

ECONOMY & CULTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 JULY 2015

Present: County Councillor McKerlich(Chairperson)
County Councillors Dilwar Ali, Govier, Howells, Hyde, Javed,
Stubbs and Weaver

13 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

14 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was received from Councillor Weaver.
Councillor Weaver declared a personal interest in Item 5 Roath Library as he is Assistant Cabinet Member with responsibilities which include libraries.

15 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2015 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

16 : ALLOTMENT STRATEGY

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Bob Derbyshire (Cabinet Member – Environment), Councillor Gareth Holden (Member Champion – Community Food Growing) Jon Maidment (Operational Manager – Parks and Sport) Rosie James (Parks Strategy and Policy Manager) and Alan McCoy (Cardiff Allotment Holders Association) to the meeting.

The Chairperson invited the Cabinet Member to make a statement in which he stated that he was pleased to have been invited to Committee, the Council was keen to progress allotments and that under increasing financial pressures this was becoming more difficult to do. He thanked Councillor Holden for the work he had undertaken and through conversation with Officers, considerable progress had been made.

Councillor Holden added that as Member Champion for Community Food Growing, he was involved with groups such as the Site Associations and Cardiff Allotment Holders Association, to improve what is offered with regards to allotments and to improve the service. He stated that his role had been a facilitator between the Council and allotment holders.

Members were provided with a presentation by Jon Maidment and Rosie James on 'Allotment Strategy Interim Review 2014-2017' which included information on the Cardiff Allotment Strategy; the Background; why an interim review had taken place; the high priority issues to be addressed; the timetable; progress made to date and delivering the vision. The high priority issues to be addressed include the removal of allotments subsidy, review of Local Management Agreements and improved quality of local allotment management.

Alan McCoy wished to reiterate what the Cabinet Member and Councillor Holden had said and added that the Cardiff Allotment Holders Association's relationship with the Council hadn't always been positive, with Councillor Holden's involvement barriers had been broken down and they now have insight into finances and how decisions are made, and that allotment holders now feel involved and want to improve the issues across the board.

The Chairperson thanked Officers for the presentation and invited questions and comments from Members.

- Members asked if there were any residual concerns that the allotments holders had; Mr McCoy stated that the Council doesn't have the resources to fully take on allotments, plot holders were needed to work with Parks to improve things. Devolved responsibility/authority is difficult for the Council but if clear boundaries are set out then the working partnership could work well.
- Members discussed the Council's statutory responsibility to provide allotments and it was noted that by taking on local management of the allotments, plot holders would be able to access further and additional external funding.
- Members asked what was being done to provide accessible allotments and whether the Council had had conversations with organisations such as Diverse Cymru. Officers explained that they are working with a number of groups to expand the provision of accessible plots; this has been done in Rhydypenau. Cardiff Access Focus Group have been involved in determining what is needed; it was not always appropriate to designate a number of plots per site; there are a number of community plots on different sites for groups to maintain according to their abilities. Officers also work with the Cardiff Allotment Holders Association on accessible plots. Councillor Holden added that he has spoken to Diverse Cymru in relation to the Leckwith site. Issues such as the state of the roads can prohibit wheelchair access to the accessible plots there. He had spoken to the developers at the House of Sport who had agreed to improve access as part of the development. He noted that officers are good at directing users to accessible plots/sites.
- Members asked who decided whether a particular site should be modified to meet needs and whether the Council can say no. Councillor Holden stated that he has met with 25 out of the 28 sites; the ethos was not one of exclusion; as it currently stands nothing would prevent them saying no, but with the intention of going forward with devolved powers to allotment holders, it could be built into any agreement. Mr McCoy added that the constitution was updated to ensure inclusion and that the ageing population have better access to facilities.
- Members asked for further information on plot sizes, splitting plots and waiting lists. Officers stated that splitting plots was common practice as a whole plot can sometimes be hard to manage; officers have been active in promoting ½ plots which are now common across the city, this had been done in conjunction with site secretaries. Councillor Holden added that they rely on site secretaries to identify plots that could benefit from being split. It was noted that site secretaries had built their own roles previously but now their roles were being directed. Another point to consider was the rotation of crops,

too many small plots can cause a build up of pests, so some plots needed to remain full size plots.

- In relation to waiting lists, Officers didn't have the current figures to hand but stated that a current figure was 450 names waiting but this was building. Officers were considering closing the waiting list when it reached 50% and then implementing a traffic light system, whereby green status would mean getting a plot within a few months. It was also noted that some people were waiting for specific plots or sites.
- Members discussed clearance of weeds. Members were advised that the Council no longer has the provision to clear weeds, although on heavily weeded plots the Council would provide help. While some sites will do it themselves, other sites will not. As such, the Council is trying to encourage individual allotment sites to take increased responsibility and pride in their site.
- Members asked about water provision at sites. Members were advised that the Cardiff Allotment Holders Association was working with the Council on water management; water is a resource that needs to be controlled through such things as metering systems; new plot holders were encouraged to have water butts and save as much water as possible. The Leckwith site drills into the ground for water extraction. Water was being looked at as an issue across the board, including leakage and wastage at some sites.

It was added that there were only 2 sites out of 28 where water was not provided by the Council, Leckwith being one of them, they now extract successfully there to provide the site with water. The other site was Pontcanna Chalet Gardens, which is a string of 8 gardens and is heavily forested, used as recreational gardens and the amount of water needed there is very little and doesn't warrant a water provision. For all the other sites, a committee was set up to look at water provision, sites had been identified that where there were leakages due to ageing systems; fixing these leaks had provided £40k of savings in this year alone. Going forward, water provision would remain high on the agenda due to the large costs to the Council, there would be a benchmark set of £1k per year water costs to the sites, any more than this would probably mean there was a leak.

- Members asked about allotment provision in respect of the Local Development Plan. Officers stated that they would aim for a 40 plot size site for the major developments.

The Chairperson thanked the Cabinet Member, Officers and witnesses for attending the meeting, giving their presentations/views and for answering Members questions.

AGREED – That the Chairperson writes on the Committee's behalf to the Cabinet Member to convey their comments and observations.

17 : ROATH LIBRARY

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Peter Bradbury (Cabinet Member – Community Development, Co-operatives & Social Enterprise) Sarah McGill (Director – Communities, Housing & Customer Services) Isabelle Bignall (Assistant Director –

Customer Services) and Nick Blake (Senior Business Officer – Customer Services) to the meeting.

The Chairperson invited the Cabinet Member to make a statement in which he said that he was pleased that Alice Shing from Save Roath Library group was at the meeting. He stated that he had inherited the building into his portfolio; when he had taken up his position as Cabinet Member with responsibility for libraries the building was in a bad state of repair; the boiler had broken in September 2014, then the roof collapsed in December 2014 and it was unsafe to keep the building open. Residents and other users had been without a service for approximately 8 months, so a temporary facility in Adamsdown needed to be provided. He added that he had listened to residents, however the Council does not have the capital at the moment to invest in the Roath library building. He stated that officers would be looking at Community Asset Transfer to incorporate a library service; a long term solution was needed and it was important to restore a library service to the area.

Members were provided with a presentation on the Pre-scrutiny of Roath Library Cabinet decision, which included information on the location, the timeline to date, the current condition of the building, the recommendations and next steps.

The Chairperson invited Alice Shing from Save Roath Library Group to address the Committee. Ms Shing informed Members that she had met with the Cabinet Member in June, she appreciated that he had been pleasant and had communicated well. Ms Shing explained that she represents library users, the group was started when service users felt discontent with the lack of consultation. The Library consultation was undertaken from November 2014 until January 2015. It commenced two weeks after Roathlibrary closed on 7 November 2014. The library being closed meant that many service users had no knowledge of the consultation, no way to complete the online survey, and no opportunity to collect a paper copy. IT use at the library had been high with lower book borrowing levels due to the ethnicity in the area.

When the library closed there was no sign on the door for three months, meaning that groups that met there regularly were left unsure of the situation and disbanded. After three months a sign was placed on the door saying that the library was temporarily closed for repairs, people were waiting for that to happen and the sign is still in place.

Although an alternative facility had been provided it wasn't local to the users of Roath library, whether they were residents in Roath or not. Many users relied heavily on the 13 computers that were at the library, some asylum seekers and the Group considered it unreasonable that there was no continuing plan regarding this, only 4 computers were in place at the alternative facility. It was added that other sessions such as Rhyme Time, which were held twice weekly at Roath were once a week in Adamsdown.

Ms Shing stated that she now had over a thousand signatures on a petition regarding the closure of Roath library and that everyone she has spoken to is in support of keeping the library service and the building together and that it should be a higher priority for the Council. She added that it would cost £100k per year to run the library and questioned whether resources were too scarce to repair a listed building, she added the Group were also concerned about what happened to the books that were left inside when the building closed so quickly. It is rumoured locally that thousands of books have been damaged and disposed of.

Ms Shing concluded by saying that the Save Roath Library group requests that the library is refurbished and reopened, however if the building was deemed too deteriorated to repair then an equivalent library service provided locally. The building had been purpose built over 100 years ago, built on a promise for future generations, it has history, memory, lasted two world wars and was now being left to ruin.

The Chairperson thanked Ms Shing for her passionate contribution to the Committee and invited questions and comments from Members.

