

Castle and Westcotes Community Meeting

Your Community, Your Voice

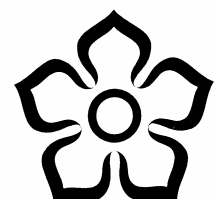
Record of Meeting and Actions

7:00 pm, Wednesday, 18 November 2009

Held at: Watershed Youth Centre, Upperton Road

Who was there:

Councillor Andy Connelly
Councillor Phil Gordon
Councillor Patrick Kitterick
Councillor Sarah Russell
Councillor Lynn Senior



Leicester
City Council

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Councillor Kitterick was elected as Chair for the meeting.

2. WELCOME

Councillor Kitterick welcomed all present to the meeting and the Councillors introduced themselves.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they had in the business on the agenda, and/or indicate that Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 applied to them.

Councillor Senior declared a personal interest in agenda item 6, "Westcotes Residents Parking Scheme" in that her partner worked in the traffic section of Leicester City Council. Council Senior also declared a personal interest in agenda item 5, "Housing Issues", in that she rented out properties in the City centre.

Councillors Connelly and Russell each declared a personal interest in agenda item 6, "Westcotes Residents Parking Scheme", in that they lived in the area that could be affected by a parking scheme.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the Joint Castle and Westcotes Community Meeting held on 4 March 2009 were agreed as a correct record.

5. CHANGE OF AGENDA ORDER

As a large number of people had attended the meeting for item 6, "Westcotes Residents Parking Scheme", it was agreed that this item would be taken before the other remaining items on the agenda.

6. WESTCOTES RESIDENTS PARKING SCHEME

Andy Thomas, the City Council's Head of City Development, explained that the Council had received feedback from a substantial number of residents in the Westcotes Ward that they were unable to park outside of their own homes. To try to respond to this, the Council was undertaking consultation with the residents of the Ward on whether they would like a residents' parking scheme introduced. Mr Thomas then gave a presentation, showing some of the parking problems

encountered in the Ward, a copy of which is attached at the end of these minutes for information.

Mr Thomas explained that the Council wanted to offer increased parking capacity to shops in the area, particularly during the current economic recession. It therefore was not proposed that the current capacity on Narborough Road would be reduced, as parking there already was limited. However, day-time commuter parking in the side streets was causing problems for people trying to find places to park, so it was hoped that commuters could be encouraged to park further out of the City, for example at the new Park and Ride facility in Enderby.

Mr Thomas stressed that the current consultation was on an idea of how parking problems could be alleviated, as formal proposals had not been drawn up yet. However, any final scheme would give priority to residents to park in the area and ensure that appropriate parking capacity was provided for people using the shops in the area. There was a view amongst some people that the same parking restrictions should apply across the whole City, but this would not be appropriate to Westcotes, which had a unique mix of shops, residents, businesses, religious and other institutions and organisations.

As no formal proposal for any scheme, or schemes, currently existed, when the consultation exercise was complete, the results would be examined to see if residents supported a parking scheme and, if they did, whether it was favoured for the whole Ward, or just part of it.

One way of testing any scheme introduced could be through using an experimental Traffic Regulation Order (TRO). Although an experimental TRO previously had not been used for a residents' parking scheme, there was no reason in law why this could not be done. It would be valid for up to 18 months, which was the maximum period allowed for an experimental Order. It was thought that, if an experimental TRO was to be used, it could be ready to start in the later part of 2010.

An experimental TRO could be cancelled or confirmed any time during its operation, but the Council expected that it would run for the full 18 months. If it was cancelled, the parking situation would return to how it had been before the TRO was introduced. As an experimental TRO, it could be amended during its first 6 months of operation, so different initiatives could be tested if needed.

In reply to questions from people present at the meeting, Mr Thomas reminded the meeting that a consultation had been undertaken in 2006 on whether there was "in principle" support in the Ward for the introduction of a residents' parking scheme. The consultation had shown that approximately half of the residents in the Ward thought they would support such a scheme. However, as there was no clear majority in favour of a scheme, it was not pursued.

Some concern was expressed that the failure of the Bede Island parking scheme to alleviate parking problems in that area, particularly when sporting fixtures were held, showed that these schemes did not work. This scheme did not appear to be enforced by traffic wardens, who were not visible in the area, and when they were around they did not appear to be ticketing vehicles parked incorrectly.

