

Castle Community Meeting

Your Community, Your Voice

Record of Meeting and Actions

6:00 pm, Thursday, 22 March 2012

Held at: Town Hall, Town Hall Square, Leicester

Who was there:

Councillor Neil Clayton

Councillor Patrick Kitterick

FORMAL SESSION

36. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Councillor Clayton was elected as Chair for the meeting.

37. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Senior.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

39. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2012 were agreed as a correct record.

40. WELFARE ADVICE SERVICES

Darren Moore, from Welfare Rights Service gave details on proposed changes to welfare benefits.

Welfare Rights Service, Leicester City Council helped Leicester residents claim £6 million in additional benefits and tax credits in 2011. The government aims to cut benefits by approximately £16-17 billion, per annum and will be changing the way increases in benefit are calculated, ceasing to use the Retail Price Index (RPI) and using the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This will reduce the amount of increase in benefits for claimants over the years, and will affect all benefits. The Welfare Rights Service can also help people who have been turned down for benefit and want to appeal. The government are looking at abolishing legal aid for a lot of areas from 2013, for example welfare benefits law, and there will be fewer agencies to give advice.

Welfare Advice Service also undertook benefit checks for people with Home Care service, to ensure they were receiving all possible help available to them.

The government introduced a phased increase in retirement age for men and women, who would now retire at age 66 in 2020, age 67 in 2026 and age 68 in 2034. The figures above may change as there was currently a Welfare Reform Bill going through Parliament. Also people of working age in receipt of benefits would face a tougher testing for eligibility. It was reported that many people on Incapacity Benefit being reassessed, now known as Employment Support Allowance from 2008 (ESA), had been visiting Welfare Advice claiming they had been assessed unfairly and had been refused ESA. It was noted that there was a process of appeal. Another change to the benefits system from 2013 would be the replacement of the Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payment for eligible working age people aged 16 to 64. This benefit would face a different test and some people might not meet the criteria, estimated to be half a million people.

Furthermore, in order to simplify the benefit system, a Universal Credit was set to replace the present benefit structure in 2013. There was likely to be an initial period of confusion as the two systems would run concurrently for a period of time. There would also be a new Enterprise Allowance created to assist unemployed people set up in business themselves.

The government would be tightening up on the number of people in work on low income claiming tax credits. Couples would now have to work 24 hours per week to qualify (previously 16 hours), and the backdating of claims would be reduced to one month. The change would also mean people would not receive extra tax credit if their income fell.

Jane Gallagher, Liaison Officer with Revenues and Benefits gave information on housing benefit and council tax changes.

It was stated that from April 2011 there were changes to housing benefits as part of the Welfare Reform Bill, which affected mainly private tenants claiming Local Housing Allowance (LHA). LHA is Housing Benefit (HB) paid to assist people unable to afford rent in the private rented sector, (Local Housing Allowance was a national scheme introduced in April 2008 for all new HB claims from people renting from a private landlord). The allowance is based on the size of the household. Some of the Welfare Reform changes affected LHA rates: the maximum LHA rate is now a four bedroom rate from April 2011 (previously five bedroom rate pre April 2011). Pre April 2011 LHA rates were set at the 50th percentile (lowest half of market rents charged in Leicester. From April 2011 the rates are set at the lowest 3rd of market rents, or 30th percentile. This means the LHA rates reduced from April 2011.

A more recent change took effect from 1st January 2012. The 'shared accommodation' LHA rate is now the maximum bedroom rate that can be paid to a single person under the age of 35 years. The rate is paid even if a single person was living in a self-contained property. Before changes to the benefits, a restriction applied to single people under the age of 25 years.

From April 2011 where a disabled claimant requires overnight care provided by a non-resident carer, an extra bedroom for the non-resident carer is allowed, and could increase the amount of benefit received for some claimants, though they must meet certain criteria for example.

Leicester City Council hold a budget to make Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), to provide financial assistance for people who need help with their housing costs. Each case is decided on its own merits, though DHPs are made in single or periodic payments.

The meeting was also informed that from April 2013 there is a proposed introduction of size criteria in the social rented sector of housing. Homes that were larger than the Government said were needed may lose part of their housing benefit. Examples of homes that could be affected were:

- A single person or couple living in a two bedrooled home;

- A family with two same-sex children living in a three bedroomed home;
- A family with a boy and girl aged ten living in a three bedroom home.

