

FINANCE & ENTERPRISE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance & Enterprise Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 9 November 2017 at 6.00pm in Meeting Rooms G3/4, Addenbrooke House, Ironmasters Way, Telford

Present: Councillors N A M England (Chair), S Bentley, N A Dugmore, R J Sloan, C F Smith and D G Wright

Co-optees: Mrs C Mason-Morris and Mr R Williams

Also Present:

Councillor A D McClements (Cabinet Member Transport, Infrastructure & Broadband)

Customer, Community & Partnership Scrutiny Committee:- Councillors L A Murray, J M Seymour and Co-Optee: Mr D Johnson

Councillors E J Carter and N C Lowery

In Attendance: A Astley (Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services), K Baker (Hollinswood & Randlay Town Council), Superintendent T Harding (West Mercia Police), L Jakeman (Newport Town Council), D Moseley (Democratic & Scrutiny Services Team Leader), and M Powell (Network Management Group Manager).

FESC-6 Apologies for Absence

Councillor R Mehta

Councillors J Ashford, G C W Reynolds, and B Tillotson (Customer, Community & Partnership Scrutiny Committee)

FESC-7 Declarations of Interest

None.

FESC-8 Minutes

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Finance & Enterprise Scrutiny Committee held on 29 June 2017 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

FESC-9 Civil Parking Enforcement

The Chair welcomed Members of Customer, Community & Partnership Scrutiny Committee to the Committee to work on scrutiny of Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE). A number of individuals were present to give evidence.

(i) Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services

The Chair invited the Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services and the Network Management Group Manager to present an update on activities which had taken place since the previous meeting.

The Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services advised that she had received a communication from the Government which indicated that the progression of applications for CPE powers was likely to be delayed until after Brexit due to the pressure of associated legislative activity and, therefore, not until 2020 at the earliest. Whilst it was noted that the process of applying for CPE powers took 12-18 months to conclude, further clarification was required as to whether the process could start prior to 2020 or not.

The Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services also advised that the Council Leader had written to the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) on 13 July 2017 asking him to consider what, if any, financial support he might be willing to offer. The Assistant Director herself had also been in communication with the Police on the issue. The PCC formally responded on 5 September 2017 with an offer to provide a funding package up to a total of £150,000 as follows:-

Year 1: £50,000

Year 2: 50% of the deficit of the scheme up to £50,000

Year 3: 50% of the deficit of the scheme up to £50,000

The offer had been welcomed however the Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services had shared the offer with the Leader of the council who considered that it would be necessary to engage further with the PCC to explore opportunities to increase the financial package to a higher value to assist with covering the costs of the scheme in the early years so that there would be no impact on the tax payer. A meeting with the police is to be convened to explore this further and a report will be provided back to Scrutiny on the outcome of these ongoing discussions.

Members' Questions

A number of Members expressed disappointment regarding the PCC's financial support package which they considered to be a low percentage of the projected costs. Current modelling figures suggested a greater funding deficit in years 3 and 4 when the PCC's funding offer was tailing off. Clarification was sought regarding the terms of financial support from the PCC since Members had noted he had on at least one occasion prior to the meeting the PCC had referred to the package as a grant. Superintendent Harding confirmed that it was funding and not a grant.

Members noted that the letter from the PCC clearly referred to funding to a total of £150,000 over three years but this left an element of financial risk. The modelled deficit in each year was:-

Year 1 - £107,000

Year 2 - £57,000

Year 3 - £62,000

Year 4 - £66,000

Year 5 - £70,000

Year 6 - £74,000

Have other Local Authorities received similar funding packages? Do they operate at a loss?

This was not a line of inquiry that the Committee had previously raised and, therefore, this information had not been sought.

At the last meeting, Members had considered five enforcement officers would be insufficient – would it be possible to provide remodelled data for a greater number of enforcement officers?

Following investigations, the Highways Team were confident that having considered all the data available such as size of the borough, comparisons with approaches in other councils etc that five enforcement officers was a reasonable number to commence with and modelling data had been based upon the current salary grade for an enforcement officer with all on-costs included in the figures. Whilst the Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services respected the view of Members that more enforcement officers would be needed due to high demand in some patrol areas, her recommendation was for five enforcement officers. She pointed out that the financial gap widened considerably as more officers were added to the model.

Members Comments

Claims that the Council intended to introduce car parking charges due to the installation of machines in Wellington were robustly refuted by the Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure & Broadband who explained that the meters had been installed following a cross-party working group at Wellington Town Council to alleviate pressure on short stay car parks. The Administration's manifesto was clearly against the introduction of car parking charges and this remained the case.

As the number of cars on the roads were increasing and the situation worsened, the view was expressed that the public would look to the Council to take on CPE powers to address the issue, creating a situation whereby the Council would face criticism regardless of the action it took. However, the flaws in the national scheme were recognised which meant that CPE powers could not be piloted or implemented in some areas only. The majority of Members present were therefore of the view that it was therefore extremely important that the Council had the right information to make the right decision and did not rush into a scheme which might not offer appropriate solutions.

