

AREA FORUM (WEST WIRRAL)

Monday, 16 February 2009

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	G Ellis (Chair)	
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	D Elderton JE Green	J Hale G Watt
	Member of Parliament	Stephen Hesford, MP	
	Community Representatives	Gary Evans	Cynthia Radford
	Business Representative	John Percival	
	Lead Officer	Jim Wilkie (Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services)	
	Area Service Co-ordinator	Tracey Smith	
	NHS Wirral	Russell Favager	
	Merseyside Police	Inspector Paul Vickers	
	Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service	John Davies	
	Council Officers	Andrew Fraser, Corporate Services Department Caroline Laing, Manager, Anti-Social Behaviour Team	Howard Mortimer, Corporate Services Strategic Development Alan Stennard, Director of Regeneration
<u>Apologies</u>		Sue Green, Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	

1 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

The Chair, Councillor Gerry Ellis, opened the meeting and welcomed approximately 120 members of the public to the meeting in Hoylake. He invited members of the forum to introduce themselves.

The Chair restructured the agenda to allow ample time for discussion on emerging issues concerned with Hoylake Library and community centres in West Wirral.

2 AREA CO-ORDINATORS REPORT

The Area Co-ordinator's report contained the minutes of the previous meeting, and local updates on Wirral Anti-Social Behaviour team, the Community Safety Team, Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, Equality and Diversity, Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Youth and Transport.

Matters arising would be considered as substantive agenda items at the current meeting.

Resolved: That –

- i the minutes of the October meeting of the Area Forum be confirmed;**
- ii the Area Co-ordinator be thanked for her report.**

3 HOYLAKES & WEST KIRBY REGENERATION PROJECTS

The Chair welcomed Howard Mortimer, Strategic Services Development Officer, and invited him to update the Area Forum on plans for the regeneration of Hoylake and West Kirby.

Howard Mortimer reported that further to the presentation on regeneration plans for West Kirby at the Area Forum meeting in October, two reports will be presented at the Cabinet meeting on 19 March. Neither report will be confidential, apart from financial aspects concerning the Sail Project. The reports, which will contain updates and recommendations on the projects listed below, will be posted on the Council's website on or about 12 March.

WIRRAL COUNTRY PARK – NEW VISITOR CENTRE: The intention is to build a new Centre and to improve access and car parking provision at a cost of about £5 million. So far, resources have been secured for about half that sum.

CANOPIES IN WEST KIRBY: Due to the economic downturn, traders do not feel comfortable about the proposal to renovate the canopies at present. The situation will be kept under review and, hopefully, there will be more a more positive response from the traders when there is an improvement in the economic climate.

PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS: The intention is to try to assemble the necessary resources, and then to ask the Council to support the proposals. There had been strong support in favour of the proposals at the exhibition in the Concourse in September. Another exhibition will be organised in West Kirby.

THE CRESCENT: The traders have expressed significant concern about the proposal to operate a pilot scheme for pedestrianisation in 2009/10 due to the impact of the recession. The concerns will be replicated in the report to Cabinet.

THE PROMENADE: There will be **NO** recommendation to introduce echelon parking on the promenade.

THE GREATER CONCOURSE: Plans for the Concourse include a new fire station, health centre, a large public square and public realm improvements, at an estimated cost of £16/17 million. The proposals have been taken to the market place and eight developers have expressed interest. A shortlist of four has been drawn up and various processes have been completed. It is hoped that the project will be picked up in conjunction with the Council's Asset Management team.

THE SAIL PROJECT: The Cabinet has extended the lock out agreement with Carpenter Investments Limited until the end of April. The Cabinet will make a decision on whether or not it wishes the scheme to go ahead with Carpenters.

HOYLAKE: There is potential for a second phase in Market Street, in the area between the railway station and The Quadrant. The project will require some complex agreements between the Council and its partners. Negotiations are ongoing to try and achieve agreement before seeking support from the Cabinet.

HOYLAKE AND MEOLS PROMENADE: The Cabinet will receive a report on a study of the projects aspired to for the promenades. Public meetings are being organised with residents and Friends' Groups in the first week in April to look at the prospects for early investment in the central area.

GOLF RESORT PROJECT: Formal expressions of interest will be invited, possibly within two weeks. It is hoped that the project will attract expressions of interest, worldwide.