The Government proposes that no account would be taken of extra room needed for a foster child, or parents with a disabled child who required their own bedroom. Changes would also affect separated couples who wanted children to stay.

For one bedroom over quota, there is a proposed 14% reduction, rising to 25% reduction in housing benefit for two or more bedrooms over quota. It was stated an average of £13 per week would be lost per family, and approximately 67,000 families nationally would be affected.

From October 2013 new HB claims would receive the housing element of the Universal Credit, rather than it being paid directly to the landlord, and by October 2012 it is proposed that HB would no longer be administered by local authorities, but will be paid as part of Universal Credit. It was believed pensioners and vulnerable people might be exempt from direct HB payments. Tenants would be responsible for ensuring their rent was paid.

The meeting was informed that contact details for Welfare Rights Service and Revenues and Benefits advice agencies in Leicester are attached to the minutes for information.

Members stated that changes to welfare benefits were complex, and that it was difficult for Leicester City Council to plan ahead as information was changing very quickly. It was also stated it was a frightening situation for people, and it was estimated that approximately 7,000 people in the city would receive less benefit.

41. THE PRINCES' TRUST

Representatives from Leicestershire Fire and Rescue were in attendance to present an overview of their work with the Princes' Trust and provided guidance on how local people could become involved with the trust.

They conducted a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation which gave detail of the Princes' Trust 12-week Team Programme and the accreditation awarded to those who completed the course.

It was explained that those who were primarily targeted for team programme work included the unemployed, offenders or ex-offenders, those in or leaving care and educational under-achievers. Referrals were made via a number of channels such as the JobCentre, Glen Parva Young Offenders institution, Connexions and through Social Workers. The teams often undertook projects that provided immediate benefits to local communities and neighbourhoods and it was acknowledged that several of these had recently taken place locally.

It was pointed out that the Princes Trust had its own delivery partner in each county, and in Leicestershire, the programme was delivered by Leicestershire Fire and Rescue, who received funding to do so from Central Government.

Those present were encouraged to inform anyone who they knew who may benefit from engaging with the work of the Princes' Trust. It was confirmed that since its inception in Leicestershire fifteen years ago, the Princes' Trust had worked with 1500 young people.

42. UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

Craig Howlett from the University of Leicester was present to provide an overview of work undertaken within the community by the University. It was explained that over 2000 student volunteers undertook residential projects which largely comprised of assisting elderly residents with everyday tasks.

One particular project carried out by the University was the 'blooming students' campaign which aimed to make student houses look more like other residential properties. For example, those working on the projects attempted to encourage landlords to remove 'to let' boards. A further aim of the project was to allow student properties to be less prone to burglaries and to generally enhance security measures.

An additional campaign centralised around student volunteers distributing leaflets to students which encouraged them to be mindful of their neighbours' regard when returning home from venues late at night. It was reported that the number of complaints from residents in relation to noise by students had declined since the inception of the campaign.

One resident spoke of disturbances caused by students throughout freshers week in the autumn. Craig acknowledged that problems were rife during this particular time and targeted improvements for the forthcoming freshers week.

In response to a question in respect of how residents could provide feedback to the university, it was explained that this could be done via Carol Blackburn, a local resident representative on behalf of the university or to contact Craig Howlett directly.

The Ward Councillors extended thanks to Craig for the work he carried out in the community on behalf of the University of Leicester. It was announced that a community liaison meeting took place every six months. It was acknowledged that residents should not have to experience anti-social incidents by students, though it was generally felt that the work performed by the welfare team at the university had led to a decrease in such behaviour. Councillors appealed for more residents to attend community liaison meetings at the University of Leicester.

43. POLICING UPDATE

Inspector Chris Cockerill was in attendance to provide an update on recent Police developments and successes.

It was reported that there had been an overall increase in incidents of crime in comparison with the previous year, and that in total, an additional of 120 crimes had

been reported. However, it was made clear that the rate for burglaries and theft of motor vehicle crimes had fallen.

Inspector Cockerill advised that there had been a series of theft of mobile phones in City Centre nightclubs. It was also reported that approximately 500 bicycle thefts had been reported during the past 12 months, but that none of the stolen bicycles were fitted with a D-lock. On this particular matter, he explained that the police had received funding to provide d-locks at a specially discounted price of £5, and it was stated that these were available for purchase at the Central Lending Library.

