.

There were no matters arising.

RESOLVED: To accept the minutes of the meeting of the Area Forum on 27 June 2012.

2 BUDGET CONSULTATION

WIRRAL BUDGET CONSULTATION: *WHAT REALLY MATTERS?*

The Area Co-ordinator 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.

The area co-ordinator explained that the questionnaire comprises nine questions. The first question focuses on the Council's three main priorities to protect vulnerable adults and children, tackle poverty and inequalities in health, and create jobs and attract investment. Members of the public were requested to state their top three highest and three lowest priorities.

The second part is about services and whether charges for services should be increased or charges should be made for services which are currently free, or whether the private or community sectors and the voluntary organisations could provide a more efficient service for some Council functions.

Members of the public are being asked to suggest services which they believe the Council should stop or reduce to make the savings needed. No decisions have been taken yet; it is a genuine consultation.

The area co-ordinator reported that community engagement officers have visited supermarkets, cinemas, a number of community groups and over a 100 events in the last five weeks, and 11,000 questionnaires have been issued. So far, 4,000 responses have been received. The closing date for responses is 19 October.

The area co-ordinator urged those who had not done so, to fill in a questionnaire, and to encourage friends and family to do so.

The Chair pointed out that it was in fact only £38 million that was being cut and the remainder of the shortfall was a result of increased cost to the Council.

The Chair stated that he was particularly concerned about the freezing of all neighbourhood forum funding, particularly £130,000 of this area forum's funding. He had invited the Chief Executive to the meeting to explain why the decision had been taken. The Chief Executive declined the invitation but said that the lead officers had been briefed and they would be able to give full answers to questions.

Rob Beresford quoted from a statement issued by the Chief Executive which in effect stated -

In September 2012, the Council received a report on the revenue budget based on spend over the previous three months. The report highlighted the fact that if action was not taken, an overspend in the region of £17 million would arise by the end of the current financial year. Clearly, immediate action had to be taken to reduce the predicted overspend and this included a freeze on all non-essential spending across all Council departments, including funding for area forums.

Rob Beresford emphasised that the funding for area forums has not been removed but suspended until the Council is able to make a definitive decisions later in the year on the way forward.

A further report will be submitted to the Council in two months' time and area forums will know the status of their funding by the end of the year.

The Council will consider the options in November, but at this stage, the lead officer said he was unable to predict what is likely to happen in the future.

The Chair raised the questions:

Q	Who determined that neighbourhood funding was non-essential?
A	The Executive team looked at all spending and made decisions about things that they have statutory obligations to meet and areas where spending can be deferred until later in the year when they know how the budget will turn out. In some instances, items had been taken out of the budget altogether. Things like health and safety are being looked at, and spending on critical Council business is continuing.
Q	I'm an elected member and no councillors have been involved in this decision-making process, and I don't recall a meeting where this was discussed.
A	I should have said the 'administration' rather than the Council.
Q	The executive team has made this decision without involving elected members. They make recommendations to Cabinet, not the administration. Was it the Cabinet who made this decision? You have not answered my question. Who made the decision on what was essential or non-essential expenditure? How was it determined? How was neighbourhood funding determined as non-essential funding?
A	Each area of funding was considered on its own merit, and in this particular case it was decided that the funding should be suspended until the end of the year when a further decision will be taken.
Q	I still haven't got an answer. What criteria were used to determine what is essential and what is non-essential? Can you just say what criteria the executive used to make their decision on what is essential and what is non-essential? I have an email here which tells me that both officers here tonight are fully conversant and able to answer my questions. I'm asking you again, what criteria were used to determine what was essential and non-essential expenditure?
A	There is a list of expenditure which is exempt from the freeze and each area of spending has been considered against that list. I haven't got the list of exemptions with me this evening.

Q	There are groups out there who rely on this funding who are suffering severely, and they will believe this is essential funding.
Councillor Abbey challenged the Chair and accused him of badgering the officers.	
Q	[Cllr Mountney] The £130,000 carried forward - we had already carried forward £29,000. When will that be released? All the money we could have spent will disappear. I have a report to Council in front of me that says something different. On Monday that decision will be made and it says that all the savings will go to general balances. Behind the scenes, the administration is taking all the money from the area forums and putting it in the general pot.

The secretary of West Wirral Boys' Amateur Boxing Club, based in Moreton, stated that the club is 'bursting at its seams'. It teaches boys discipline, keeps them fit and healthy, gives them a sense of purpose and enables them to make friends. The funding is a massive help, and the club meets all the strict rules and criteria to get it.

A letter had been received saying that the criteria for funding had been met and money was available. Two weeks later information had been received that the funding was suspended.

The Chair again asked the question on who had taken the decision to freeze the funding – money that is intended for neighbourhood use.

