

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

MONDAY, 10TH SEPTEMBER 2012 AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors S. R. Colella (Chairman), P. Lammas (Vice-Chairman), C. J. Bloore (present from Minute No. 31/12), J. S. Brogan, Dr. B. T. Cooper, Mrs. R. L. Dent, K. A. Grant-Pearce, Mrs. J. M. L. A. Griffiths, Mrs. H. J. Jones (Substitute), P. M. McDonald, S. P. Shannon, Mrs. C. J. Spencer and L. J. Turner

Observers: Councillors M. A. Bullivant, R. Hollingworth, C. B. Taylor and M. J. A. Webb

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Mr. G. Revans, Ms. A. De Warr, Mr. K. Hiron, Ms. S. Morgan, Ms. D. McCarthy, Mr. M. Bough, Ms. A. Glennie, Mr. M. Craggs and Ms. A. Scarce

28/12 **APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor R. J. Laight.

29/12 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

Councillor Mrs. H. Jones declared an other disclosable interest in respect of Minute No. 35/12 and left the meeting during the item.

30/12 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 16th July 2012 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes be approved as a correct record.

31/12 **BLUE BADGE HOLDER CONSULTATION PRESENTATION**

The Board received a presentation from the Environmental Services Manager in respect of the findings of a working group which had been set up to investigate the needs of Blue Badge Holders and to better understand the needs and view of local disabled residents. A survey had been undertaken to improve the Council's understanding of how car parks are used by disabled drivers in Bromsgrove town centre, and to test whether accessibility, cost or any other factors were barriers to car park use in the area. 1,208 surveys were issued to individuals and selected groups in July 2012, of which a total of 474 responses were received. The majority of respondents were aged over 65.

Detailed results and analysis of the survey were provided in the report; however officers highlighted the salient points:

- 94% of respondents used car parks in the town centre.
- Over 85% agreed that disabled spaces in car parks were conveniently located and that payment machines were also well positioned and easy to use.
- Those that disagreed cited the distance required to walk to parking spaces and/or the payment machines as the main reason.
- There was a clear 50/50 split in terms of whether it was felt that the cost of parking for Blue Badge Holders in BDC car parks stopped or reduced the frequency of visits to the town. Those who disagreed commented that the car parks were too expensive, that parking was free elsewhere and Blue Badge holders should not have to pay.
- 11% of respondents identified the high street / town centre as an area that could benefit from disabled parking.

Officers explained that the findings would be used to produce a report to the Cabinet to be held on 3rd October 2012 and which would include four possible options for improvements to disabled parking in the town centre. Whilst it was agreed that the survey had been very thoroughly undertaken, Officers confirmed that they had been unable to access the relevant blue badge holder database held by the County Council due to data protection issues. The survey had however been made available through various other means, including the Council's website and the Customer Contact Centre.

On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked Officers for the presentation and the useful and relevant data provided by the survey.

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

32/12 **CAR PARKING - DECLINE IN USAGE/ MARKETING CAMPAIGN REPORT**

The Board considered a briefing paper in respect of the decline in car park usage in the town centre and a marketing campaign to increase usage, which had been prepared following its request at the meeting held on 16th July 2012. The Environmental Services Manager explained that car park usage had declined in the town centre during the first quarter of 2012/13 by approximately 2% and gave details of the potential affect of this on the income budget for 2012/13. Officers confirmed that there was a national decline in car park usage, with some councils having recorded an 11% reduction in short stay car park usage.

The Board discussed the following areas in more detail:

- How the Council could be more pro-active in addressing this decrease in usage; in particular the possible reduction of car parking charges and how the Council could do more to make the town a more attractive destination for visitors from outside of the district.

- The costs involved in maintaining the car parks and the payment machines and therefore taking up a significant proportion of the revenue collected.
- That car park charges were relatively low compared to other areas and that pricing was not the main issue.
- The difficulty in measuring the impact that the reduction in car parking usage had made at other local authorities (Officers confirmed that this information was difficult to access).
- Members commented that collecting usage figures on a monthly rather than quarterly basis could more clearly identify patterns that could then be appropriately acted upon (Officers agreed to consider this).
- Members discussed free parking, loss of income and the impact of this on both Council Tax and budgets.

