

AT A MEETING

- of the -

NEIGHBOURHOODS SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL held at the Council House, Walsall on **1 FEBRUARY 2007** at 6:00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Chair)
Councillor Burley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Ault
Councillor Beeley
Councillor Bott
Councillor Griffiths
Councillor Wilkes

ALSO PRESENT

Mrs. C. Kibble GMB
Steve Chapman Policy & Performance Manager - Street Pride

OFFICERS PRESENT

Tim Challans Assistant Director - Leisure Culture and Lifelong Learning
Keith Stone Assistant Director - Built Environment
Allison Jarrett Head of Regeneration & Neighbourhood Services Finance
Stuart Bentley Scrutiny Officer

45/06. **APOLOGIES**

The Chair advised the panel that apologies had been received on behalf of Councillor Woodruff.

46/06. **SUBSTITUTIONS**

The Chair advised the panel of the following substitution to the panel for the duration of the meeting: -

- Delete: Councillor K.Phillips
- Substitute: Councillor Wilkes

47/06. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

Councillor Burley declared a non-prejudicial interest as member of the GMB.

48/06. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Members noted that there were no items for consideration in private at this meeting.

49/06. DRAFT BUDGET 2007/8

Councillor Towe referred to appendix 1 of the previously circulated report, noting the significant differences in the forecast and actual figures for 2006.

(annexed)

Having done some calculations he highlighted up to a £1.5m discrepancy, which was very concerning, and he asked what was being done about this.

Allison Jarrett replied that those estimates had been made in December (2006) with the projected overspend as of that date. However, the service is currently looking at a zero budget deficit for the year end. The deficit had been a worry, largely due to the impact of the school meals service, but that was now being managed.

Councillor Towe commented that some of the budget was totally out of skew and asked who was monitoring the budget on a monthly basis.

Keith Stone replied that there was a formal budget monitoring process on a monthly basis where actions could be taken to meet budget pressures.

Councillor Burley replied that she had also picked up on these figures and that, even with monitoring, some were still double the forecast figure.

Allison Jarrett replied that the accountancy team regularly monitored the budgets and that there were occasional miscodings or one-off payments. There was a duty to report what was on the system at the time of the report.

Councillor Towe replied that he was still unhappy that the actual figures were so far adrift from the set budget and he asked what the budget tolerance was.

Allison Jarrett replied that there was no set tolerance but any variance was looked at. She then gave a presentation highlighting the current position, the action plan to reduce the projected directorate overspend and the draft neighbourhoods revenue budget for 2007/8.

(annexed)

Councillor Towe then referred to table 2 of the previously circulated report and stated that it would appear that the majority of the proposals this panel had put forward had been declined by Cabinet. He then asked for comments.

Councillor Burley stated that she was extremely disappointed that the panel had been ignored. However, more annoying were the job cuts all over the budget, especially from the lower end of the workforce; also the proposed reduction in litter collection and street sweeping. She added that council would not receive the thanks of the public for this.

There followed a general discussion on the effect of the proposed cuts in Streetpride on the state of the Borough's streets.

Councillor Griffiths then suggested that the panel take each issue listed in table 2 in turn to see if the panel agreed or disagreed with Cabinet's decision.

This was generally agreed to be a good idea.

There followed general discussions on the issues listed in table 2 of the report with members taking into account the options available, the associated risks and liabilities and the impact on health and safety.

During the discussions Mrs. Kibble stated that the GMB had forwarded some alternative savings to the head of Streetpride, which they were still looking to put through. Further, the GMB had been asked for its comments on the current proposals at the Neighbourhoods JNCC, but had had no feedback on either.

Keith Stone replied that he that it was difficult for him to comment, as he had not seen the alternative savings proposals. He stated that he would discuss the issue with the head of streetpride, but added that he would be very surprised if the proposals had not been viewed and judged as to their acceptability.

Councillor Towe asked that the panel be kept up to date on this issue, particularly about the why the GMB had received no response.

Allison Jarrett then suggested that members re-visit those items that Cabinet had agreed, detailed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.3 in order to offset any increases in the council tax resulting from consideration of the items in table 2.

Councillor Beeley raised the increase in charges for cricket and bowling clubs and stated that further increases would severely affect that remaining clubs in the Borough.

Steve Chapman added that there were various other proposals, including home composting and increased litter enforcement, which could be pursued to reduce costs.

Councillor Griffiths replied that it was unfortunate that these possible efficiencies had been brought forward now as they did not help with the budget this year. However, he would like to see regular updates on any further proposed efficiencies.

Councillor Towe suggested that the closure of certain libraries for a day week could be re-visited as long as the effect was not a huge one on the service provided.

Councillor Burley stated that the costs of consultants and agency staff should be investigated.

Following the discussion of the items listed in table 2 and those items mentioned in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.3 (see resolutions) Allison Jarrett informed the panel that if such recommendations were agreed the effect would be an approximate 0.3% increase to the Council Tax.

Resolved

That the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel ask Cabinet to revisit the following issues in line with retaining the proposed 4% council tax level.

That the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommend that:

- The highways maintenance “responsive service” within Street Pride is not reduced.
- The gully cleansing service is not reduced to a reactive service.
- Staff car parking charges are increased by 20%.
- The level of the premises repairs undertaken by the playground fitting service is not reduced.
- The opening hours of the libraries is reduced as long as the reduction in staff hours can be borne through the deletion of vacant posts and where this would have no material impact on users.
- The weights and measures testing equipment, for Trading Standards, are not removed.
- The “Right to Read” project should cease to be funded through Neighbourhoods directorate as long as the funding is picked-up elsewhere.
- The frequency of sweeping and litter picking is not reduced.
- The Central Library remains open on Sundays.
- The funding to the Jerome K. Jerome museum is retained.
- The funding to the Locksmith museum is retained for 1 year with the caveat that the museum must look for future external funding.
- The floral decorations are retained at Streetly crematorium and the service pursue the possibility of sponsorship to offset the costs.
- The community sports worker post is retained.
- The part-time duty manager and part-time golf attendants are deleted only if it can be achieved through natural wastage.
- Cabinet remove the increase in charges to cricket and bowling clubs from the draft budget proposals.

Their being no other business the meeting terminated at 8:12 p.m.