

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 3 OCTOBER 2013 AT 10.00 AM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Luckley (Chairman) Councillors Ellis, Lishman (as substitute for Councillor Mrs Prest), Scarborough, Miss Sherriff, Mrs Stevenson, Mrs Vasey and Wilson

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Martlew, Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder
Councillor Mrs Riddle, Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder

OFFICERS: Deputy Chief Executive
Director of Community Engagement
Director of Local Environment
Carlisle Partnership Manager
Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager
Overview and Scrutiny Officer

COSP.61/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There was an apology for absence submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Prest

COSP.62/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest in respect of the business to be transacted.

COSP.63/13 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder advised that to date she had not received a response from the Police Commissioner in respect of CCTV cameras in Carlisle.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held on 20 June and 11 July 2013 be agreed as a correct record of the meetings and signed by the Chairman.

COSP.64/13 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS

There were no matters which had been the subject of call in.

COSP.65/13 OVERVIEW REPORT AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer presented report OS.22/13 which provided an overview of matters relating to the work of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel and included the latest version of the work programme and Key Decisions of the Executive which related to the Panel.

The Scrutiny Officer reported that:

- The Notice of Executive Key Decisions had been published on 30 August 2013. The following issues fell within the remit of this Panel:

KD.018/13 – Play Area Review – to be considered later in the meeting.

KD.021/13 – Application for Healthy City Designation (Phase VI) – The Executive had, on 30 September 2013, approved the Council application for Healthy City Status (Phase VI). Members of this Panel had previously agreed that they did not wish to scrutinise the matter.

The Carlisle Partnership Manager explained that the application was due to be outlined after the business meeting held in July in Turkey. That meeting had then been postponed until September. A number of steps in respect of the application had been completed in advance of the deadline date and the Officer confirmed that she would notify Members of that date when she had been advised although she believed it would be towards the end of the year or early 2014. There were a number of different aims required from previous applications and there were a number of large documents that provided information towards the completion of the application. The Officer had been working with partners on the completion of the application. The Officer confirmed that she had attended a previous meeting held in Sheffield; the next meeting was scheduled to be held in Derry, Ireland but it was unlikely that an Officer from the City Council would be in attendance.

- The following Minute Excerpts had been received from the Executive's meeting held on 30 September 2013:

EX.105/13 – Carlisle's Play Provision, which matter would be considered as the next item of business.

EX.107/13 – Application For Healthy City Designation (Phase Vi) which had been discussed as part of the previous item

EX.112/13 – Representatives On Outside Bodies – the Executive had decided:

1. That Councillor Dodd be nominated to fill the vacancy on the Yewdale Community Centre Management Committee.
2. That the appointment of Councillors Graham and Mrs Parsons as City Council representatives on the Downagate Community Centre Management Committee be confirmed (this issue had been the subject of call-in at a previous meeting).

- The Overview and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that the next meeting of the Panel had been moved to Tuesday 19 October 2013 and would be held in Tullie House. As the Tullie House Business Plan would be one of the items for discussion the Officer advised that a tour of Tullie House could be arranged to follow the meeting.
- Work Programme – The Overview and Scrutiny Officer presented the current work programme. The Officer explained that:
 - a brief update on the Localisation of Council Tax had been provided at the previous meeting and that a short update would be provided at the meeting in November,
 - an update on Community Centres may be provided at the meeting in November provided a meeting could be arranged with the Centre Managers before circulation of the reports, and
 - the Strategic Assessment 2013 of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership would be submitted to the Panel at either the meeting November 2013 or January 2014.

RESOLVED – 1) That, subject to the issues raised above, the Overview Report incorporating the Work Programme and Key decisions relevant to this Panel be noted.

2) That the Work Programme be amended to reflect the issues raised by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer

COSP.66/13 CARLISLE'S PLAY PROVISION

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager reported (CD.52/13) that the City Council operated 69 play areas serving its population of 106,000. 'Play for Today, Play for Tomorrow' was the City Council's Play Policy and Strategy for Children and Young People 2007 – 2012 and it was now time for the City Council to review its approach to play area management. He explained that the intention was to create a legacy of play facilities offering high play value in a safe environment, accessible to every child and allowing them to explore their individual abilities and learn to assess and overcome the risks inherent in physical challenge.