Members were informed that once the shared service arrangement with Wychavon District Council had stabilised a full parking review would be undertaken followed by a marketing campaign. This was to be carried out in 2013 and following any changes which could be made following the result of the survey as detailed in Minute No. 31/12 being considered by Cabinet and the introduction of civil parking enforcement, which was due to commence in April 2013.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

33/12 **CABINET RESPONSE TO THE PLANNING POLICY TASK GROUP REPORT**

The Board received a verbal report from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Core Strategy and Regulatory Services on the Cabinet's further response to the Planning Policy Task Group Report and Recommendations which had been further considered at its meeting on 4th July 2012. It was understood that the Transformation process had affected the schedule for implementation of a number of the approved recommendations.

In terms of Recommendation 1(a), Councillor Taylor remained very keen for the Planning and Enforcement Team to take all the necessary and appropriate actions to ensure that all conditions attached to a planning application were being met, however he acknowledged the financial implications involved and confirmed that this recommendation would be discussed with the Head of Planning and Regeneration Services.

On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his report.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and no further changes to the Task Group's recommendations made.

34/12 **PRESENTATION - LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

The Board received a presentation from the Bromsgrove Partnership Manager which provided an overview of the work of Bromsgrove Partnership, the Local

Strategic Partnership for the District and provided background to its creation, membership and details of its vision, priorities and structure. Information was also provided on the Partnership's terms of reference and protocols and its three key themed areas: economic growth; balanced communities; and environment.

The Chairman of the Partnership, Councillor R. Hollingworth, explained to Members that it provided a forum for local partners to come together to address cross cutting issues and provided a united strategic voice for the District at both a regional and a national level. Councillor Hollingworth also praised the work of *The Trunk*, which delivered services in Charford and Sidemoor, and was a prime example of how the Partnership was helping to deliver specific and important services to what had been classed as "an area of highest need".

Members discussed the following areas in more detail:

- The work of the Better Environment Theme Group, including CO2 emissions and its key priorities.
- The work of the Balanced Communities Theme Group, including its membership and links.
- Value for money from the Partnership

Following the presentation, the Board further considered the Overview & Scrutiny Topic Proposal Form and how best to take the Board Investigation forward. After discussion it was

RESOLVED:

- a) that a presentation focusing on the Balanced Communities theme group priority area be received by the Board at the meeting to be held on 8th October 2012; and
- b) that presentations on the Economic Growth and Environment priority areas be scheduled into future meetings of the Board.

35/12 **PRESENTATION - PROGRESS ON THE IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT WELFARE REFORMS**

The Board received a presentation from the Strategic Housing Enabling Officer and the Head of Housing Needs (Bromsgrove District Housing Trust) on the impact of Welfare and Housing Benefit Reform on residents in Bromsgrove. This updated Members on the impact to the Council of the benefit changes that had been made since the Board considered an earlier report at its meeting held on 23rd April 2012.

The presentation explained that:

- The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) had been reduced to the 30% lower quartile.
- There were currently twenty-eight cases of households in Bromsgrove affected by the benefit cap.

- Social housing tenants in under-occupied properties would no longer receive LHA as part of the new changes.
- Providing a homelessness service was a statutory function of the Council.

Officers therefore anticipated a significant increase in demand for the Housing Options Service and an increase in homeless acceptances. Members were informed that Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) had already identified and contacted tenants who were under occupying and discussed possible options. A Multi-agency Welfare Reform Steering Group had been established and its priorities included the development of a communications strategy to raise awareness of welfare reform. Officers were encouraging those potentially affected by the changes to discuss with the Council the available options in order to prevent them from becoming homeless.

The Board discussed the following areas in detail and Officers responded to questions:

- The implications for residents over the age of 65 on housing benefits.
- The potential financial impact of a significant rise of homelessness on the Council and specific measures being undertaken by the Council to help prevent residents from becoming homeless.
- The options available to tenants in under-occupied properties. The Board was informed that Cabinet would consider a new policy for discharging social landlord tenants in under-occupied properties to the private rented sector.
- How the Council had been working with the private rented sector about the likely increase of local residents on housing benefits and who would possibly need to move into the private rented sector.
- The impact of moving residents to other local authority areas.
- The introduction of a credit union.
- The advice and support available for residents whose benefit levels would decrease under the new reforms.
- The impact of changes to the planning regulations to the Council's ability to tackle homelessness.