THE HOTEL: Plans for a hotel are in limbo.

The Chair thanked Howard Mortimer for the presentation.

The Chair introduced Hugh Dalglish and invited him to pass on the views of local residents on the plans for the development of West Kirby.

Hugh Dalglish explained that the West Kirby Working Group consists of a group of people who have combined to try and persuade the Wirral Council of the need to do things differently. The Council is relying far too much on consultants and developers for regeneration schemes and general planning, and it is not listening to the views of the people. Decisions at Council level have been secretive and officers' responses to public questions have been somewhat evasive. Furthermore, Wirral Council is not following national guidelines or even its own policies for the involvement of the public in decision-making.

Jim Wilkie, Howard Mortimer, Councillors Hale, Green and Watt, responded to the issues raised.

Members of the public protested loudly about the short period between the publication of the report and the date of the Cabinet meeting.

Howard Mortimer explained that the report would include artists' impressions and elevations. If the Cabinet is minded to proceed, it will be a requirement on the developer to develop the detail to the extent where it can be submitted to the Planning Committee. The Council will advise Carpenters of the need to hold public meetings.

The Chair suggested that everyone should write to members of the Cabinet expressing their concerns.

Members of the public raised the questions/comments:

Q [John Martin] When the Wirral Country Park was created, Cheshire County Council shared half of the cost.

A We are talking now about building on land that is in Wirral.

Q When the Cadbury plant was built in Moreton, many of the senior managers stayed at the Dee Hotel in West Kirby. It is still in existence. Why consider another one?

Q [John Martin] The case has not been made for a hotel and plans don't exist. The sailing club could be improved at very little cost – simply move the outside tap just a little way up the road. You could make the sailing club look more attractive by putting on a modern type of roof, and it would not cost a great deal. There is no need for a hotel, nor to improve the sailing school. There is no case for a hotel on that site whatsoever.

Q [Lorraine]. I raised a point about land ownership at the last meeting. The land is not registered with Land Registry. Is it in the Council's ownership? If not, who does own it? I think the issue needs to be looked at.

A [Howard Mortimer] I recall a conversation with Lorraine last time. If the Cabinet is minded to continue with the routes that Carpenters are proposing, then after 19 March, Carpenters will become the preferred bidder. The Council will work with Carpenters to develop a development agreement and the lease will be made over to this activity in a way that is acceptable. There are a number of options, but the most likely one is that the land will be made over on a long term basis at a peppercorn rent, and the Council would continue to hold the freehold of the site.

Q Can we have a straight-forward answer to the question of ownership?

A [Jim Wilkie] I was not aware of any questions over the ownership of that site. I will speak to the Estates people.

[Howard Mortimer] A lot of Council properties, land and estates are not necessarily registered with Land Registry.

Q [Cllr Watt] Following various questions put to me over the summer, I raised the question, 'Would the Council consult about covenants?' The answer I was given was, 'Yes, we do own the land and there are no covenants on it'.

The Chair suggested that Lorraine pursues her query further with Jim Wilkie at the end of the meeting.

Q [Margaret Campbell] Why didn't the Council do an independent assessment of Carpenters' questionnaire in response to the concerns expressed about the questionnaire? It is the Council Officers' job to examine the evidence and present a balanced view on which Councillors can make their decisions.

A [Howard Mortimer] The consultation was carried out by the developer, not by Council officers. We did go through the questionnaire and checked what Carpenters were saying to us. We agreed in terms of the questions asked against the percentages given, and if they were factually correct.

[Cllr Elderton] I would like to raise a point of clarity and information. As Chairman of the Planning Committee, I am used to dealing with facts and clarity. Aldi had a clear set of plans, presentations and a visual impression. Carpenters have had a year to come up with detailed plans and elevations, but they have still not done so. If they

manage to convince the Cabinet on the basis of the information produced, then at best the Council will have just one week to consider those plans. Carpenters need to produce a lot more factual information on what they are proposing before they can expect anyone to approve it.

Members of the public objected loudly to the situation described. They insisted that they wanted to see proper plans and information on what is being proposed.

Councillor Elderton gave an assurance that he would not permit anyone to pass anything that does not have the detail associated with it – the public can be assured that that would not happen.

