

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

WEDNESDAY, 2ND DECEMBER, 2020

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Bentley, A Blackburn,
D Collins, A Gabriel, P Grahame, A Khan,
M Harland, K Brooks, T Smith, M Dobson,
D Ragan and K Renshaw

61 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against the refusal of inspection documents.

62 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

The agenda contained no exempt information.

63 Late Items

There were no late items added to the agenda.

64 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

No declarations of pecuniary interests were made.

65 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Cllr Peter Gruen and Cllr Nicole Sharpe. Cllr Denise Ragan and Cllr Karen Renshaw attended as substitutes.

66 Call In Briefing paper

The Head of Democratic Services submitted a report in relation to the procedural aspects of the call in process.

Members were advised that the options available to the Scrutiny Board in respect of this particular called in decision were as follows:

Option 1- Release the decision for implementation

Having reviewed this decision, the Scrutiny Board may decide to release it for implementation. If the Scrutiny Board chooses this option, the decision will be immediately released for implementation and the decision may not be called in again.

Option 2 - Recommend that the decision be reconsidered

The Scrutiny Board may decide to recommend to the decision maker that the decision be reconsidered. If the Scrutiny Board chooses this option a report will be submitted to the decision maker.

In the case of an Executive Board decision, the report of the Scrutiny Board will be prepared within three working days of the Scrutiny Board meeting and submitted to the Executive Board. Any report of the Scrutiny Board will be referred to the next Executive Board meeting for consideration.

In reconsidering the decision and associated Scrutiny Board report, the Executive Board may vary the decision or confirm its original decision. In either case, this will form the basis of the final decision and will not be subject to any further call in.

Failure to agree one of the above options

If the Scrutiny Board, for any reason, does not agree one of the above courses of action at this meeting, then Option 1 will be adopted by default, i.e. the decision will be released for implementation with no further recourse to call in.

RESOLVED – That the report outlining the call in procedures be noted.

67 Revenue budget Update 2021/2022 and Budget Saving Proposals - Resolution 77(c)

The Head of Democratic Services submitted a report that presented background papers to an Executive Board decision which had been called in in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

The decision had been called in for review by Councillor Robert Finnigan.

The Scrutiny Board considered the following written information:

- Call in request form – 24 November 2020.
- ‘Revenue budget update 2021/22 and budget savings proposals’ – Executive Board Report 18 November 2020.
- Minute 77 Executive Board 18 November 2020.

The following were in attendance:

- Cllr Robert Finnigan, Leader of the Morley Borough Independent group
- Cllr Debra Coupar, Executive Board member for Communities
- James Rogers, Director of Communities and Environment
- Shaid Mahmood, Chief Officer Communities
- Michael Everitt, Head of Finance
- Richard Jackson, Head of Service, Facilities Management
- Sarn Warbis, Senior Policy and Performance Officer
- Mark Turnbull, Head of Service Resources and Housing

As the lead signatory to the Call In, Councillor Finnigan was invited to outline his concerns regarding the decision taken by the Executive Board and to set out the outcomes he wished to secure from the Call In meeting.

Cllr Finnigan set out a number of concerns including:

- The potential impact on an already disadvantaged community of losing a valuable asset if the Lewisham Community Centre were to close.
- The likelihood that those most affected would be the same people who have been hardest hit by the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic.
- His interpretation that the wording of a Service Review proposal suggested a decision had already been taken to close the Lewisham Community Centre with the associated cost saving having already been built into the budget for 2021/22.
- There not being sufficient time to “galvanise the local community” to engage in a consultation exercise before February 2021 given the disruption caused by the ongoing pandemic and Christmas.
- There being a lack of clarity about the anticipated costs of running the community centre during 2021/22.
- Usage being adversely impacted by the way in which Leeds City Council’s centralised booking system operates.

Cllr Finnigan sought a recommendation from Scrutiny Board members that the Executive Board should remove Lewisham Community Centre from the “closure list” and instead provide the local ward members with 12 months to work with the community to explore alternative proposals for the centre.