On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked the Officers for the detailed presentation.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

36/12 **BRIEFING NOTE ON THE DISPOSAL OF STOCK AND ANY CLAW BACK CLAUSE - BROMSGROVE DISTRICT HOUSING TRUST**

The Board were reminded that this briefing paper had been prepared in response to issues raised at the Board meeting held on 23rd April 2012.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

37/12 **SCRUTINY OF CRIME AND DISORDER PARTNERSHIPS -
INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF THE NORTH WORCESTERSHIRE
COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP**

The Board was provided with a briefing note which gave background information and a progress update on the recently merged North Worcestershire Community Safety Partnership, including the purpose of the partnership, its structure, financial arrangements, local delivery and representation. The Chair of the Partnership, the Executive Director, Leisure, Environmental and Community Services explained that the Partnership was currently operating under shadow arrangements whilst a formal application to merge was being prepared for submission to the Home Office. The Partnership had however, agreed its draft terms of reference and it was anticipated these would be formally approved at its next meeting.

The Chairman of the Board requested further updates on progress made to formally establish the new Partnership when available.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and the Board receive a further update in due course.

38/12 **OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY TOPIC PROPOSAL - PARISH COUNCIL
INVOLVEMENT IN THE BROMSGROVE COMMUNITY SAFETY
PARTNERSHIP**

The Board considered a scrutiny proposal form relating to parish council involvement in the Bromsgrove Community Safety Partnership (BCSP) submitted by a member of the public. Since submitting the proposal, the resident had been given assurances by the BCSP that a number of the original issues raised were being acted upon. The proposal had therefore been modified by the resident to concentrate on the specific requirement for the involvement of parish councils within the North Worcestershire Community Safety Partnership (NWCSP) which had since superseded the BCSP.

Members were informed that the Community Safety Team would be facilitating community involvement by liaising with the parish councils. After further discussion and in light of the information provided it was

RESOLVED that no further action is taken.

39/12 **MAKING EXPERIENCES COUNT QUARTER 1 1ST APRIL TO 30TH JUNE
2012 REPORT**

The Board considered the Making Experiences Count Quarterly Customer Service Report which provided customer feedback data for the first quarter of 2012/13. The Head of Customer Service informed Members that, in line with the Board's request, the report contained an update in relation to training provision and a recent mystery shopping exercise.

The Executive Director, Leisure, Environmental and Community Services confirmed that issues in respect of waste collection would be addressed

through the transformation process. Members had also raised concerns in respect of the number of agency staff used within this team and were informed that currently 12 agency staff were being used (a number of operational staff had been released to participate in the transformation process). However, a recruitment exercise was being undertaken to fill a number of permanent posts and to reduce the number of agency staff used.

The Board discussed the importance of recording and analysing customer complaints in order for the Council to improve performance and the services it provided.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

40/12 **QUARTER 1 1ST APRIL TO 30TH JUNE 2012 FINANCE MONITORING REPORT**

The Board considered the Finance Monitoring Report which detailed the Council's financial position for the period April – June 2012.

It was explained that lower than expected car park income was a main concern. Officers agreed to provide a breakdown of the financial figures for car parking and related fines. The Board were informed that the Cabinet was to receive a report which provided further information on the variance levels for Environmental Services during the three month period. It was also explained that significant underspends for some departments could largely be attributed to vacant posts that had yet to be filled as the relevant departments were being re-structured.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

41/12 **QUARTER 1 1ST APRIL TO 30TH JUNE 2012 WRITE OFF OF DEBTS REPORT**

The Board considered the Write Off of Debts Report for Quarter 1 which summarised the action that had been taken by Officers concerning the write off of debts during the first quarter of 2012/13.

Members were concerned that the Council's Council Tax arrears had increased significantly during 2011/12. Officers acknowledged this and confirmed that they were trying to engage with any customers affected by debt to discuss their financial issues and to provide them with any support available.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

42/12 **ACTIONS LIST**

The Board received the outstanding actions from the previous meeting held on 16th July 2012. In respect of action Item 6(f), the Board was informed that a response clarifying the points raised had now been received and would be circulated to Members as soon as possible.

RESOLVED that the actions list be noted.

43/12 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Board considered the Work Programme and it was

RESOLVED that subject to the amendments detailed in Minute No. 34/12 the Work Programme be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.52 p.m.

Chairman