In addition, the cost of obtaining parking permits under the Bede Island scheme could become quite high as, in addition to paying £26 for an annual permit, each visitor's permit cost £1. Visitors' permits were difficult to obtain, as the resident buying them had to go to the Council, offices with several forms of identification. Customer Services would not accept printouts of electronic bills for identification purposes, so residents had to pay energy companies for paper copies of bills. An added problem was that the queues at these offices could be very long and some people were not able to spend the time waiting. These problems meant that some people were unable to have visitors to their properties.

Mr Thomas apologised for the lack of customer care that residents had experienced from the Council in this respect. One possible way to alleviate this situation could be to introduce parking meters that enabled someone to park for up to 3 hours. In addition, the process for obtaining visitor permits was being simplified as part of a major programme of improving access to permits across the City. Mr Thomas also undertook to ask the contractor responsible to increase the number of visits made to the area by wardens.

Mr Thomas further explained that the City Council had learned from parking schemes introduced in other areas that any scheme introduced had to reflect the specific needs of that area. Introducing an experimental TRO in Westcotes would provide flexibility to adjust the scheme as needed. In addition, the system of obtaining tickets and/or permits to park would be simplified, for example through the use of facilities such as road-side meters or an online payment system, which would include the facility to obtain tickets for vehicles to park for up to 3 hours.

Some concern was expressed that people would misuse 3-hour parking slots on days when sporting fixtures were held. Mr Thomas explained that one reason it was suggested that an experimental TRO could be used was so that concerns of this nature could be assessed and addressed before any permanent restrictions were introduced, as it was important that any such restrictions were of benefit to those living and working in the area.

A resident explained that they had received the first letter sent out during the consultation in Westcotes Ward, but had not received the second letter, even though Westcotes' facilities were the nearest to where they lived and so were the ones they used. The Chair explained that, following the first consultation, it had been decided that there was not enough support in some roads to warrant a second consultation being done there. Consequently, these roads, which included some that were considered to be part of Westcotes, but were not actually in the Ward, had not received the second letter.

A view was expressed that introducing a parking scheme that only allowed non-permit holders to park for three hours would prohibit people from having visitors for the weekend and could result in property in the area becoming devalued. One way of improving the situation could be for De Montfort University to provide parking for its students. Mr Thomas confirmed that the Council recognised the need to be flexible in its approach and allow people to come to the area as visitors. He also

reminded residents that a 48-hour parking permit already was available, which could be used for visitors.

The Chair recognised that there was no simple solution to the problems being experienced and explained that one reason for considering a residents' parking scheme was to discourage students from bringing cars in to the area. However, it also was recognised that different people had different needs and this was why it was suggested that, if a TRO was introduced, it should be on an experimental basis.

A resident drew attention to the parking scheme that had been introduced successfully in Harrow Road. As a result of this scheme, it was very rare that residents could not find a parking space.

Concerns were raised that it would be expensive to introduce an experimental scheme and that sufficient parking already was available, so introducing a scheme of any sort was a way for the Council to raise money. As an alternative, it was suggested that aerial photographs could be used to identify where no parking was available. This also would provide evidence to reassure residents that a scheme was needed.

Mr Thomas explained that any income from residents' parking schemes was spent on transport issues. Most of it was used to help subsidise bus passes for the elderly and some was used to help subsidise bus routes.

Another resident stated that, when they had bought their house in Westcotes, they knew that no off-road parking was available, but that they could park on the road and that it was not a problem to park away from their house. However, if a parking scheme was introduced, they would only have access to half of the parking they now had, as one side of the street would be pay and display parking.

In reply, the Chair reiterated that at present the Council was only consulting on a suggested way forward. If residents voted against the introduction of a parking scheme, it would not proceed. A similar situation had arisen in Clarendon Park, where a residents' parking scheme was not introduced when a survey of residents was undertaken and 60% of residents voted against introducing a scheme.

It was further explained that it had not been possible to consult residents on the introduction of a residents' parking scheme in Bede Island, as its introduction there had been a requirement of the planning permission granted. However, although the Council could not remove the scheme, it was very happy to review its operation to see how it could be improved.

Mr Thomas confirmed that no particular restrictions had been proposed for any particular area. Some ideas had been displayed at the last Westcotes Community Meeting, but these were only suggestions of what could be possible and were not a scheme. At present, residents were being asked whether they wanted a scheme, not to approve a particular scheme.

