

Halesowen Area Committee - 22nd January 2009

Report of the Area Liaison Officer

Responses to Questions Asked at the Meeting of the Committee held on 12th November 2008

Purpose of Report

1. To receive responses to questions asked at the meeting of the Committee held on 12th November, 2008.

Background

2. The issues set out below were raised at the last meeting of the Committee, progress on which is as follows:-

3. River Stour Walkway

Further to the report made to the last meeting of the Committee on the maintenance arrangements applicable to the River Stour Walkway, which was provided in response to a request having been made by a local resident for action to be taken to improve the safety of the walkway, in consequence of its being over grown, the Director of the Urban Environment has pursued the matter with the Chairman of the Dudley Borough Local Access Forum who has surveyed the walkway and made a number of suggestions regarding improving the surfaces in certain sections. The comments of the Chairman of the Forum have been passed to Green Care for action.

4. Spring Street/Foredraft Street Footway

In response to the issue having been raised by a member at the meeting of the Committee held on 12th November, 2008, the issue of the street lighting at the footways at Spring Street and Foredraft Street has been raised with E-On Energy Services, who gave an assurance to the Director of the Urban Environment that the lamps will be connected on or before 5th December 2008. A check has been made and all lights except one are operational. The electric cable runs by the non-operational light but does not seem to be connected to it and the matter is therefore being taken up further by the Director of the Urban Environment.

5. Play Path Finder Scheme at Cradley

The provision of a Play Path Finder Scheme in the vicinity of Beeches View Avenue, Cradley was advocated by a member at the meeting of the Committee held on 5th November, 2008.

The Director of Children's Services has commented that, as part of the £2.6 m Play Path Finder allocation from the Department for Children's Schools and Families (DCSF), the Council is required to build or refurbish 28 children's play areas across the Borough during the period from 2008-2010.

Twelve existing children's play areas in public parks and existing play areas have already been selected for refurbishment by the Council and will be completed, and be opened, by 31st March, 2009. The Council is now required to select 16 additional children's play areas to build or refurbish during 2009/10. The Director has confirmed that a 'Play Path Finder nomination form' has been received from the Trustees of the Council on Community Partnership for the area adjacent to Council on primary school and off Beeches View Avenue to be developed into a new children's play area. An initial assessment process for all nominations is being undertaken currently and this will include advice from relevant agencies, including the Directorate of the Urban Environment, Green Care, Play England and MADE.

When the initial assessment process has been completed, a prioritisation process will be undertaken by a panel of children, young people, community representatives and play specialists from the Dudley Play Partnership. The prioritisation list will then be submitted to the Cabinet Members for Children's Services and the Urban Environment for joint endorsement and final approval. This will then be included in a report to the Cabinet for inclusion in the Capital Programme for 2009/10. The final list must then be submitted to the Department for Children's Schools and Families for inclusion in the national evaluation programme.

In relation to the proposal for Beeches View Avenue, the Head of Development in the Directorate of Children's Services has met the member of the Council who raised the issue, the Head teacher of the Caslon School, Groundwork Black Country and a member of the Trustees of the Council on Community Partnership for a site visit. The party was informed that the DCSF funding is primarily for the refurbishment or replacement of existing children's play areas although the provision of new areas were not being ruled out, provided they meet the DCSF criteria. The Head of Development also walked the site and spoke to some children using the area as an unofficial BMX trail. He also spoke to a member of the public using the area as a short cut across the field. The member who raised the issue and the Head of the School have been advised by the Head of Development that it is unlikely the area will meet the DCSF criteria but he also encouraged them to submit a nomination form nevertheless.

The DCSF require that the prioritisation process be completed by the end of January, 2009 and a decision on the proposal will therefore be known in the near future.

6. Premises of the Former Cradley High School

At the meeting of the Committee held on 12th November, 2008, questions were asked on the security arrangements being made at these premises, with particular reference to the lighting of the school building, and on the possible continued use of the changing accommodation by the public, pending the disposal of the property.

The Council has a decommissioning process when a building becomes vacant that is agreed with the Council's insurers. In this case decommissioning was arranged for 19th December, 2008, on which date the electricity use ceased.

Regarding the nature of the lighting, this was provided by way of fluorescent tubing, and changing these to low energy bulbs would not be cost effective in terms of labour, the minimum eighteen month running time to achieve a saving, and the high cost of disposing of the fluorescent tubes which have to be disposed of as controlled waste. In her former capacity as Assistant Director of Children's Services, the Interim Director of Children's Services wrote to the member of the public who raised the lighting issue confirming that no additional costs to the Council Tax would arise from the activity of the lights being left on.

On the issue of security, the school had to be completely cleared of all combustible materials and hazardous chemicals, and the power sources isolated. The risk of intruders injuring themselves should they be able to gain access to the building was considered high until the decommissioning process was complete, and the insurance would be invalid unless there was appropriate security in the building.

Regarding the changing accommodation issue, in her former capacity as Assistant Director of Children's Services, the Interim Director of Children's Services has confirmed with the member who raised the issue the understanding that, by the provision of mobile changing rooms, the Council's commitment to provide safe and appropriate changing facilities has been honoured. It has also been indicated to the member that the facilities within Cradley High School cannot be made available now that the decommissioning has taken place. The area that used to provide the leisure facilities cannot be isolated and the Council is not able to provide heating, and water and lighting would not be available after the site was closed in mid-December. The Assistant Director did not consider the situation at Cradley High School to be directly comparable with that in respect of Valley Road School and confirmed that no funding has been allocated from any budgets to retain facilities beyond the decommissioning process.

7 Academic Achievement of school pupils in the Cradley area

Further to the enquiry at the last meeting, the Interim Assistant Director of Children's Services (Early Years, Youth and Education Services) has responded as follows. The latest figures for the percentage of pupils from the Cradley and Foxcote ward achieving the benchmark 5 A* - C (including English and Mathematics) GCSE grades shows a 2% decline in 2008 compared with 2007. (40% and 42% respectively). It should be pointed out that of the 172 pupils from this ward, only 40 were on roll at Cradley High School. The figures quoted by the member who raised the issue refer to the old Key Stage 4 benchmark of 5 A* - C grades and that information is correct.

It is also important to note that current figures are still unvalidated and can change. Validated data will not be available until later in January or in February.

Finance

7. There are no direct financial consequences arising from this report.

Law

8. Section 111 of the Local Government Act, 1972 enables the Council to do anything that is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions.

Equality Impact

9. The report takes into account the Council's policies on Equality and Diversity. Since this is a feedback report on issues raised by members, there are no direct implications for children in noting the report.

Recommendations

11. That the contents of this report be received and noted.



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AREA LIAISON OFFICER

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List of Background Papers

Minutes of the meeting of the Halesowen Area Committee held on 12th November, 2008.