The lead officer reiterated the response given early. He added that measures are being put in place to retrieve the financial situation, to rein in spending and assess the situation at the end of the year. The spending on area forums is still on the agenda and has not been rejected by the Council. What the Council is saying is that it needs time to do the responsible thing and try and look at other ways of bringing spending back into balance, and it will be looked at again at the end of the year to see if it can go ahead and provide this money.

The Council has needed to look very seriously at its spending and get back into balance. That is what the people of Wirral would expect. There is a commitment to the funding and the situation is suspended as opposed to being rejected like other areas of expenditure. The programme has been suspended whilst the Council deals with a very serious situation, which can have serious implications for Social Care. It is taking measures to avoid that and part of those measures is to suspend the funding pending further consideration in two months' time.

The Chair stated: *'You keep using the word Council; it's the administration that has suspended the funding, not the Council. The Council has not met to make that decision. The Council meets on Monday. Neighbourhood Forums across the Borough should not pay the price of this administration's failure to manage its budget'*.

The lead officer replied: *'The Council has been faced by a number of problems. The two main reasons for the overspend are the increased cost of Social Care. Demographic changes in Wirral have resulted in an increase in the number of older people,[people are living longer] and an increase in the number of children with problems who need support. Wirral has one of the highest levels of children in Care, and there are increased costs associated with that. These are the key reasons why the Council is facing this overspend At the moment there is a cap of £17 million, and*

steps are being taken to retrieve that situation. Decisions have yet to be made and they will be made in the next two months’.

3 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT/BENEFITS

COUNCIL TAX CONSULTATION

Viv O’Leary, Department of Finance, thanked the area forum for giving her the opportunity to talk about changes to the Council Tax system.

The Government has announced that from April 2013, Council Tax Benefits will no longer exist in their current form and all councils will need to devise their own Council Tax Support scheme.

In addition, Wirral Council will have to work within a budget that has been reduced by at least 10%, which for 2013/14 equates to an initial budget reduction in the region of £3.2 million. As a result the Council has to make some difficult decisions about who should get financial support and how much support they should be given.

The Council Tax Benefit, which is the means tested benefit that helps people on a low income to pay their Council Tax, will be abolished and replaced with a new local scheme, known as Local Council Tax Support Scheme.

The Government has decided that pensioners and vulnerable people must be protected, and that vulnerable people should be defined locally.

Wirral Council is consulting on the definition of vulnerable people, [eg those of working age who have a disability, have a disabled child, have a war disabled pension or a war widow/widower pension] and is consulting on a proposal to base the local scheme for 2013/14 on the principles of the existing Council Tax Benefit scheme, and on possible options for achieving the £3.2 million savings needed from the scheme.

Members of the public are urged to complete the questionnaire by the return date of 31 October 2012. Questionnaires can be completed on line on the website in libraries [apart from Rock Ferry Library]. Paper versions can be obtained from and returned to any Council One Stop Shop, Library, Leisure Centre and Children’s Centre. Completed questionnaires can be returned by post.

Once the consultation finishes, a report will be presented to Elected Members who will make the final decisions on Wirral Council’s Local Council Tax Support Scheme.

Viv O’Leary responded to questions on the classes of persons who are entitled to a reduction under the scheme, the number of responses to date [400], and the media used to publicise the consultation [*The Wirral Globe*].

Viv stated that it would be helpful if those present this evening could take away the consultation paper and give feedback, and to encourage responses from family members and friends.

Viv responded to the question.

Q	How are you getting the message out?
A	By various means. We have a paper document you can pick up in one stop shops etc, some are here today; on line on the website. We’re

	hoping to go out to leisure centres during half term; an article in the Wirral Globe, and on Twitter and Facebook. With our current clients, everyone gets a flyer and we've written to our main stakeholders, eg. Citizens' Advice Bureau, registered and private landlords, and given presentations at landlord focus meetings. We haven't written to every Council tax paper because of the cost involved. We have started to collect email addresses and have a data base of about 13,000 email addresses.
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4 **HEALTHWATCH CONSULTATION**

HEALTH WATCH CONSULTATION

The speaker did not turn up at the meeting The Chair said having given them an opportunity at short notice they had missed their chance and would not be invited back.

5 **GENERAL PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

GENERAL PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Q – Cllr Abbey	[To Inspector Kolokotroni]. What impact will cuts in the Police budget have on neighbourhood policing in Wirral?
A	I can only state that in the short term it has had no effect whatsoever. What will happen when the new Police Commissioner is elected in November, I don't know. Staffing levels in Moreton have not changed. We have one vacancy and we are hoping to have that filled.

The Chair placed his appreciation on record and congratulated the Police Officer on the reduction in crime levels in the neighbourhood area.

6 **DATE OF NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM**

DATE OF NEXT MEETING: 17 FEBRUARY 2013 at a venue to be confirmed.

In closing the meeting, the Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and extended his best wishes for the forthcoming festive season and for the New Year