Residents then made the following points:-

- people were being misled into thinking they would be getting an allocated parking scheme;
- officers at the Council had told residents that they would not be able to park in pay and display parking areas and that double yellow lines would be painted in front of drop kerbs;
- people could be voting on something they did not fully understand;
- some communities held large family gatherings, especially for events such as weddings and funerals. Would they be expected to obtain a visitor's permit for every visitor?;
- introducing a parking scheme would mean that it would no longer be possible to make spontaneous visits to people living in the Westcotes area;
- what would happen when people attended the mosque for Friday prayers?;
- one of the main causes of problems with parking in Westcotes was that people parked there when going in to the City centre;
- introducing a residents' parking scheme in Westcotes would simply move the problem to another area; and
- people outside of the area also should be consulted on whether a scheme should be introduced, as they also would be affected by it.

Mr Thomas apologised for any confusion that had arisen and confirmed that residents would be able to park in pay and display areas. He further confirmed that the Council would be meeting with the committees of religious establishments and other organisations to discuss the issues raised, as the Council did not want to prevent any community from celebrating anything. Although it was not easy to balance everyone's needs, the aim was to resolve things for the benefit of residents. One way the Council hoped this could be achieved was through increasing the availability of visitors' tickets. Additionally, the Council was always willing to consider how it could help people in exceptional circumstances.

A resident raised concerns that parking schemes were abused in other areas of the City, such as Holy Trinity, where parking permits were sold to office workers. Mr Thomas advised the meeting that, when the Council became aware of schemes being abused, the person or people in question were interviewed. If the Council was not satisfied with the answers given, it could withdraw their right to have permits.

Councillors explained that residents were being consulted on the possibility of introducing a parking scheme as, for some time, problems with parking had been some of the main issues being raised with them by residents. However, if the majority of those responding to the consultation did not want a scheme introduced, it would not be and, if this was the case, the Council would not keep consulting residents on a parking scheme.

Mr Thomas confirmed that, if a scheme was introduced on an experimental basis, it could be cancelled if it did not work. The Council's Enforcement Officers would be responsible for enforcing the experimental scheme and they would be involved in this assessment. The Chair suggested that, if residents felt it to be appropriate, the Council could consult residents at the end of the experimental period for the TRO.

In response to a question from a resident, Mr Thomas explained that the suggested sites for pay and display parking had been identified because their location in relation to the rest of the area made them suitable places to concentrate traffic. However, at present these were only suggested sites.

A resident noted that some residents were unaware that this meeting was taking place. In reply, Councillors explained that unfortunately the Council had a limited budget for publicity, so leaflets advertising this meeting had been targeted on the roads likely to be the most affected by the introduction of a residents' parking scheme. If someone living in those roads had not received a leaflet they could speak to a Councillor, who would look in to the matter for them.

Some residents felt that the challenge for some people was seeing what the net benefit of a residents' parking scheme would be for them, as things to make it easier to travel, such as car sharing schemes or car club schemes, were missing from the proposals. Mr Thomas replied that the Council would work with the community wherever possible to accommodate such things. It currently was working in an area with a car club scheme, so was aware of the sort of issues that could arise in this situation.

A resident advised the meeting that the parking scheme introduced in Grassmere Street a year previously worked well. Before the scheme was introduced, residents had a lot of problems finding parking spaces, but since its introduction these problems had been removed. The cost of £1 per day for a visitor was considered to be very good value, but to have the same charge to park for half an hour was inequitable.

Residents noted that, in some areas where car parking had been improved, bus services needed to be sufficient to enable people to use them rather than having to drive anywhere, but instead were still quite poor. Mr Thomas explained that, unfortunately, the Council did not operate bus services, so was unable to change their times.

It was suggested that, if people had to spend time looking for a parking space, they would stop using the shops and businesses in Westcotes, which could drive people and businesses out of the area. Mr Thomas confirmed that the Council was discussing this issue with local businesses and was trying to find ways to increase parking capacity for them. The most flexible way in which this could be done was through an experimental TRO, which allowed restrictions to be altered as a particular need was identified.

The view was expressed that the Council would decide how many essential vehicles a business should have and would charge £100 per vehicle. As businesses already

paid very high rates, and a lot of people working in the area were on very low wages, this could push businesses and people out of the area. In addition, there were no late night buses to the area, but there was a thriving late night economy, which also could be damaged by the proposals.

Mr Thomas accepted the points raised and stressed that the Council was working to find an approach to the problems that suited the area. The Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with local businesses, so that it could be certain that any solutions proposed were appropriate for the area and businesses concerned.

In response to a question, Councillor Connolly explained that, as a resident of Westcotes he was entitled to vote on the consultation currently underway. He reminded the meeting of the interest he had declared in this item and that he previously had expressed his support for a residents' parking scheme in the Westcotes Ward. He also stressed that it would be residents who decided whether a scheme should proceed, not Councillors or officers.

7. ADJOURNMENT OF MEETING

The meeting adjourned at 8.34 pm and reconvened at 8.47 pm

Councillor Russell in the Chair

8. HOUSING ISSUES

Councillor Russell reminded those present that a wide range of issues had been considered at the last Joint Castle and Westcotes Community Meeting, one of which had been the upkeep of properties owned by landlords. Some properties had been kept well, but others had not and, in respect of the latter, it could be difficult to make contact with the landlords. As such, the Council wanted to know what problems were being encountered in relation to this, so that the Council could work with landlords to find suitable solutions to problems identified.

One resident reported that it appeared that, in Hazel Street, when a house became vacant, students were moved in, but always keeping the number below 4, so that a licence for a house in multiple occupation was not needed. The effect was that the area had degenerated and was a "ghost town" in the summer.

Rental properties often were repaired in the cheapest way possible and this work often looked very cheap. The quality of repairs also could affect who bought a property when it was sold on, as work done often was not appropriate to families, (for example if front gardens had been concreted over). This led to areas slowly decaying.

The Council was commended for its work on clearing rubbish and the City Wardens were congratulated on the work they did to keep areas in good condition, but

landlords did not appear to have the same interest in maintaining good standards in the area. For example, they had been known to leave mattresses and sofas at the front of properties.

One example of the problems experienced was that wheeled refuse bins often were left out on the street and the City Wardens did not have the resources to deal with all of the problems being encountered. It was suggested that one reason for this could be that landlords cleared out literature from properties, so students were not aware that they should be taking bins off the pavement. The meeting felt that landlords appeared to be getting away with creating this sort of situation, but should be held responsible for ensuring that their tenants were informed of the requirements.

Councillor Russell advised the meeting that one thing the Council wanted to introduce for the next academic year was a requirement for landlords and letting agents to display a sign in each property telling tenants the basic levels of behaviour expected of them, (for example, that wheeled rubbish bins should not be left on the street and what items could be put in the green recycling boxes).

The following points also were made during discussion on this:-

- Residents felt like they did not matter to the Council, as students always appeared to be put first. In other parts of the country there were some good examples of how local authorities, universities and residents had worked together to overcome similar situations;
- Legislation on the number of people who could share a property before a licence was needed was ambiguous;
- Was there any way in which landlords could be encouraged to take responsibility for the appearance of the area in which their properties were located, for example, through using better quality materials to renovate houses?;
- Residents could find it intimidating to have a large number of people living in one house;
- Some universities ran an introduce yourself to your neighbour scheme, which could be very successful in breaking down barriers between students and the local community;
- Local residents also should make an effort to introduce themselves to their neighbours, as this could help students to feel part of the community;
- At certain times of the year, roads could have many "To Let" signs along them, which detracted from the appearance of the area;
- Employing wardens to walk round the worst affected areas from approximately midnight to 4.00 am at weekends could help to reduce anti-social behaviour;

- Not all properties in multiple occupation housed students. Some accommodated people such as migrant workers who were new to the country and so were not aware of the rules and laws by which they were expected to live; and
- Although various problems were being identified, the community did not want students to feel that the community was against them living there.

The Student Accommodation Officer from De Montfort University advised the meeting that information was sent to students, encouraging them to respect the communities in which they were living, providing them with information such as when refuse bins should be put out and telling them to ensure that items such as mattresses were not left outside a property.

Information also was sent to landlords, advising them how they could show respect to the local community, and similar letters were sent to landlords to pass on to students. However, some students did not use landlords, which made them harder to reach, but information also was provided through electronic networking sites.

The University spent a lot of time working with the City Council and the Students Union to find ways to improve the situation. However, it was recognised that a small minority would ignore the information and advice provided and their poor behaviour could result in all students being categorised in the same way.