Cllr Finnigan further indicated that organisations he has involvement with, including Morley Town Council, would be prepared to provide financial support to cover a proportion of the ongoing costs of running the community centre if an assurance were provided that an extended consultation could take place.

Members were invited to ask questions or raise points of clarification in regard to the information outlined by Cllr Finnigan. Discussion included:

- The cost associated with the work of a mobile caretaking team.
- The cost of water on the site and the potential measures that could be introduced to reduce these and other running costs.
- Possible reasons for declining usage since 2015, including a perception that the Council’s charging policy and centralised booking system discourage wider community use of Lewisham community centre.
- The likelihood of securing greater community engagement than was the case when the centre was last considered for closure in 2015.
- The perceived lack of alternative community venues in the area.
- Recent and ongoing discussions with the local community committee and its community centre sub-committee.
- The likelihood of securing sustainable future income streams to make a community run centre viable.
- Clarification about the potential costs of maintaining the site if the centre were to close from 1 April 2021.
- Examples of centres that have successfully transferred to community-led arrangements in Stanhope, Drighlington and Meanwood and the involvement of the Council’s communities’ directorate in facilitating those arrangements.

Members sought and received assurance that the decision taken by the Executive Board was to begin consultation on the potential closure of Lewisham Community Centre and that the Board had not agreed to the closure of the centre ahead of the outcome of that consultation being properly assessed.

The Executive Board member and her officers were invited to further address the Board and respond to the concerns raised by Cllr Finnigan.

The scale of the financial challenge facing the Council for 2021/22 was highlighted. The Executive Board member for Communities noted that budget proposals had been set out at a much earlier point in the municipal year than has been typical in recent years, with a view to enabling discussion and engagement to take place in relation to some of the “very difficult choices” facing the organisation.

The Chief Officer for Communities reiterated that the service is seeking to quickly engage in a consultation exercise about the future of Lewisham Community Centre with a range of stakeholders. He noted that officers within the directorate would work towards February 2021 to assess the viability of any alternative proposals, including any potential community asset transfers, which emerged from the consultation and advise the Director and Executive Member for Communities.

Members were invited to ask questions and/or provide comment at this point in the meeting. Discussion included:

- Long standing efforts over a period of ten years to reduce to costs associated with running community centres across the city so as to retain as many as possible.
- The offer from Cllr Finnigan to explore alternative sources of funding to assist in securing the future of Lewisham Community Centre as a community asset.
- The success of partnership arrangements in other areas of the city which have enabled community-run centres to succeed.
- Examples of improved outcomes being delivered as a result of successful consultation events in other areas of the city including Temple Newsam.
- The financial impact of extending the consultation period to a year.
- Ongoing work to improve the centralised booking system.
- Proposals for consultation regarding the potential closure of two other community centres, which were detailed in the same Executive Board report.

Members were provided with assurance that ward members in Morley South would receive support their exploration of alternative proposals for Lewisham Community Centre from officers that had provided support to other councillors affected by similar proposals in previous years.

It was agreed that should the proposed closure be recommended as part of the final budget proposals the outcome of the consultation would be outlined in the associated Executive Board papers to inform decision making.

Cllr Finnigan requested further information about the basis of the assumed costs of running Lewisham Community Centre in 2021/22 in order to inform local consultation and engagement.

It was noted that the final decision about the future of the centre would be taken by the Executive Board and that final budget proposals would be presented to Executive Board in February for recommendation to a meeting of Full Council the same month.

The Chair welcomed the assurances and clarification provided in relation to running costs, the consultation process and the support that would be made available to ward members.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the information provided at the meeting be noted

68 Outcome of the Call In

The Scrutiny Board considered whether or not to release the decision for implementation. A vote was subsequently held and the Scrutiny Board agreed (by majority decision) that the decision be released.

RESOLVED – That the decision be released for implementation.

69 Date and Time of Next Meeting

To note the date and time of the next meeting as 14 January 2021 at 10.30am.