



Leicester
City Council

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

Held: TUESDAY, 13 MARCH 2018 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Gugnani (Chair)
Councillor Thalukdar (Vice Chair)

Councillor Bajaj
Councillor Cank
Councillor Cutkelvin
Councillor Fonseca
Councillor Khote

In Attendance

Councillor Clair, Deputy City Mayor with responsibility for
Culture, Leisure, Sport and Regulatory Services
Councillor Master, Assistant City Mayor - Neighbourhood Services

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64. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

65. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following declarations of interest were received in relation to the Call-In of the Executive Decision – Neighbourhood Services Grant Funding.

Councillor Cutkelvin declared that she had in the past spoken to the Saffron Resource Centre in relation to funding, but she had an open mind.

Councillor Fonseca declared that a member of the Sikh Community Centre had contacted him in relation to their grant funding, but he had an open mind.

Councillor Khote declared that a member of the Sikh Community Centre had contacted her in relation to their grant funding, but she had an open mind.

Councillor Gugnani declared that he had visited the Sikh Community Centre.

Councillor Bajaj declared that he had been to the Sikh Community Centre.

Councillor Clair, Deputy City Mayor in attendance, declared that he had previously spoken to members of the management committee at the Sikh Community Centre.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, the interests declared were not considered so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Councillors' judgement of the public interest. They were not, therefore, required to withdraw from the meeting.

Lee Warner, Head of Neighbourhood Services declared that a member of his family volunteered at the Gorse Hill City Farm.

66. CALL-IN OF EXECUTIVE DECISION - NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES GRANT FUNDING

The Chair thanked the Ward Councillors and representatives from the organisations who had come to address the Commission. The Chair explained how the meeting would proceed and the recommendations for Members in relation to the call-in.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services introduced the report on the call-in of the Executive Decision in respect of the Neighbourhood Services Grant Funding, explained the reasons for the decision and the process in working with the seven Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations. Members heard that the current grant agreements were made with the organisations in 2015 and the first stated purpose of the agreement with each organisation was to establish an approach toward self-sustainability.

The Chair invited Councillors Waddington, Councillor Riyait and Councillor Willmott, three of the Councillors who had signed the call-in, to address the Commission. Points made by the Councillors included the following:

- The voluntary organisations were thanked for the work that they were doing. The value that they gave to their communities was not in doubt.
- It was very regrettable that there had been no consultation with Councillors in whose wards the organisations were based. All the other decisions within Transforming Neighbourhood Services programme had involved the Ward Councillors.
- All funding to those organisations would cease by 2021.

- The Beaumont Lodge Neighbourhood Association and Woodgate Residents' Association both provided a range of activities for children and people of all ages; the Council would not be able to provide those activities. Beaumont Lodge had recently held an anti-knife project for which a grant had been received from the Police. The Police grant however would not cover the running costs of the building.
- Gorse Hill City Farm had been visited by generations of families; they would try to raise money by charging but history had shown that this would result in far fewer people visiting the farm.
- Local Councillors needed more detailed information; some groups might manage with the reduction in their grant, but some would not.
- The Sikh Community Centre provided a service to all people. The £58,000 they received was used to contribute towards running the centre in which the nursery is located.
- The Council stated that they faced substantial demands on Children's and Adults Services; the centre helped by delivering those services and it should be noted that the council signposted to the centre.
- The presumption in the report was that the groups would secure the funding but there was concern that this would not be possible as it was very difficult to secure funding for general running costs.
- A Councillor quoted a case where he had been approached by a distressed constituent who had no money for food. The Councillor had contacted the council out of working hours and had been told to advise the constituent to go to the Gurdwara on East Park Road. The Councillor questioned where people would go when Social Services could not help.
- There was unallocated revenue in the Council budget and it was suggested that the Council needed to look at how the underspend could be used to help voluntary organisations deliver very important work in the community.
- A longer consultation period was requested, with the Councillors whose wards were relevant to the seven organisations affected by the decision.

Representatives from the Beaumont Lodge Neighbourhood Association, the Sikh Community Centre, Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council and the Woodgate Residents' Association were then given an opportunity to address the Commission. Points made in their submissions, included the following:

- The cuts to the grants did not make sense; in the area that Beaumont Lodge served, there was increasing crime, poverty and a big problem with social isolation. The cuts would not help the community.

