

# AREA FORUM (HESWALL AND PENSBY & THINGWALL)

Wednesday, 17 October 2012

Present:

Councillor	L Rowlands (Chair)
Councillors	M Johnston M Sullivan
Community Representatives	Ray Squire
Lead Officer	David Armstrong Interim Director of Childrens Services
Area Service Co-ordinator	Tracey Smith
Streetscene Manager	Mark Traynor
Community Safety	Mike Collins
Merseyside Police	No representative
Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service	Keith Woodhouse
Council Officers Apologies	Neil Powell, Finance Department
Councillors	A Hodson P Johnson D McCubbin
Police	Inspector Mick Blease

## 1 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

**On behalf of Councillor Andrew Hodson, Councillor Les Rowlands accepted the Chair and welcomed Forum members and thirty-one members of the public to the meeting of the Neighbourhood Forum in the United Reform Church in Heswall.**

**Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Andrew Hodson, Councillor Peter Johnson and Councillor Don McCubbin.**

Councillor Rowlands was saddened to announce that Councillor Peter Johnson is in Arrowe Park Hospital where his condition is very serious.

Peter has been a hard-working councillor in Heswall for many, many years. He was Mayor of the Borough and has a long track record of service to people in this area.

Councillor Rowlands invited the area forum to join him in sending every good wish to Peter and kindest thoughts to Mary and their family at this very difficult time.

#### MINUTES AND ACTIONS ARISING FROM JUNE 2012 FORUM

The minutes of the Area Forum meeting on 13 June had been distributed electronically in advance. Paper copies were available at the meeting.

The area co-ordinator had responded by email to the query raised about the barrier around the footpath at Pensall and Fairview.

No matters arising were raised.

**RESOLVED: To accept the minutes of the meeting of the Area Forum on 13 June 2012.**

#### **NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS - FUNDING**

The Lead Officer, David Armstrong, read out a statement issued by Wirral's Chief Executive which, in summary stated that in September 2012, the Council had received a report on the revenue budget based on spend over the previous three months and 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. A decision was made to freeze all non-essential spending across all Council departments, including neighbourhood forum funding.

A further report will be submitted to the Council in two months' time when the situation will be reappraised. Neighbourhood forums should know the status of their funding by the end of the calendar year.

**Q Can the finance officer explain how this £17 million overspend come about, when presumably you struck a balanced budget in April?**

A We did set a balanced budget, but there was an overspend in Adult Social Care costs and around £5 million in Children's Social Care, mainly due to a rise in the number of children going into residential care and foster care, transport costs, and a downward trend in income.

**Q £17 million is an enormous amount of money. What is the % of the overall budget?**

A It's a very small percentage of the £600 million budget.

**Q From my limited understanding of finance, you either have to get more money or you have to make more efficient use of the money you have. Two options the Council might have would be to list the services you can cut, or top slice by 10% and let every department take a cut.**

A [Chair]: The Council is consulting with the whole of the Borough, and the next agenda item is Budget Consultation.

**Q Who decided what was non-essential?**

A The Chief Executive and the new Director of Finance, in agreement with Chief Officers, drew up a list of items of essential and non-essential spending and using pre-determined criteria decided to freeze, suspend, or approve the expenditure. The process will be subject to close scrutiny by elected members.

**Q The essentials and non-essentials should be listed.**

A Each decision taken will be published, and can be questioned.

In an overview of the budgetary situation, Councillor Sullivan stated that the senior officers have been very competent in their approach to addressing the overspend. Consultation on the budget finishes on 19 October and no decisions will be made until all the responses received are collated. He urged everyone to fill in a questionnaire. The Council is also facing problems caused by a reduction in Government funding. The Council has released £20,000 to each area forum to spend on road safety.

**Q Could you not foresee you would have reduced income on car parking etc? I understand the 20 mph limit is not enforceable. Is there any point in spending that money when no-one will take any notice?**

A [Chair] The 20mph limit is enforceable.

Councillor Johnson explained that the Council set targets for savings. Wirral has 679 children in Care, which is double the national average. Currently, the overspend is £15.4 million, but it is starting to move in the right direction and the Council has transferred £7 million to reserves. He was confident that non-essential spending will go back into spend.

**Q [Community Representative]. What is the cost of child care to the Council?**

A The departmental budget is about £70 million, the greatest proportion of which is spent on Children's Social Care. [Examples were given of the costs per week of taking a child into care].