To do that successfully the Council's proposed strategy would focus on quality. Details of a methodology by which an assessment could be made of the quality, play value and accessibility of each individual equipped play area were provided. The outcome thereof would be used to determine the type, specification and maintenance requirements of each site in the future. The standard adopted would aim to ensure that every child had access to a high quality play area within 500 metres of their home.

In some instances existing play equipment was either obsolete or poorly located (or both) and was no longer providing a quality play experience. Application of the criteria would identify those sites and allow decisions to be made on how their future management could contribute to raising quality standards, the outcome of which could be that the equipment was removed and not replaced. The Green Spaces Team had conducted a review of the Council's stock of equipped play areas during 2013.

The report outlined the Risk Assessment; Aim and Outcomes of the Play Areas Review; Review Methodology; and Criteria. Although no external consultation had been undertaken to date, Ward Councillors, 'Friends' of Parks and residents' groups would be consulted (where appropriate) as the review moved to its action phases.

The Executive had, on 30 September 2013, resolved to receive Report LE.29/13 and refer it to this Panel for consideration and comment. A copy of Minute Excerpt EX.105/13 had been circulated prior to this meeting.

The Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder advised that, as she was not able to attend the Executive meeting on 30 September 2013, she had recommended to them that no decision should be made until consultation with the Panel had been undertaken.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- *The report indicated that there was no capital funding available for investment in old and obsolete equipment. Where would funding come from to replace old and damaged equipment?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that where there was a new development the Council could utilise a Section 106 Agreement. However in established play areas there was some revenue funding to replace equipment but stressed that there was a limited budget for that purpose.

- *How would Members be involved in the review?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that Members could discuss specific areas with him outwith the meeting. Officers needed a set of criteria for all play areas that would achieve good quality play areas across the City.

- *A Member was pleased to see that most of the play areas in the City were above average, good or excellent.*
- *As Chair of the Development Control Committee a Member advised that Members of that Committee stressed to Planning Officers the importance of discussions with developers to provide play areas and their location. Some play areas were hidden away and were often vandalised or used by young people who left broken glass behind.*
- *Less maintenance was required for some types of play equipment. What impact would that have on resources?*

Some play areas were lower maintenance than others eg wooden climbing equipment. Much of the maintenance involved removing broken glass and therefore the siting of play areas was critical. Occasionally young people collect refuse and set fire to it beneath equipment which would require it to be replaced.

- *Members would be prepared to support Officers in the combined rationalisation of play areas with a capital programme to improve the play areas.*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that Officers' intention was to improve the quality of the play areas. If there was a rationalisation of play areas the play spaces would remain but they may look different to how they currently appear.

- *Would the Council be able to match community based initiatives and community fund raising?*

The Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder stated that the intention was to ensure that the equipment in all areas was to a good standard. If the community provided funding and the Council matched the funding it could distort the funding available across the City. Any work with the community would need to be done in relation to the criteria.

The Director of Local Environment explained that Officers were looking at the principles to enable them to undertake the review. If there were opportunities to enhance a play area they may call the community to action to support the Council as the community could access grant funding that may not be available to the Council. The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager and his Officers were experienced in seeking out grants. The Council had a desire and a will to provide high quality play areas but the community and Members also had a role to play to support inventive ways to obtain funding.

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that such schemes had worked well at Hammonds Pond and Belle Vue where Officers had worked with the community. Some community members also provided light maintenance such as litter picking and opening and closing the parks but that situation was not ideal.

- *Why was there a 500m buffer zone between play areas? Would there be the possibility of expanding that distance? The Member believed that 500m was too narrow.*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that such input was what Officers were looking for. The appendix did not include issues such as busy roads.

- *Were there any plans to consult with children and young people?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that it may be useful but it may result in talks taking place about specific areas. When new play areas were being discussed there was consultation with schools and community centres. The Youth Council could also be consulted.

- *What was the timescale for the review and would there be any feedback to the Panel?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that it was essential to start the review as there were various budgetary implications. The criteria could then be turned into an action plan.

- *There had been a review and the start of a strategy in 2011 and 2012. Were they finalised?*

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that that work had stopped due to transformation issues and a reduction in staff. The current work was looking at the same issues in respect of the strategy and young people involved in play. If the focus was on the principles behind the review there could be consultation on the types of equipment and how children played. The Council did not have the same resources as in the past to stimulate those discussions and it was important to get community groups involved.

- *Some areas are implementing Play Streets schemes which were working well. It may be interesting to look at such schemes.*
- *The report indicated attendance at play areas. How was that monitored?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that whilst the Directorate did not have the resources to formally monitor the use of the play areas the figures were based on observations while Officers and staff had been on the sites and from experience. The number of reports of vandalism and broken equipment was also an indicator of the use of the sites.

RESOLVED: 1) That Report CD.52/13 – Carlisle’s Play Provision – be noted and the comments from the discussion referred to the Executive in consideration of the criteria for the review.

2) That the Executive be asked to consider a capital budget to be made available for the replacement of equipment when and where required

COSP.67/13 REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE – WELFARE REFORM

The Director of Community Engagement presented report CD.48/13 providing an update on the discretionary assistance provided to housing benefit recipients affected by Welfare Reform.

In terms of the background position the Director reminded Members that, as part of its Welfare Reform programme, the Government had (from April 2013) implemented several changes to housing benefit. Those changes had affected levels of benefit expenditure, greater detail in respect of which was provided at Sections 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 of the report.

He further explained that, due to reduced benefit entitlements (as a result of the new rules), a significant number of additional applications for discretionary housing payments had been made when compared to the previous year. 71 applications were considered for the period from March 2012 to August 2012, compared to 311 applications received during the same period in 2013 i.e. a workload increase of 338%.

For the current financial year up to 9 September 2013, Discretionary Housing Payments of £43,596.95 had been awarded relating to 152 cases. That represented 30.56% of the £142,640 Government Funding contribution available. By way of comparison 20.81% had been awarded during the period March 2012 to August 2012. Details of the category split were also provided.

The Director of Community Engagement anticipated that further applications would continue to be received as the impact of reduced benefit entitlement affected customers' ability to make rent payments. He assured Members that applications were nonetheless being considered promptly and advice given on the options for assistance wherever possible. Levels of expenditure were being closely monitored and Officers would endeavour to utilise available funding within the financial year.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- *What advice and support was available to those people whose applications were unsuccessful?*

The Director of Community Engagement advised that Officers would offer advice and support to those in financial difficulties. Funding had been received from the DWP to assist with transitional issues and it was important to ensure that the funding was used effectively. Those who were approaching financial difficulties were directed to the City council by social landlords and advice agencies. Organisations such as Riverside had their own advice networks which "pre-checked" many Discretionary Housing Payment applications.

- *Was there a set criteria to decide who would be eligible for awards?*

The Director of Community Engagement explained that the applications were means tested and the final decision lay with the Assessment Officers within Revenues and Benefits. Although there were set guidelines which were consistent across the country the Local Authorities were still able to exercise discretion when processing applications.

- *The manner in which money for the Discretionary Housing Payments was awarded was at the discretion of the Local Authority. How many people had enquired about assistance and nor applied?*

The Director of Community Engagement advised that the information could be provided if required.

- *The criteria should have been given to Members of the Executive before the system was put in place. Priority should be given to those with particular circumstances such as illness.*
- *What was the DWP timetable for the implementation of Universal Credits?*

The Director of Community Engagement advised that he did not have that information but he was concerned about the impact on staff and management.

- *Would there be additional pressure on staff due to the potential of an increase in applications over the winter period?*

The Director of Community Engagement believed that there would be an increase in applications but he did not think the increase would be overwhelming.

- *Was performance being monitored?*

The Director of Community Engagement explained that performance would be monitored as the process unfolded. A report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel to show performance over the next quarter.

- *The report showed that in one instance, there had been a reduction in benefit of £111.50 per week. That indicated that a salary approaching £40,000 would be affected by the reduction in benefits.*

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that when assessing benefits a claimant's income was taken against their outgoings and looked at available funds.

A Member queried an award that had been approved. The Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder advised that the award had been discussed with the manager although no personal details were disclosed. A lot of preventative work was being undertaken to avoid a build up of work. The Portfolio Holder was impressed with the work being undertaken by Riverside and Members should direct people to the relevant agencies for assistance.