It was noted that a letter had recently been sent to parents/carers of pupils in Newport Schools from the Newport Safer Neighbourhood Team regarding parking problems around schools and advising that a robust 'ticket not warn' approach would replace the current 'education before enforcement' ethos.

Some Members considered that the Scrutiny meeting should be adjourned whilst further negotiations took place with the PCC so that the funding could be reflected in modelling data. However, other Members felt that it was worthwhile to continue to engage in the planned evidence gathering and it was decided that the meeting should continue as intended.

(ii) Superintendent Tom Harding, West Mercia Police

Superintendent Harding noted that the Police were operating in a challenging budget

environment which had necessitated the introduction of the “THRIVE” decision model. The model - Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement - was used to assess the appropriate police response to a call. Whilst he understood that it was frustrating, parking offences did not rate highly against the model.

He went on to confirm that the PCC’s financial offer was funding, not a grant or loan subject to clawback, and he would ensure that this confirmation was provided over the next few days. He stated that the proposals would not result in any savings for the Force as Police Officers were not generally used for parking enforcement. PCSOs were providing a presence around schools to deal with issues due to the associated safety impact. Such a presence would potentially continue even if the Council adopted CPE powers. However, it was essential for the Police to target their limited resources against the most harmful crimes and he noted that of the 9500 crimes reported across West Mercia per year, most would take priority over parking offences.

He noted that Local Authorities across West Mercia had adopted powers of CPE and there were examples of successful schemes and low funding shortfalls - further information could be provided.

The Police would look to work with the Council to resolve concerns around this issue. It had previously been reported that the Police had stated that no parking enforcement would take place from April 2018 but discussions would continue and associated areas of harm would continue to be looked at.

Members’ Questions

Particular problems with parking offences had been noted at The Wrekin - was any enforcement activity taking place to tackle this?

Five PCSOs in the area had received delegated powers from the Chief Constable to issue tickets and this could take place where there was capacity or particular issues in an area had been identified. There had to be evidence of the likelihood of real harm or danger.

Would the Police undertake any enforcement?

Police Officers would not be used for parking enforcement.

The forthcoming Budget position from Central Government was not likely to be favourable for Local Government and some Members were unconvinced that CPE should be a priority issue for the authority due to the funding required which could be spent on vulnerable adults and children.

Any money received through parking fines issued by the Police was returned to central government, so there was little incentive for the Police to carry out enforcement. In contrast, if Councils took on the powers, they had more control over spending the income generated into Highway related improvement.

(iii) Councillor E J Carter and N C Lowery

Councillor Carter expressed disappointment that negotiations with the PCC had not been concluded and concern that the funding offer was less than hoped for. He was also disappointed that the financial modelling information had not been built upon since the last meeting. He noted that CPE had been adopted everywhere else in the West Midlands and he felt that more data from those areas where CPE had been adopted could be shared to provide information on how CPE could successfully operate. He noted that further clarity was required on the timeframe for the application of powers from the Department for Transport. He concluded that the Committee still needed a lot of information before making a decision.

Councillor Lowery noted that it was clear that Parking Enforcement was not a priority for the Police under the THRIVE model but that it was essential to develop a credible strategy to tackle the issue. CPE had received support from the PCC, some Town and Parish Councils and the local MPs. She echoed Councillor Carter's disappointment that further negotiations with the PCC had not taken place prior to the meeting and his concern regarding the delays suggested by the Department of Transport. She expressed the view that a "neighbourhood warden" style model might make a CPE scheme more viable and she suggested that the Committee may wish to consider the benefits of such an approach in future modelling going forward.

Members' Questions

The written submission made by Councillors Carter and Lowery stated that "CPE is a complex matter and requires careful consideration and planning to ensure that any scheme developed is suitable for the circumstances in Telford & Wrekin and sustainable in financial terms". Ticketing was unlikely to improve issues and a scheme to stop people parking irresponsibly was required.

Parking issues were a big issue around schools in Newport and housing growth would continue to cause issues. Some had dealt with the issue by the installation of wooden bollards on verges and it was essential that schools also took responsibility for their pupils who were of an age to drive to school but were unable to park on school property. It was essential to work together to find a solution or solutions. Any scheme should benefit the borough: a scheme which sought to educate was preferred as opposed to the creation of a profit making scheme.

Members' Comments

The view was expressed that greater foresight in the planning process was needed and that future developments needed to consider parking issues so that problems were not perpetuated. A converse view was expressed that some forthcoming developments may alleviate pressures, for example through new traffic configurations in Newport due to development at the Business Park, and it was also noted that an opportunity to develop land for car parking at The Wrekin had not come to fruition.

The view was expressed that scheme modelling should incorporate partnership working.

(iv) Newport Town Council

The Chair invited Lee Jakeman, Town Clerk, to present evidence on behalf of Newport Town Council.

Mr Jakeman noted that parking offences were a particular issue for residents in Newport, as evidenced by the number of complaints which crossed his desk, and he considered it to be the single biggest issue facing residents in Newport, bigger even than development at Station Road. He considered that most people would obey laws until they saw others getting away with offences and therefore parking problems were likely to perpetuate.