It was further reported that there had also been a recent series of motorcycle thefts.

In terms of positive developments, Inspector Cockerill announced that instances of anti-social behaviour (ASB) had been successfully tackled. With the exception of the riots in August 2012, the rate of ASB was particularly positive.

A member of the public made reference to a series of burglaries which had taken place within the Clarendon Park area, Inspector Cockerill responded by stating that one prolific offender had recently been imprisoned for a number of such offenses. Councillor Kitterick also explained that there was also a high burglary rate in the St Andrews area and this was partly as a result of the high student population which attracted such crime.

In response to a question around race-related crime, Inspector Cockerill stated that 125 cases had been reported in the past year, with the majority of these occurring in the City Centre. In reply to a related question, Inspector Cockerill confirmed that he did not have figures in relation to the programme of improvement around the stop and search of people from different racial backgrounds, but agreed to provide further information to the next community meeting.

44. CITY WARDENS UPDATE

Nik Krneta, City Warden for Castle Ward provided an overview of his recent work within the local area.

Nik explained that the 'bins on street' programme had recently re-commenced, and would report further progress to future meetings.

In relation to anti-social behaviour, it was reported that a CLASBO had recently be issued to a persistent flyposting offender. Ward Councillors thanked Nik for his role in securing this particular sanction.

On a general matter, it was reported that the City Mayor had made a commitment for 16 wardens to cover the City over the forthcoming 12 months.

Concerns were raised by residents in relation to litter from the McIndians take-away van located on Victoria Park Road. The City Warden agreed to investigate the matter further, though it was acknowledged that this was a long-standing issue. Residents felt that the business should take more responsibility for cleaning up the area surrounding the van.

The City Warden was advised of reports relating to the extensive display of 'to let' signs on streets surrounding Lower Hastings Street. Nik explained in response that the City Wardens were likely to acquire additional powers in relation to the enforcement of such signs, but could not currently confirm whether this was to be the case.

ACTIONS:

That the City Warden be asked to investigate reports of litter from the McIndians van on Victoria Park Road.

45. BUDGET

Councillor Clayton introduced this item of business. It was made clear that as this was the final meeting of the 2011/12 municipal year, this was the only remaining opportunity for funding from the ward budget to be allocated.

Members considered the following applications:

- 1. Highfields Community Association** – request for £2,000 from each of Spinney Hills, Stoneygate and Castle to provide costs towards events and catering for the Highfields Festival.

Members explained that whilst they were supportive of the proposal, it was pointed out that the proportion of the Highfields area within the Castle Ward was significantly smaller than that in both Spinney Hills and Stoneygate, and it was therefore proposed to fund a smaller portion of the requested sum.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £500 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

- 2. Castle Ward Tree Replacement** – request for £2,932.66 to plant trees at six identified locations where trees have been removed and replacements not planted.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £2,932.66 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

- 3. Community Information Boards at Leicester Central Library**– request for £686.80 to install a community noticeboard to increase the amount of noticeboard space in Leicester Central Library.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £686.80 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

4. **Spring-a-long (Friends of Clarendon Park and Stoneygate)** – request for £880 to arrange a series of six music/singing workshops designed for older people to participate in making and listening to music.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £880 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

5. **Art House Hopper** – request for £346.80 to fund two mini buses to transport the elderly and immobile to the Art House for events in June 2012.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £346.80 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

6. **The Centre Project** – request for £978 towards the purchase of a new commercial upright freezer.

RESOLVED:

That the application be supported and that a sum of £978 be allocated from the Ward Community budget.

7. **Light-seekers (Finding my path)** – request for £4,000 towards photography courses and accreditations for young people.

The Ward Councillors stated that they were minded to refuse this application in its current form, as there was not sufficient evidence that the project would directly benefit those living within the Castle Ward. It was reported that applications were received which had a city wide focus, and whilst these were often fundamentally good applications, grants would only be provided to those which directly benefitted Castle Ward constituents.

RESOLVED:

That the application be refused.

As a result of the decisions outlined above, it was reported that a sum of £2,432 remained in the budget. The Members reported that they intended to allocate this remaining sum towards any projects that relate to the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee, and encouraged such applications to be submitted.

RESOLVED:

That the remaining budget balance of £2,432 be pledged towards projects in relation to the Diamond Jubilee.

46. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7:56pm.