- *Riverside had been proactive and had contact tenants about the changes before they were implemented which had been helpful.*
- *If an award was time limited what would an applicant do if they remained in the same position at the end of that limit?*

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that a further application could be submitted. He believed it would take approximately two years before the impact would be clear but agreed that regular update reports would be provided.

- *We need to ensure that there is flexibility in the process to ensure people who need help are not turned away and that funds are used effectively.*

The Deputy Chief Executive agreed to provide pen portraits regarding people's circumstances for information and would speak with the Director of Resources to obtain additional material.

- *It would be useful to have more information about the Welfare Reform Board, for example, who are the partners, what work is being undertaken.*

The Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder explained that she chaired the Board which had been very effective in sharing information but would develop further. Partners included DWP, advice agencies and regional social housing providers. To date they had been looking at gathering and sharing information but would now start looking at the best way to move forward.

RESOLVED: That the content of Report CD.48/13 be noted.

COSP.68/13 WELFARE ADVICE SERVICE

The Director of Community Engagement reported (CD.49/13) that the City Council's Welfare Advice Service provided specialist advice dealing only with welfare benefits, either through referrals or directly. One FTE Manager and 2.6 x FTE Advisors assisted on any aspect cases from initial claim to tribunal and upper tribunal representation.

The service was delivered from the Civic Centre and two rural outreach surgeries via telephone advice and appointments, in addition to which home visit appointments were offered to anyone unable to access those bases due to disability or poor health.

In terms of the budgeted service costs, the Director advised that for 2013/14 those were in the sum of £163,000 per annum, of which £121,800 were employee costs. He further outlined the impact of the service, commenting that from 1 April 2013 to 27 August 2013 the total benefit gains were £560,240.38.

The Director of Community Engagement reiterated that demand for welfare advice services had increased as a result of the current welfare reform changes, which was in turn placing increased pressure upon delivery. As a result, the service was reviewing operational service delivery; and developing further partnerships to ensure that the most vulnerable people could be assisted and represented appropriately. That work included prioritising caseloads and referrals; and increased and enhanced partnership approaches with other local advice agencies.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

There was some discussion about the opening times for people to contact the service. The Director of Community Engagement confirmed that he would check with staff and confirm to Members of the Panel the correct information.

- *Would there be any training available for Members?*

If training was required that could be delivered through the Member Development process. A leaflet had been produced and distributed among Members in respect of Welfare Reform. Apart from the information on Universal Credit the leaflet was still accurate and could be re-circulated if required.

- *Members were impressed that the annual gain was over £1million which would assist applicants and also put money back into the economy of the area.*

In response to a query the Director of Community Engagement advised that the support charges were in respect of recharges within the Council in relation to housing and supporting the service.

RESOLVED: 1) That the current position, as detailed within Report CD.49/13, be noted.

2) That the Director of Community Engagement to provide information regarding times when residents can access the service.

COSP.69/13 TRANSFORMATION UPDATE

The Director of Community Engagement presented report CD.50/13 summarising the recent transformational changes made within the Community Services Directorate.

Members' attention was drawn to the structure chart appended to the report which had been implemented from April 2013.

The Director of Community Engagement further explained that the savings target was £201,000, of which £159,000 had been achieved to date. He added that the shortfall of £42,000 related to the Partnership Manager's post which, following consultation, had been retained within the structure. That saving would be taken corporately during 2014 and 2015.

The Director of Community Engagement advised that since production of the report he had announced that he would be leaving the authority to take up a new post elsewhere. The Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive were in discussion regarding the future of that post.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- *Would the savings made from the transformation be absorbed into the system?*

The Director of Community Engagement explained that since 2010 directorates had been required to make savings. The Community Engagement Directorate had not quite achieved their full savings requirement due to the retention of the Partnership Manager as the Director of Community Engagement believed it was not the right time to remove that post.

- *Was the Disabled Facilities Grant Co-ordinator employed by the Council?*

The Director of Community Engagement confirmed that he was employed by the Council as a permanent member of staff.

In response to a query from a Member the Director of Community Engagement outlined the role of the Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager.

RESOLVED: That Report CD.50/13 be received.

COSP.70/13 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chairman thanked the Director of Community Engagement for his work during his employment with the City Council and wished him well in his new post.

(The meeting ended at 11:25am)