**Q [Community representative]. Any questionnaire is a 'wish list'. You are asking for comments, but we need to know what it costs.**

A There are five papers on line which show the spending on staffing etc, broken down by Department, which people can look at before they fill in the questionnaire.

**Q It's now October. Why wasn't something done before, ie in the first month, to reduce this overspend?**

A The new Director of Finance has introduced a new way of working which will highlight issues sooner rather than later.

**Q Is there any chance the budget might be realigned next year?**

A Wirral has a large number of Looked After Children and a statutory responsibility to care for those children.

**Q The area co-ordinator said information is available on the Internet, but not everyone is on the Internet. The free half hour has expired in the time it takes to log on in the library.**

A Council officers are very aware that not everyone has access to the Internet and they try to ensure that alternative means are used to engage with members of the public and to keep people informed. Information is available on the back of the consultation document and a hard copy will be sent out to anyone who requests it.

**Q I'm conscious that Children's and Adult Social Care cost a fortune, and a massive number of children have gone into care in the past few years, but you should have known about those children when you set the budget.**

A [Chair]. Circumstances can arise suddenly in families where children need to be taken into care and the Council has a statutory responsibility to look after those children. The Council is being more transparent, and elected members are receiving figures monthly, instead of at the end of the year.

**Q Can you tell us specifically what happened to the £17 million? Was it a series of families?**

A £10 million of the overspend was in Adult Social Care to meet the increasing costs of providing for adults. Children's Social Care has 3,000 open cases – it's not possible here to identify all the variables – but providing for those children impacts across the whole Council in various ways.

[Councillor Sullivan]: There's a new administration – new people at the top – and the Chief Executive had assured the Councillors that the new staffing structure will save a third of management costs. The 17 million overspend which has built up over the years has not disappeared, but that situation will not continue because of the austerity measures put in place. These are the facts and it's important that everyone is clear. We think we have acted responsibly, and taken the right decisions to sort it all out.

**Q Does the £17 million include the financial transactions for senior officers in and out, or is that a separate item?**

A [Councillor Johnson] The costs of a compromise agreement, for example, or pension costs, early retirements, are separate because they are spread over five years. The reasons for the overspend are 1]. we have not realised all the savings; 2. unexpected expenditure, and 3. some of our income has gone.

**Q You have a 3% overspend of £17 million on a budget of £600 million. Will you have to save the 3% plus government cuts?**

A The first step is to balance the budget for this year. The Director of Finance has given all departments savings targets for next year. The Council has not been notified yet of the settlement from the Government for next year.

## 2 BUDGET CONSULTATION

In her presentation, 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 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 Was Council tax frozen last year, and if so, will it be frozen again this year? I suggest people need information on the costs before you get a response on a generalised basis. I support going for joint services.**

A Last year and the year before, the Government gave funding to Councils, provided they did not increase Council Tax, and the indications are that there is a similar proposal for the next financial year.

Contracts in Children's Services, for example, rise year on year, but Council tax did not go up.

**Q There are certain areas in Wirral that have a high level of social problems etc and you need resources if you are having to fund them. Is there a vehicle to lobby to say there are extraneous circumstances in Wirral that place a lot more pressure on services?**

A Council officers follow Council policies and do the best they can to stay within budget. It is up to the political parties to lobby the Government. Wirral has a good track record of successfully bidding for grants, and has recently received a grant to support specific families in Wirral.