- Q The issue of the consultation, which I consider has been totally inadequate for at least ten years. I knew nothing about your so-called master plan. It did not come to my attention until after it had happened. I knew nothing about the Sail project. I didn't get any official notification. I got a letter from Carpenters three days after the consultation started, and when I went, there were no questionnaires available. When I eventually got one, I said, 'This is rubbish'. As this is as a result of an incompetent exercise, a mendacious exercise, Council Officers should be fired and the Council should be 'hung out to dry'. It should not be taking important decisions on such an inadequate basis. You should have proper consultation with proper officers before the Council makes any decisions whatsoever.

The Chair stated that Jim Wilkie, who is the second most senior Officer in the Authority, has taken all the issues on board. The Conservative group sends quarterly newsletters to all local residents and information on all the issues raised has been included in every edition.

- Q [John Hutchinson] Referring to the Cabinet report. Jim Wilkie said that the questionnaire etc was carried out totally by Carpenters. That is true, but the report went to Cabinet as if it was a Council report.

- A [Jim Wilkie] The Cabinet report was a Council report. There is no suggestion that the consultation was done by Council officers.

[John Hutchinson] It went through with the endorsement of Council officers as if the investors had written it. It didn't mention any of the objections and the implication was that Council officers generated the report.

[John Percival] I am a sailor, and I know sailors will not pay £25 to stay at a hotel. They will sleep on the beach. People who come tend to be young people, many travel from overseas, and they stay with members of the sailing community in Wirral. I have a great concern over the hotel and redeveloping the sailing club. How will the Council make it pay if they run it? Will it be permissible to turn it into flats if it fails as a hotel? We need better sailing facilities, but I am concerned about the whole development.

4 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Andrew Fraser, Forward Planning Section, Corporate Services Department, gave a presentation on the Local Development Framework. The LDF is a single document that replaces the Unitary Development Plan for Wirral dated February 2000, and will operate alongside the Regional Spatial Strategy. The framework provides guidance for assessing planning applications and allocating land for new developments within the next 15/20 years. Consultation on the strategy has begun and the Council would welcome feedback on the various parts of the document. The next stage will be to

translate the objectives into spatial policy options and identify the preferred options. A draft core strategy will be compiled, scrutinised by an independent inspector, and submitted to the Secretary of State with the aim of adopting the core strategy in 2011. Members of the public can become involved in the consultation by asking for a copy of the plan, by putting their names on the contact database, or by submitting comments in writing, by email or fax. The deadline for responses is 5 pm, on 27 March 2009. Contact details are: Strategic Development, Corporate Services, Town Hall, Wallasey, CH44 8ED [email hazeledwards@wirral.gov.uk] phone 691 8225 or fax 691 8188.

A report will be presented to Cabinet that summarises all the comments received and will explain how those comments have been taken into account for the next stage. At the end of the process, the document will go to full Council for final approval and adoption.

John Hutchinson explained that Wirral Council has imposed a Banning Order on him, because he has been asking questions on the public's behalf about the Sail project. He enquired if the Banning Order prevented him from responding to the consultation on the LDF.

The Chairman of Meols Drive Residents' Association stated that the Association has looked at the document, and one of the questions raised was whether the LDF is a new style development which will replace the existing plan.

Councillors Watt and Green clarified the situation on Conservation Areas.

A member of the public asked how Wirral Council proposes to notify every voter in Wirral about the consultation, and to remind them of their entitlement to comment on the document.

Andrew Fraser explained that letters had been sent to people on the database, the issue was being raised at all area forum meetings, and a Press release has been issued.

A member of the public stated that these actions alone would not guarantee full coverage. There is a need to achieve 100% coverage and to do that it is necessary to ensure that the information is delivered to every household.

Minute decision:

Resolved: That –

- i **the consultation on the Local Development Framework be noted;**
- ii **Andrew Fraser be thanked for the presentation.**

5 CLOSURE OF HOYLAKES LIBRARY, WESTBOURNE HALL & HOYLAKES COMMUNITY CENTRES

Councillor Hale explained that in June 2007, the Cabinet had appointed consultants [at a cost of £100,000] to examine and report back on leisure and community facilities across Wirral. The consultants had presented their report in March and when, as Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Hale had asked for a copy, his request had been refused. The first sight he had of the report was 48 hours before the Cabinet meeting on 27 November.