He appreciated the reasons why the Police did not engage in enforcement activity and noted that many people would agree that the Police were not the appropriate authority to undertake such activity in any event. He commented on the success of the recent partnership scheme which had seen some Town and Parish Councils invest in a scheme to engage five PCSOs in enforcement activity. Newport Town Council were keen to seek a more permanent solution and he had written to the Department for Transport and the Department for Communities and Local Government in an attempt to secure Civil Enforcement Powers for Newport Town Council. However, he had been advised this was not possible and it was necessary for the local authority to seek the powers and delegate them to the Town or Parish.

Mr Jakeman contended that all public authorities were run at a loss and that was the purpose of taxes. Commenting on the potential to increase the Council Tax base, and calculating that Council Tax income would grow with projected housing growth in the area, Mr Jakeman considered that there were economies of scale to be made. He also argued that parking was never truly free as it was provided through taxes.

He also questioned the common assumption that CPE could not result in profit as his belief was that profits had to be reinvested, for instance through the purchase of a car park.

Mr Jakeman acknowledged that this was not an easy decision: nobody liked traffic wardens and the issue was probably, therefore, not a vote winner. However, he noted that the issue of CPE had been considered by Scrutiny as far back as 2005 and he was dismayed that there was likely to be further delay. He urged the Committee to do what was right for the community at the current point in time and felt that modelling data would constantly change as new information came to light. He considered that a decision was needed quickly as delay would result in a decision being considered too close to the election which could stymie the process further.

Members' Questions

The delay referred to by the Town Clerk was noted but it was considered that in the same period of time, several issues had compounded the situation in Newport: eg reconfiguration of the High Street, loss of 'herringbone' parking and taxis parking whilst waiting for their next fare.

Local retail businesses welcomed the limited parking time in the High Street as it provided regular churn.

Further information was sought regarding the multi-skilled approach to enforcement referenced at paragraph 20 of the submission from Newport Town Council.

This model was related to the recent publicity around training on fly tipping which enforcement officers had received.

Noting that the Committee had not sought to consider other scheme models previously, the Assistant Director: Neighbourhood & Customer Services confirmed that this was something that could be provided if the Committee wanted to explore such opportunities.

Members Comments

Despite the concern of the Town Council, some Members remained unconvinced that this issue should be a high priority for the Council in light of competing priorities relating to adult social care and vulnerable children and young people.

The argument that the Clerk had made to increase the Council Tax base in order to pay for parking enforcement was noted but it was considered that this would result in an unfair increase in those areas where less tickets were issued due to the implication that parking offences were not as great an issue in those areas.

The language of the Newport Town Plan referred to parking enforcement as a 'quick win' but that was not the case and bringing a scheme to fruition was a complex process.

(v) Hollinswood & Randlay Town Council

The Chair invited Katrina Baker, Parish Clerk, to make a submission on behalf of Hollinswood & Randlay Town Council.

Ms Baker commented that there were a number of issues in the parish which the Parish Council had been led to believe could be solved by CPE.

Employees of a local large business often parked on the estate roads instead of the business's own large car park in order to avoid queuing to exit. Similarly, shoppers visiting the Telford Shopping Centre also parked on estate roads to avoid paying parking charges. Additionally, taxis also parked in the estate roads to maintain close proximity to Telford Shopping Centre and their next fare.

This situation was compounded by Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), with the number of occupants resulting in five or six cars per property. The language barrier that existed between the occupants of some HMOs and residents or the Parish Council meant that this situation was not easily resolved and could result in anti-social behaviour. There were also issues with car repairs taking place on-road.

Issues with inappropriate car parking outside schools at start/end times was a national problem but the safety of children was being compromised during drop off/pick up.

In some cases, it would be difficult to ensure emergency vehicle access. However, Ms Baker noted that the local policing team would attend very quickly if a safety issue was reported to them.

The Parish Council was keen to work in partnership with the Council to address the issues but at the current time, more information was needed about the benefits and drawbacks of CPE including cost implications and resources for enforcement. The Parish Council would welcome examples of CPE in practice or alternative schemes to provide a picture of whether CPE was the solution to the stated problems and enable an informed decision to be made.

Members Comments

The wide variance in the opinions of and problems experienced by the Town and Parish Councils was noted. Some of the issues raised could be seen replicated elsewhere – eg the issue with shoppers parking in Hollinswood to avoid parking fees at the Town Centre may be seen in Wellington with patients avoiding hospital parking fees. It was difficult at this point to see what scheme could address all of these issues.

The Chair asked Members how they wished to progress the review and it was agreed that before proceeding further, time was required to reflect upon the data and evidence received so far in order to decide what further evidence or information was needed to enable a recommendation to Cabinet to be made.

RESOLVED – that the Committee will meet as a working group to consider further evidence required to inform the review.

FESC-10 Work Programme 2017/18

The Committee noted the Work Programme.

FESC-11 Chair’s Updates

None.

The meeting ended at 7.42pm

Chairman:

Date: