



Leicester  
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the  
NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT SCRUTINY  
COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER 2014 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Singh (Chair)  
Councillor Bhatti (Vice Chair)

Councillor Dr Chowdhury	Councillor Gugnani
Councillor Corrall	Councillor Waddington
Councillor Desai	

In Attendance

Councillor Russell – Assistant City Mayor (Neighbourhood Services)  
Councillor Cassidy – Member for Fosse Ward

\* \* \* \* \*

**16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sood, Assistant Mayor (Community Involvement, Partnerships and Equalities) as, although not a member of the Commission, she normally attended its meetings.

**17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Dr Chowdhury declared an Other Disclosable Interest in relation to agenda item 6, “Transforming Neighbourhood Services Programme – West Area”, in that he worked in the voluntary sector.

In accordance with the Council’s Code of Conduct, this interest was not considered so significant that it was likely to prejudice Councillor Dr Chowdhury’s judgement of the public interest. He was not, therefore, required to withdraw from the meeting.

## **22. TRANSFORMING NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES PROGRAMME - WEST AREA**

The Director of Culture and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report updating the Commission on the Transforming Neighbourhood Services (TNS) programme and setting out the proposals that the City Mayor and Executive were considering implementing in relation to the West Area of the city. The Chair reminded the Commission that this was Phase 2 of the Programme.

The Assistant Mayor (Neighbourhood Services) explained that efforts had been made to learn from the first phase of the programme, including letting people know as early as possible in the process what options were available and what each involved. Consequently, at the start of the process, questionnaires were made available on-line and at buildings in the Wards affected, (Braunstone Park and Rowley Fields, Fosse, Westcotes, and Western Park). The importance of buildings just outside each area was recognised, so questionnaires also were placed in these buildings.

In addition to actively encouraging people to fill in the questionnaires, the Council hosted separate focus groups for people from different demographic groups. The proposals drawn up therefore reflected the views expressed through the questionnaires and the focus groups, but also had to take in to account the Council's need to meet its savings target of a 30% reduction in costs.

The Assistant Mayor then drew attention to the following points:-

- The Leicester Centre for Integrated Living (LCIL) had taken over the running of the West End Community Centre. The Centre remained in the ownership of the Council and continued to be used as a community centre. However, established income from groups using the centre was enabling LCIL to expand the range of services being offered;
- Libraries would have an increased importance in the future, especially in relation to the aim to improve digital inclusion;
- The Winstanley Centre had for some time been solely used by a local dance group. It therefore was proposed to consider options for community asset transfer of this Centre by way of a lease;
- Newfoundpool Community Centre and the Oak Centre were well used in the evening, but had limited use during the day. It therefore was suggested that community sector providers should be sought to take over the running of these facilities, through community asset transfer;
- If there were not community groups interested in taking over the running of Cort Crescent Community Centre, it was suggested that the building could be demolished and the site used for other purposes, such as the provision of affordable housing;

- Assurances would be sought from any organisation taking on the running of Braunstone Grove Youth Centre and the Braunstone Oak Community Centre that youth provision would continue;
- It was recognised that transport links between north and south Braunstone were not good. Community centre provision already existed in the south of the area, so consideration was being given to what could be provided in the northern part of that area;
- Manor House was a Building of Local Interest. However, it was expensive to run, due to the age of the building, and its upper floor was not accessible to disabled users. The management group at Manor House was willing to work with the Council to find a way of resolving these issues, so it was proposed that action in relation to this building should be deferred until discussions were complete; and
- The Transforming Neighbourhood Services review had been undertaken to identify ways of achieving a reduction in spending of £1.7 million. This had been agreed as part of the Council's budget.

Geoff Forse, of the Woodgate Resource Centre, addressed the Commission at the invitation of the Chair. He welcomed the decision to continue funding the Woodgate Resource Centre, but asked whether it would be possible to revert to awarding funding for three years or more, rather than the current annual awards. This would help organisations' long-term planning and the certainty provided could help them access other sources of funding.

Angela Wright, Chief Officer of b-inspired, also addressed the Commission at the invitation of the Chair. She commended the Council on the consultation that had been undertaken and the way that views given had been listened to. She noted that funding for the extension and refurbishment of Braunstone Grove Youth Centre had been provided under a previous government scheme, but legacy arrangements existed for this, which needed to be taken in to account under the current Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme.

Ms Wright also asked that, if asset transfers were to be undertaken, it be ensured that leases granted were of sufficient length to enable the buildings to be classed as assets for accounting purposes.

The Assistant Mayor noted that the Community Services Section of the Council had entered in to a variety of contracts with voluntary organisations that regulated their funding. Rather than review all these contracts together, grants for each organisation were reviewed when the Transforming Neighbourhood Services review was done in a particular area. As a result, the Council was able to confirm funding for organisations, but only within the Council's budget strategy. Ways of ensuring that funding was awarded for appropriate periods also were being considered.

The Assistant Mayor advised the Commission that advice was being taken on how arrangements could be made for groups so that they became as successful as possible.

She further advised the Commission that:-

- Asset transfer was not being considered for all centres, only those considered to be suitable for it. Transfers by way of leases were being considered, so if problems were experienced the situation could be reconsidered;
- It was recognised that organisations interested in taking on leases for centres would need certain skills. Locality, a government-funded organisation, therefore had been engaged to run sessions for organisations interested in taking on a lease. These sessions would provide an independent view of issues such as the skills needed, backing needed and the risks associated with taking on a lease;
- The Council's Community Asset Transfer policy had been rewritten in the last two years. This contained the criteria that organisations needed to meet to assure the Council that they could successfully take on an asset transfer. The policy also contained safeguards in case any such transfer was not successful; and
- This work was being done in phases, so that the Council could engage properly with local people, as what was right for one area was not necessarily right for others.

In reply to concerns raised by the Commission, the Assistant Mayor advised that:-

- Two rooms at Fosse Library currently used as classrooms would be used to temporarily house the music library that had had to be moved from Southfields Library, which was having work done on it. Whether this became a permanent arrangement would depend on the outcome of discussions yet to be held;
- The main buildings for which it was suggested that an asset transfer could be done by way of leases were those in locations where it was known that there was community interest in taking on a lease;
- In order to attract groups interested in taking on leases of buildings, advertising would be done that was specific to the building in question, so that relevant community groups could be engaged
- The Adult Education service operated on a break-even service. Work was underway with the service to ensure that the right spaces were available so that adult education could continue to be offered in the community;
- Deprivation indices had been considered when drawing up the proposals

being considered for this area of the city. However, issues could be masked by more affluent areas of an individual ward. In addition, community demographics could change and the aim was to future-proof the proposals as much as possible. Information that was known about communities was always taken in to account when looking at services, so that these services could be put in the areas of greatest need; and

- There were limited examples across the city of where it was considered appropriate to sell a building. It was recognised that media reporting of disposals of this nature was not always favourable

The following points were made by the Commission in discussion on this item:-

- The transparency of the consultation exercise that had been undertaken was welcomed;
- Some centres were still suffering from cuts in services that had been made about 10 years ago. For example, it was unlikely that the community would be able to take on the running of Fosse Community Centre;
- The proposed investment in libraries was welcomed;
- Although Equality Impact Assessments had been done, they were quite narrow in scope;
- The current level of use of community facilities should not fall or stop as a result of the proposals made. Asset transfers therefore should be pro-actively promoted, especially to groups with the sustainability to take them on. This could be done now, before decisions were taken, so that interested organisations could start work as soon as possible ; and
- Some community centres were used for events organised by people and organisations from outside of the centres' immediate locality. At the same time, local communities could be looking for somewhere to engage. It was recognised that these could be specialist organisations that only needed one base in the city, but it was asked that priority of use of community centres be given to local community users of community buildings.

Councillor Cassidy addressed the Commission at the invitation of the Chair. He recognised that financial cuts were needed and welcomed the work being done to identify opportunities on how to take services forward. He then stressed the importance of engagement with all parts of the community. The community needed to be involved in planning for the future, so that it could take ownership of services. This highlighted the need for good promotion of the initiatives and for staff to be trained, so that they could be fully engaged with the new services from the start.

The Assistant Mayor concurred with this, noting that the new service arrangements being proposed did not just relate to buildings. They aimed to support communities to come together and develop their own sense of identity.

As such, the Council wanted to engage the community in any service redesign.

For example, the community had been integral to the redesign of services at Southfields Library. In addition, the move of St Matthews Library in to the St Matthews Centre had been very successful, despite the initial concerns of residents, due to community engagement and the proper training of staff in the new front line services being offered.

The Commission asked what had been learnt from previous transfers of community centres and stressed the need for comparative studies of the situation now and in the future, to ensure that efficiencies were obtained. In particular, it was questioned whether the Manor House was running efficiently.

In reply, the Assistant Mayor explained that one of the main problems being experienced at the Manor House was the lack of disabled access to the first floor. As the majority of groups using the centre would not book the first floor, the ground floor was well used, but the upper floor was empty most of the time. The configuration of the building meant that the investment needed would be disproportionate to the benefit to be obtained, (for example, an external lift would be needed). In addition, the building was draughty and had a high energy use. Despite these problems, the centre was very important to the community.

She further explained that various key lessons had been learned and more were being learned as each area was reviewed. These included:-

- What needed to be advertised and how this should be done;
- The whole process needed careful management, so that all concerned remained engaged;
- Criteria needed to be set for potential applicants to take on assets, so that they knew they had the ability and capacity to take over the running of assets;
- The Council needed to be very open about what people would be taking on if assets were transferred. For example, information needed to be provided on things such as water rates and maintenance issues for buildings;
- Independent support for groups was needed, such as that provided by Locality. This included immediate and longer term support, (for example, to help groups develop a business case); and
- It would be ensured that one of the criteria for groups taking over community assets would be a requirement to show what benefit there would be for the local community if that group took over the running of an asset.

In summary, the Assistant Mayor explained that the current situation was a baseline from which to work, but footfall in to a building was not the major issue. The main issues were more related to things such as how many groups used a centre, the type of groups using a centre and attendance levels.

Councillor Dr Chowdhury reminded the Commission of the interest he had declared in this item.

The Chair and the Assistant Mayor thanked all involved in the work that had been done on this programme.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) That the Assistant Mayor (Neighbourhood Services) be asked to consider whether facilities other than the two rooms currently identified at Fosse Library can be used to house the music library;
- 2) That a colour copy of the appendix to the report be circulated to all members of the Commission;
- 3) That officers be asked to include a key on plans and charts submitted in future reports;
- 4) That the Assistant Mayor (Neighbourhood Services) be asked to advise the Executive of the Commission's comments, recorded above, on Phase 2 of the Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme, stressing that the Commission wants local community activities to continue at the centres under consideration;
- 5) That the Assistant Mayor (Neighbourhood Services) be asked to ensure that the Members representing Wards included in the West Area, and the Chair and Vice-Chair of this Commission be kept informed of progress with Phase 2 of the Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme; and
- 6) That the Assistant Mayor (Neighbourhood Services) be advised that the Commission would wish to continue to scrutinise the Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme as it progresses.