

# AREA FORUM (WEST WIRRAL)

Tuesday, 16 October 2012

<u>Present:</u> Councillor	G. Watt (Acting Chair)
<u>In attendance:</u> Councillors	D Elderton J Hale G Ellis E Boulton
Community Representatives	Jackie Hall Cynthia Bibbington
Lead Officer	Kevin Adderley Director of Regeneration Housing and Planning
Area Service Co-ordinator	Tracey Smith
Streetscene Manager	Mark Traynor
Community Safety	Mike Collins
Merseyside Fire Service	Sarah Patterson Phil Hunt
Merseyside Police	Sergeant Andy Carter
Council Officers	Viv O'Leary Neil Powell
<u>Apologies</u> Councillors	JE Green  John Percival Inspector Mick Blease

## 1 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

**1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES:** The Chair, Councillor Geoffrey Watt welcomed forum members, and the new community representatives and 41 members of the public to the West Wirral Neighbourhood Forum meeting held at West Kirby Concourse. Apologies received from Councillor Jeff Green, Inspector Mike Blease and John Percival.

- **Neighbourhood Funding Statement** - Kevin Adderley 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 Cabinet has 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

**BUDGET CONSULTATION:** Tracey Smith informed the forum 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 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 are being asked 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.

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, 6,000 responses have been received – 227 from residents in this area forum. Some innovative ideas have been put forward for improving Council services and for saving money.

The area co-ordinator strongly urged those who had not done so, to fill in a questionnaire and to encourage friends and family to do so. The consultation ends on Friday, 19 October, the results will be analysed and the ideas on how to make savings will be fed back to the relevant departments. A further consultation on the options will take place with residents.

**Q:** What services are more costly for Wirral?

**A:** We have made no decisions, we know where the high spending is all this information is available on the website and the areas are Adult Social Services and Children's Services and again these are our priorities.

**Q:** We can put our comments down, but we feel decisions have already been made? Can you reassure is this is not the case.

**A:** We have not made any decisions and we still have £200 million to spend/allocate on services after the end of this process, so this consultation is important to help direct that future spend too.

**Q:** Before you decide on cuts to services, you still need to deliver statutory services before cutting services, but what is happening internally to address this?

**A:** Review of all management throughout Wirral Council - this will be reduce by 33% bearing in mind we shed around 1,200 staff two years ago. We will be looking at partnership working with other organisations. If we cut services, we will definitely reduce staff and there will be fewer staff working for the council.

**Q:** Some services have to be done by law don't they?

**A:** The questionnaire is general. We have a list of statutory services. It is all open for debate. Statutory services do cost a lot of money. "Some of the nice stuff we do will have to go." We are making a budget plan not just for today but for the future.

**Statements:** Cllr John Hale: The Council meeting we had on Monday night – looked at the £100million saving. As a Council we have to spend money on statutory services and look after the elderly and children's services and it also has to be to a certain standard. We have to be more efficient and improve all our services. Non statutory services (pot holes, dogs in parks etc) will be under review. We have to balance the budget by law. "No decisions" have been made. "Consultation" is genuine and we will be looking at the consultation results and will be using them.

Cllr David Elderton also said that as a council we are looking at alternative ways of working with voluntary groups to maybe provide services. All options are open.

**Q:** Not certain about the actual 100 million saving?

**A:** The 100 million is included within the growth element until we see full details of budget over the next 3 years.

Kevin Adderley informed the forum that for year 1 and 2 we know what we have to achieve and although the required 100 million is not necessarily all due to reduced allocations from Central Government, there is an acceptance that the amount is correct.

The next steps are that the consultation report will go to Cabinet in November and this will help set the budget this needs to be done by 10th March 2013

**Q:** How much has it cost for the suspended officers.

**A:** Kevin Adderley advised the resident that he was unable to answer that question.

**Q:** We need to learn good practice from other councils and costs per head for services and compare this.

**A:** Kevin Adderley advised that you have to be careful using comparisons as some council's have different services in each service area.

**Q:** Suggested that Council Tax could go up a small amount and for everyone to contribute as we are proud of Wirral and don't want to lose vital services

**A:** This will be looked at.

### 3 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT/BENEFITS

**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 have 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. The Council 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 of 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 working age having to pay something.
- Introduce a standard non-dependant charge – set at £9.90. This will mean every household which has adults living there will pay something towards the household costs.