**Q Sounds as if we are reaching Armageddon with all kinds of services expected to be cut.**

- Q You could consider putting the rates up. A progressive tax to put the rates up.**
- A Council tax is only 13% of our income. No Council can put the council tax up because there is a freeze from central government.
- Q You need to make the survey easy to get as big a response as possible. Question 2 asks people which of 12/15 items are important, but there's no information. It may be on the Internet, but you have to look for it. You could have made the questionnaire larger and provide more information to help people to decide what is important and what is not.**
- Also, the start time of 6.30 pm doesn't give much time to people who are working to get to this meeting. The start time should be at least 7 pm.**
- A We used to have a 7 pm start, and there are more people at this meeting than there were then.
- [Area co-ordinator]: The reason we didn't have a bigger questionnaire is because people tend not to fill it in. The reason we didn't include monetary values against everything is because the information is available separately on the Internet, for example, the Streetscene budget, and copies will be sent out to people on request, and because it would add considerably to the cost. Also, if there is a monetary value, people would fill in the questionnaire in a different way and base their responses on cost, instead of what is important to them.
- Q [Community representative]: I am hugely concerned about this questionnaire. The area coordinator mentioned only 227 questionnaires have come in from this area. It would have been helpful to have a succinct list of the areas of expenditure saying this is where we spend the money and this is what we are asking you to prioritise. What will the questionnaire be used for? As a basis of a mandate for the Council? As one of the people who attended the Council meeting on Monday, I'm not sure it is valid to have a questionnaire. I want to know what it's going to be used for.**
- A [Area co-ordinator]: Legally, we have to consult with our residents whenever we are going to make any changes to our services. There would be an outcry if services just stopped. The reason we are consulting is because we want to know what matters to people. Every comment will be analyzed and fed back to the relevant department so they know what is important to people. A list of options will be drawn up for further consultation with the community.
- Many people don't care – they think it doesn't affect them, but they need to understand how important it is. A questionnaire has not been sent to every household because of the expense involved, and even so there would not be a guaranteed response.
- Q Do you use local free newspapers for publicity?**
- A We give the Press stories to publish, but they tend not to print the 'good news' stories and focus on 'bad news'.
- Q The problem is there is no incentive to fill one in. If there was a reward or a worthwhile prize you would be inundated with replies. People always ask, 'What's in it for me?' Its apathy, and you can't beat apathy.**
- Q One question that's not in the questionnaire is about how the £17 million overspend can be reduced. You would have a 99% response if you asked if**

**all Councillors and Council employees should forego their expenses entirely until there is no deficit. If the allowances stopped it would focus people's minds more on reducing the £17 million.**

A [Chair] Councillors took a 5% decrease in their expenses and many councillors don't claim travelling expenses for journeys within Wirral. You can check every Councillor's expenses at the end of the year – we'll all be accountable.

**Q Councillors deserve their expenses; it is expensive returning phone calls and visits etc. It's dangerous to say that all Councillors should have their expenses frozen or taken away. It's a hard enough job being a councillor and to say you are not going to receive any expenses would be unreasonable.**

**Q [Community representative]. Neighbourhood funding. Has last year's underspend been cut?**

A [Area co-ordinator]: We spent it all in this year, before the freeze. The £20,000 for road safety is a Government grant.

### 3 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT/BENEFITS

Neil Powell, Department of Finance, gave a presentation on 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 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.

Neil Powell responded to questions -

- Q**        **How much does it cost to give pensioners a discount on their Council tax?**
- A        £1.2 million. The Government has said pensioners must not be worse off.
- Q**        **People being asked to respond to questions in a forum such as this. What does it contribute to the financial aspects of the LA?**
- A        By law, we have to ask those questions.
- Q**        **What is the rate of non-collection of Council tax?**
- A        We collected 96.8% last year, we usually manage to collect the remainder within 2/3 months. It's an easy tax to collect.
- Q**        **According to a Press article, some Councils are saying if they make people pay it costs more to collect than they collect, especially in low banded properties.**
- A        You are quite right. A person in a band A property would pay £20 a month, and it would be too expensive to collect it.
- Q**        **Do you use debt collection agencies?**
- A        We use bailiffs. We don't factor the debt because there is not a huge amount of debt left to collect.

The Chair urged people to take the time to fill in the questionnaire.

#### 4        **GENERAL PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

- Q**        **A written question had been received asking if damaged or stolen wheelie bins are replaced by the Council.**
- A        Damaged bins, and lost or stolen bins reported within 24 hours, will be replaced free of charge provided they are left outside only on the collection day. Residents should contact the Streetscene call centre.
- Q**        **Has the panel met to consider a pedestrian crossing on Pensby Road as discussed at the last area forum meeting?**
- A        [Councillor Johnson]: 21 areas in Wirral are requesting Puffin crossings, and they are scored according to foot traffic and road traffic. The Pensby Road crossing is ranked number seven. Questions have been raised over the last six years and one of the biggest problems is the location of people's driveways where it's technically impossible to put a crossing. A crossing near Gills Lane for example, would be too close to someone's house. The other issue is funding. Each one costs around £80,000.
- [Councillor Sullivan]: I've been negotiating with Tesco since the last meeting and I've spoken to Technical Services about a pelican crossing on Pensby Road. I've been assured by the council officers that if we can get the money from Tesco there will be one as close as possible to Tesco Express. I've rang customer services and Tesco head office and am waiting for a response.
- I've spoken to the Council about the dangerous situation at the bottom of Gills Lane and they are trying to put in some measures. I didn't ask about the mirror but I'll go back and ask if it's possible to put one there.