- Grant providers did not give core funding; any grants provided were restricted. Some of the groups were responsible for the upkeep of their building and the insurance.
- There was concern as to who would provide activities and services for the community if the voluntary organisations could no longer do this.
- Concerns were expressed that with the closure of housing offices and the expectation for more people to access services via the internet, there had been a big increase in the number of people coming into the Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council with queries.
- The Neighbourhood Council had saved the Council considerable sums of money by, for example, giving debt advice and helping people in arrears.
- The Woodgate Resource Centre had been successfully run for over 30 years; they had been improving their service and there had been a record attendance during the previous year.
- The centre offered lunch clubs and taught music. Further funding was being sought to continue with the non-Council funded music teaching but without the grant from the Council, the teaching may be affected and some of that additional funding may have to be returned.
- A new school for 900 children in the Woodgate area was being planned and it was expected that a lot more children would move into the area. However with the reduced grant, the centre would not be able to support them.
- The centre had provided and maintained hanging baskets and planters; this would stop if grant funding ceased.
- There was money available for significant projects in the city centre, so why could the Council not find a modest sum for the voluntary organisations?
- The two meetings held in 2017 with the Sikh Community Centre (CC) only lasted about 15 minutes and reports of the meetings were not sent to the centre.
- The report stated that children in the nursery at the Sikh CC would not be affected, but this was not true. The children in the nursery and their parents would be affected by the reduction in grant funding to run the Community Centre along with members of staff and other service users, including adults with learning disabilities, people suffering from social isolation and service users with limited English.
- Serious concerns were expressed about the consultation process which was said to be inefficient and inaccurate. There were also concerns about a lack of communication and that Ward Councillors had said that they did not know about the changes to grant funding.

- A request was made for the decision to be delayed for six months to allow for a proper consultation.

The Assistant City Mayor, Neighbourhood Services responded to the representations made; points made in his response included the following:

- Current contracts had been signed by the voluntary organisations in 2015 with the stated grant funding purpose of working towards an approach to self-sustainability, so the decision should not have been a surprise to them.
- The Council were facing the most severe cuts in their budget that they had ever experienced and they were not in a position to continue with the funding going forward.
- The decision taken was not a reflection on the quality of work that the organisations carried out.
- All the organisations had submitted their own financial plans for 2018-19 and officers would continue to support those groups over the next three years to help them become self-sustainable. The aim was for them to become independent by April 2021.

Councillor Clair, Deputy City Mayor stated that there was a reduction of £150m in the Government's subsidy to the Council and services were being kept open as much as possible. He expressed disappointment at the comments made by the manager of the Sikh CC and said that he would be requesting sight of the records of the meetings and would share them with the Chair.

Officers added that the grant agreement in 2015 firmly established the protocol towards self-sustainability. Information in the financial accounts submitted by the groups to the Charities Commission (which was publicly available), provided useful information for consideration.

Members considered the representations made and responses from the Executive Members and officers. During the ensuing discussion, a number of comments and queries were raised which included the following:

- The shift in the VCS and move towards self-sustainability had been evident for some time. The subject was emotive and the groups helped vulnerable people in the community.
- The mood of the organisations during the consultation was queried and officers responded that the relationship with the groups was cordial and they were realistic about the situation. The groups had signed the grant agreement in August 2015 with the stated purpose of working towards self-sustainability. In October to December 2016, officers had spent a week with the organisations after which an analysis and assessment had been drawn up. Each of the groups had then been visited several times between May and September 2017. The groups had been asked to complete their own financial plans which were then taken to the Executive.

- A Member commented that the contributions of the voluntary sector had been very considerable but because of the severe reductions in government's funding to Leicester and financial pressures it faced, the Council had to make funding cuts in all areas and not just the voluntary sector.
- In response to a question, the meeting heard that the grants to the voluntary organisations were historical and relationships with those groups had been continued. If this had been a commissioning exercise, there would have been a procurement procedure to follow.
- In response to a query as to why Ward Councillors had not been consulted, a Member commented that the groups had signed a grant agreement and it was clear what they were signing. If they were not happy with the agreement; they should have approached their Ward Councillors and then those Councillors would have acted on their behalf.
- In response to a query, Members heard that the funding for 2018/19 had been agreed as per the report. Officers would be talking to the groups about funding for subsequent years but that funding would be tapered to zero from April 2021.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions to discussion. The Chair then moved that the call-in be withdrawn. This was seconded by the Vice Chair and upon being put to the vote the motion to withdraw the call-in was carried.

RESOLVED:

that the call-in of the Executive Decision relating to Neighbourhood Services Grant Funding be withdrawn.

67. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 7.08 pm.