Many residents felt that many students showed a general disrespect for the area, particularly at night time, (for example, kicking over refuse bins and talking loudly in the street, when sound carried easily). It was recognised that students were not the only people who participated in anti-social behaviour and that many of the problems experienced continued in the summer months, when most students had left the area.

Representatives of the Leicester Electricity Sports and Social Club in Brazil Street reported that the premises always experienced an increase in vandalism and pranks at the start of the academic year. However, the Club had a good relationship with De Montfort University and was able to identify students who caused these problems. The Club did not want to create bad relationships, as it wanted to encourage students to use its facilities.

The Director of Student Services for De Montfort University advised the meeting that the University could not give out personal details of where individual students lived, but very much welcomed suggestions for positive ways of working with students and the community to improve relationships.

The University also wanted to be told of complaints and concerns, so that they could be investigated and when it was made aware of a problem, it would intervene where it could. For example, over the last few years it had worked with specific students when problems had been identified and had found that the students often were unaware that there was a problem. On most occasions, students responded well when advised that their behaviour was causing a problem, but it was recognised that there were those who would not respond in this way. The University also worked

closely with the Police and other agencies, so there could be other powers that could be used if a particular student, or students, continued to cause problems.

The Student Accommodation Officer from De Montfort University advised the meeting that, to help students settle in to Leicester, a new initiative had started this year. Groups of second and third year students had formed the Welcome Crew and had visited every rented property in the first two weeks of the academic year, to see how new students were settling in. The University's Pastor also had visited many properties. It was hoped that this would help to identify any issues before they became problems. In addition, every year a letter was sent to students recommending that they introduced themselves to their neighbours.

If any residents were experiencing problems with students in their area, they were invited to contact the University's Welfare Officer at the Students Union. The Welfare Officer could speak to the students concerned if the residents were concerned about speaking to them themselves.

The residents present emphasised that they were not against students and recognised that a lot of the permanent residents in the area were of a different generation to the students. However, this meant that, in some roads, there were very few families left and it felt like the area was dying. Ways of encouraging a better mix of people therefore needed to be found. This would make the community more stable and so encourage people to move in to the area.

The meeting considered whether more purpose built student accommodation would help to resolve the issues being discussed, but it was difficult to envisage where provision on the scale that would be needed could be made.

It was suggested that some of the money in Ward Community Budgets could be used to host a community event at the start of the academic year to welcome new arrivals to the area. This would have the additional benefit of enabling permanent residents to meet their neighbours.

AGREED:

- 1) that consideration be given to holding a community event at the start of the academic year to welcome new arrivals to the area, with funding for the event being provided at least in part from Ward Community Budgets;
- 2) that, wherever possible, landlords be encouraged to:-
 - a) take responsibility for repairs and the general upkeep of their properties;
 - b) use reasonable quality materials when carrying out repairs and refurbishments to their properties; and
 - c) dispose of rubbish from their properties appropriately;

- 3) that liaison between De Montfort University, Leicester City Council and local residents be improved, residents being informed of who they can contact regarding concerns about, or problems with, student behaviour;
- 4) that residents should take on a responsibility to introduce themselves to student neighbours, as well as students being encouraged to introduce themselves to their neighbours; and
- 5) that any other ideas for how housing issues in the area can be approached be passed to the City Council and/or De Montfort University.

Councillor Kitterick in the Chair

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Castle Ward Community Budget

Three applications for funding from the Castle Ward Community Budget were tabled for consideration. It was agreed that these should be considered as urgent business, as the funding was required before the next Castle Community Meeting. However, the meeting had to be closed before these bids could be considered, (see minute 10, “Close of Meeting”, below).

Post-meeting note:

Immediately following this meeting, the Ward Members indicated that they recommended that the following grants should be supported and reported to the next Castle Community Meeting:-

- a) Queens Road Traders Association
Queens’ Road Christmas Lighting – £3,442 from the Ward Action Plan Budget
- b) Shama Women’s Centre
Upgrading of Alarm System – £950 from the Ward Community Fund
- c) Shama Women’s Centre
Repairs to, and refurbishment of, three shower areas – £875

10. CLOSE OF MEETING

Some residents present at the meeting raised objections to the demolition of the Bowstring Bridge in Westcotes Ward, asserting that this Bridge was part of the area’s history and heritage, but had been demolished without any consultation with local residents.

The Chair called for order in the meeting, but as this could not be restored, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 9.31 pm.