**Q Will the appointment of an independent Police Commissioner have any financial impact on Wirral?**

A [Mike Collins, Community Safety]. No. The funding is coming from central government. It's a government Initiative.

**Q Why does it cost £83,000 for a pelican crossing. Have you got a breakdown?**

A [Councillor Johnson]: It costs between £80 and £85,000, depending on the location.  
[Area co-ordinator]: I will get a breakdown of the costs for the next meeting.

**Q The bus service on Pensby roads has reduced by 50%. What is the Council doing about having it restored?**

A [Chair]: The Council doesn't run bus services, it was devolved from the Council to private companies. Merseytravel is now responsible and they let out the contracts to companies who provide a service – Arriva in this case. These companies are profit-making companies and if a route is not profitable they will not put on a bus service. Merseytravel is not in a position to insist that the company provides a service and there's nothing we can do about it other than plead with the company to put the buses back on.

I've taken the concerns back to the panel meeting with all the companies but trying to persuade them to put on the types of buses or the services we require is very difficult if it is not what they want to provide. I take your point that it is a poor service and I'll keep shouting about it. See me afterwards and give me some details and I'll take them with me to the next monthly meeting.

**Q Pensby Road used to have six buses an hour, now it's three an hour. It's been put out that Wirral Council has agreed a new scheme with Arriva and it's publicising it as a marvellous service negotiated with the Council and that people have a fantastic service because of the partnership with Wirral. I wrote to Merseytravel and didn't get a reply. A new law has been passed which says local authorities can agree non-commercialised routes. It's on the web – an agreement between Wirral Council, Arriva and First Direct.**

A [Chair]: That's the first I've heard of it.

**Q Have you considered shared services and going to the private sector to provide services, eg. finance, payroll etc?**

A [Area co-ordinator]: That's one of the questions in the questionnaire, but specific services have not been named. We are asking for ideas on shared services.

[Lead officer]: We already have joint services with other North West authorities, eg. Governor Support, and some aspects of curriculum support for schools. The joint services operate on the basis of economy of scale but don't generate a huge amount of savings.

**Q Is it the fault of the planners for not putting the requirement for a crossing in the planning application for Tesco?**

A [Councillor Johnson] explained the need for caution on the part of Council officers when specifying requirements in a 106 agreement. Developers are very experienced in these matters and they can challenge anything in the 106. Massive costs can be incurred if it is deemed that the demands are unreasonable, and Officers tend to err on the side of caution. He stated that he was unable to give a precise answer to the question on the percentage of appeals that are lost.

**Q** **Would it be possible to have a mobile microphone at meetings – a lot of people are finding it difficult to hear.**

**A** [Area co-ordinator]. I apologised at the beginning of the meeting. There is no microphone this evening because of the freeze on non-essential spending.

The area co-ordinator apologised again.

**Q** **A great number of the people who are here tonight are retired, but for those who work, a 6.30 start is not a reasonable time to get here.**

**A** The issue was discussed at a previous meeting when it was agreed that it was unsafe to expect people, especially more elderly residents, to make their way home in the dark when meetings end at 9 pm or later. The majority of people present thought that meetings should start at 6.30 pm, and it was agreed the next three meetings would start at 6.30 as an experiment. The situation will be kept under review.

**Q** **In the past people on the top table outnumbered the number in the audience.**

**A** There were 62 members of the public at the last meeting – double the number here tonight – and the consensus was that meetings should start at 6.30 pm.

**Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service:** From this week and up to 5 November, the Fire and Rescue Service are urging members of the public to use the freephone 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.

**Community Safety:** 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.

There were 174 burglaries in 2007, compared with 20 last year. 20mph zones are enforceable - and it's stated in Highway Code - however, the Police do not have the resources available. If there is an issue, the Police will deal with it.

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.

5 **DATE OF NEXT NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM - WEDNESDAY 6TH MARCH 2013 VENUE TO BE CONFIRMED**

**WEDNESDAY, 6 MARCH 2012.**

Venue to be confirmed.

In closing the meeting at 8.30pm, the Chair thanked everyone for their interest and attendance, and input into a lively and very productive meeting.