- Members discussed the information contained within the report and a Member stated that he felt important information was missing from the Cabinet report. He had identified sums of money from section 106 agreements that, as a local Ward Member, was happy to use towards Roath library alongside insurance claims - he was concerned there was no mention of this option in the report. Officers explained that the costs that had been provided were estimates provided by a non intrusive survey, giving a low cost estimate; however the wider issue of sustainability needed to be considered, not just the cost of refurbishment, therefore Community Asset transfer is what officers are trying to achieve. It was added that the section 106 monies/contribution should be used in respect of services related to the development for a particular purpose and ward Members consulted on its use, and it needs to be in the framework of the capital programme. Members considered that section 106 monies could be used for enhancing community facilities.
- Members considered there had been misleading information in the report in that the Library Strategy hadn't been presented to Council, it had been an appendix to the budget report; there was a Cabinet Budget Amendment to continue to fund branch libraries until the end of its term until alternative fully in place, this information was not included in the report. The Cabinet Member stated that he had met with Members in February and discussed issues, the building had deteriorated over time, the report looks for long term tenable options and he was determined to provide an alternative provision until a sustainable library service could be provided. He added that he would bring individual Cabinet reports in time to look how this could be achieved; he was trying to go through library strategy, had the roof not fallen in the library would still be open, he had kept it open when the boiler had broken but it was too unsafe once the roof had collapsed. He added that he was concerned that people in the ward had had no library provision in 9 months. It was noted that alternative sites such as St Germans and primary schools were being considered.
- Members could understand why people had been left frustrated by the Council - the building had been left to deteriorate to the point where it had to be closed. It was noted that library services were changing to the Star Centre, however a solution needed to be found in Adamsdown and Roath. It was noted that people now had a lack of confidence with the communication process and reengaging these people may now be difficult. The Cabinet Member stated that the issue of trust and confidence was one that needed to be addressed and that going forward communication would be improved. He added that he didn't want people to think that services were being moved from their area permanently and that whatever is put in place needs to be sustainable as there is more austerity to come.

- Members were grateful for an open minded approach in looking for alternatives but noted that it was important for the Council to accept responsibility for the building being allowed to deteriorate to the point of closure. Members were not happy however with what they considered a piecemeal approach to alternative provisions and asked whether a temporary building within the ward had been considered. The Cabinet Members stated that yes they were trying to find a solution just like that for example at St Germans. He added that he does take responsibility and that right across the Council's estate there were issues; there was a £100 million maintenance backlog across the city which he had inherited.
- Members sought further information on a Mobile Library Service. Officers explained that they needed to discuss this with ward Members, consideration needed to be given to venues and days to cover needs as widely as possible.
- Members considered that the huge maintenance backlog was unaffordable to the Council and could make a Community Asset Transfer impossible, although they could see why the caveat was there. Members asked if there had been any market testing undertaken to see if there was potential for obtaining a capital receipt while building in a commitment of continued provision of services. Officers considered that this could potentially have merit and that they could look for a commercial opportunity with library provision; Community Asset Transfer would be looked at first of all as it was the best solution but that wouldn't exclude commercial options.
- Members concluded by reiterating their concerns about the report not stating that the library was closed during the consultation period; the number of signatures on the petitions being incorrect; there being no mention of the meeting with the Save Roath library group and no mention in the report of it being a deprived area. The Cabinet Member stated that he would update the report to include the concerns of Members.
- Questions from Members of the public were then read out; Would Save Roath Library group be involved in the discussions, the Cabinet Member stated they would; What financial support would those taking on the building receive, the Cabinet Member stated that this would be teased out during discussions. Officers added that it was the Council's responsibility to provide a library service wherever it was.

The Chairperson thanked the Cabinet Member, Officers and Alice Shing for attending the meeting, giving their presentations/views and for answering Members questions.

AGREED – That the Chairperson writes on the Committee's behalf to the Cabinet Member to convey their comments and observations.

18 : WORK PROGRAMMING

The Chairperson welcomed Sarah McGill Director – Communities, Housing & Customer Services, Isabelle Bignall Assistant Director – Communities, Housing & Customer Services, Tara King Assistant Director - Environment and Jon Day Economic Policy Manager to the meeting.

Members discussed possible items for the work programme with Officers from each Directorate.

The principal scrutiny officer sought suggestions on how to formulate the work programme; Members also discussed task and finish groups and volunteers to sit on these groups were sought.

RESOLVED:

- I. Priorities and items to be considered within the Economy and Culture Scrutiny Work Programme for 2015/16.
- II. To task the Principal Scrutiny Officer to update the draft work programme document and bring this back to Committee's September 2015 meeting for final agreement and adoption.

19 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next Economy & Culture Scrutiny Committee meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday 10 September 2015 at 4.30pm in Committee Room 4, County Hall, Cardiff.

The meeting terminated at Time Not Specified