- Second Adult Rebate where 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 with 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: 3<sup>rd</sup> September to 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 your nearest One Stop Shop to pick up a paper version
- Or your 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. 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.

#### 4 GENERAL PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

**POLICE:** "Wirral – Your neighbourhood Newsletter for October 2012", was available for residents at the meeting. Overall crime down and it is the safest place to live and work. Shoplifting/Robberies slightly increased mainly with incidents at off licences.

**Q:** Raised issue about scams & door knocking scams

**A:** Be aware do not accept these unless you know them also do not give anyone personal information. It is dangerous to do so.

Sgt Andy Carter informed the forum that they have a very good team with 19 special constables & officers for the local area. Special constables are voluntary and some of these move on to become Police Officers. Merseyside Police have started internal recruitment of around 120 staff for the new financial year including PCSO's. The next "Have Your Say" meeting will take place on the 24<sup>th</sup> October at Melrose Hall.

**FIRE SERVICE:** Phil Hunt/Sarah Patterson briefed the forum that over 6,000 properties have had completed with home fire safety checks. The Bonfire strategy starts next week with fire service and partner organisations. From this week and up to 5 November, the Fire and Rescue Service are urging members of the public to use the free-phone telephone number 0800 731 5989 to report the build up of bonfire materials that are considered to be dangerous, and the fire service will collect the materials and use them for organised events. The same number can be used to report skips left in the street and they are considered to be a fire risk. The service will contact the company involved and ask for them to be removed. The same number should be used to report children or youths with fireworks or on setting fires. A fire prevention officer will visit shops to check compliance with the rules for the sale of fireworks and will remove the fireworks if there are any unsafe practices.

Phil also advised the forum that they are visiting every school educating young people on safe driving, around 16 sessions have been organised and sessions also delivered to those who are aged 16-25 on the campaign regarding "drive to arrive". This is a very direct training session and highlights the issues around drugs, alcohol, speeding, impressing their mate/s and not wearing a seatbelt.

The West Wirral sustainable transport team are keen to encourage people to use their bikes! Other schemes include Beachsafe – BBQs, Aware of Tides, promoting Tide Times etc.

**COMMUNITY SAFETY:** Mike Collins briefed the forum on that his team is responsible for the security of all council buildings, parks and open spaces. Anti-social behaviour and general crime is down in this area. The community safety team work in partnership with the Police and Fire Service to ensure that this is a safe place to live. Wheelie bins are a major issue at present. If a bin that has been left out or is put out on a non-collection day is stolen, the occupier is responsible for the cost of the replacement bin. In some areas of Wirral, wheelie bins are being stolen and used for bonfires.

**Q:** Jackie Hall raised an on-going issue around the former public toilet at North Parade/Trinity Road. This was pursued in 2007 and she had been informed that nothing can be done about this until 2015.

**Q:** With all of the savings that need to be achieved, what is happening with development for the Concourse.

**A:** Kevin Adderley will look into both of these issues.

**Q:** It is the year of the Wirral Coast Line. Beach at Hoylake is in a dreadful state the grass growth of beach is comical to look at. The spartina grass is getting worse and is spreading more and more. Hoylake Sailing Club volunteered to clean it up yearly but it has been even more widespread. It is encouraging more insects and we will have more rodent problems in the future. It is from the Kings Gap area heading towards Liverpool, also West Kirby beach was highlighted as an area of concern.

Cllrs John Hale/Geoffrey Watt replied to this issue. Back in 2000 we were banned by Natural England so had to use specialist equipment/materials. It has been sprayed for 2/3 years. It is now being regularly sprayed by the Council's own workers and

some die-back is apparent. Mary Bagley is the officer responsible and is aware of this issue. Natural England may be more stricter after 2015.

*One resident was not in favour of the removal of the Spartina grass.*

**Q:** Road maintenance - Banks road (sinking)) near Church Road. It has been like this for about 3 months. There are Cones to protect the area.

**A:** Mark Traynor is look into this.

**5      DATE OF NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM - THURSDAY 28TH FEBRUARY  
2013 VENUE TO BE CONFIRMED**

The Acting Chair, Councillor Geoffrey Watt thanked everyone for attending.