In summary, the report recommended the closure of 13 libraries, including Hoylakes library, the closure of Woodchurch and Leasowe Leisure Centres, the closure of all

swimming pools, including Guinea Gap, the Grange Road West Sorts Centre, two museums, the Pacific Road Arts Centre, and 22 community centres. Councillor Hale called a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 10 December to look at the proposals. The proposal of the Conservative group was that the recommendations should not go any further, but the group was outvoted. It was proposed that there should be four area forum meetings, one in each Parliamentary constituency. Despite difficulties encountered by many people in travelling to the venues, all four meetings were attended by a minimum of 500 people, and some by over 800. The consultation period included Christmas and New Year period. The Council ultimately decided to reprove some of the facilities, including the swimming pools, but to close premises on which there had been no previous mention or consultation. The biggest issue for this area is the proposal to close Hoylake Library.

The Chair invited Liz Webster to pass on the views of Residents' groups on library facilities, particularly in Hoylake.

Councillor Hale stated that he agreed entirely with the sentiments expressed by the local community, and he commended Liz on her skill in presenting the case on behalf of residents. He added that he had extended a written invitation to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Steve Foulkes, to attend the meeting this evening and explain the rationale for the closures, but clearly the invitation had not been accepted.

The Chair invited Vaughan Williams, Chair of the Community Centre, to address the meeting. He added that the Vice Chair of Westbourne Hall was also in attendance.

Vaughan Williams began his presentation with the comment that the Centre would be celebrating its Centenary this year.

Hoyle Road Community Centre has the biggest attendance of any other in Wirral, and provides facilities for children with special needs. The Management Committee is actively engaged in looking at ways it may continue to provide those valuable facilities.

Alan Stennard, Director of Regeneration, responded to the main points raised by the speakers and members of the public. He acknowledged that he was not in a position to respond tonight to all the points raised. He added that the original plan had been to close the facilities on 31 March 2009. To meet contractual obligations etc., the Council has allocated sufficient funding to keep the facilities open, where necessary, until June

Stephen Hesford, MP, advised that he had been in Westminster when he had received notification for the first time by email about 48 hours before the announcement was made. After investigation, he had reached the conclusion that the whole thing was a badly thought out and badly designed programme. As a result, he had demanded a meeting with Senior Council Officers and other Wirral MPs. A suggestion was made at that meeting that there should be a joint communiqué about how the MPs intended to approach the issue, but he had refused to sign any kind of joint communiqué. The MP had made it clear at a meeting on 28 November that he did not agree with the closure of any services in his constituency. Everyone was now aware of developments since then and as the local MP he was prepared to do all he could to support the local community.

Stephen Hesford continued that although he would not want to tell people what to do, in his opinion there are two options. Firstly, a judicial review [which would be costly and the Secretary of State might not find fruitful], or more realistically, people can write individually or collectively to the Local Government Ombudsman. The MP has arranged to meet the Ombudsman on 19 February, when he would present a report he began preparing in November.

Stephen Hesford stated that the current issue is the most serious one he has had to address so far in his political career, and he wanted to make it absolutely clear how people might fight to the end. In his view, the whole thing has been completely finance-drive, and it should not be. If the Ombudsman could be persuaded of that fact, and is able to understand the subsidiary affect, it might be possible to make some positive progress.

There have been enquiries from other parts of the world. Wirral has made national headlines and national TV, because there is simply no precedent for this. One of the surprises was the unexpected reaction of the community.

The Chair thanked Stephen Hesford for his speech. Members of the public expressed their appreciation through spontaneous prolonged applause.

In bringing the lengthy debate to a conclusion, the Chair stated that both the consultation and the decision-making process are fundamentally flawed, and that fact will be conveyed to the Ombudsman. He urged everyone who feels strongly about the issue to write a letter of complaint to the Council [Jim Wilkie] and to follow that up with a complaint to the Ombudsman. People might also choose to write to the Secretary of State for the Environment.

The Chair announced that due to the late hour, it would be necessary to postpone the agenda item on the Integrated Transport Block. He apologised to the representatives from partnerships who had made themselves available this evening. The Chair urged people who have a question they wish to raise to speak to Forum members individually, or direct any queries in writing to the Area Co-ordinator.

6 **DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Minute decision:

Resolved: That the next meeting of this Area Forum be held on 17 June 2009 at Westbourne Hall, Westbourne Road, West Kirby.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and contribution and closed the meeting at 9.50 pm.