Minutes of the MEETING of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on Monday 11th April 2016 at 6.00 p.m. at the Council House.

Present

Councillor A. Underhill (Mayor) in the Chair

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Apologies

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Hussain, D.A. Shires and Whyte.

Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the meetings held on 25th February and 7th March 2016 copies having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as correct records and signed.

Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 2985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

Mayor's announcements

The Mayor thanked all those Councillors not standing for re-election on 5th May 2016 for their services to the Council and the people of Walsall and wished them well for the future.

Councillors Arif, Nazir, S. Coughlan, Smith, P. Bott, Anson, I. Shires, Westley and Bird also paid tribute those retiring members.

The Mayor referred to the recent deaths of former Councillors Wood and Perrett and also to the recent death of Councillor Darren Cooper the Leader of Sandwell Council, Dr. Henry Summer ex Medical Officer of Health of Wednesbury and later of Walsall and local historian and photographer, Mr. Jack Haddock.

During the discussion Councillor Arif apologised for his “tweet” of 22nd September 2015 and said that he accepted that the apology given to Council by Councillor S. Coughlan was not for lying but was for raising his complaint in the wrong forum, namely Council.
Resolved

(1) That this Council expresses its regret at the death of Mr. C.J.P. Wood a member of Walsall County Borough Council from 1962 to 1974, a member of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council from 1974 to 2002 and Mayor in 1981/82 and places on record their appreciation of his services to the borough over a period of many years and expresses its condolences to his family at this sad time.

(2) That this Council expresses its regret at the death of Mr. T. Perrett, a member of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council from 1997 to 2000 and places on record their appreciation of his services to the borough over a period of many years and expresses its condolences to his family at this sad time."

113 Petitions

The following petitions were submitted:

(1) Councillor Ditta:
- Parking enforcement in Bescot Crescent
- Resurfacing of road and pavement in Weston Street, Palfrey
- Resurfacing of pavements in Earl Street, Countess Street and Milton Street, Palfrey

(2) Councillor I. Shires – request for pedestrian crossing in Wesley Road, Short Heath.

(3) Councillor Underhill – Parking problems around Bentley West School and playing fields off Monmouth Road/Western Avenue.

(4) Councillor Wilson – request for off road parking scheme for Broad Meadow, Aldridge.

(5) Councillor Worrall – implementation of 7.5 tonne weight limits and HGV alternative route along various roads in Shelfield/Rushall/Walsall Wood.

(6) Councillor Young – Reinstatement of post box at the corner of Dartmouth Avenue and Dartmouth Close

At 7.20 p.m. the meeting adjourned.

The meeting re-convened at 7.25 p.m.
Question from member of the public

Mature oak tree in Portland Road, Aldridge

Mr. P. Bassford asked the following question of Councillor Perry:

“Why was a mature oak tree (T979) in Portland Road, Aldridge removed despite assessments by Marlow Consulting Ltd. on 26.3.12 and 30.7.14 stating that it was worthy of retention and why was the tree said to be of poor amenity value on 22.2.16 and not merit a Tree Preservation order despite my letter objecting to the felling of the tree which was not considered at the time the decision was made and why was my letter not put before the panel?”

Councillor Perry replied that planning permission 14/1590/FL for the erection of a pair of 4 bed semi-detached houses was granted in January 2015. The houses were specifically designed to avoid the root protection area of the protected oak tree. The permission had not yet been implemented but was still capable of being implemented as it was within the 3 years allowed for commencement of development.

A tree survey was undertaken for the site by Marlow Consulting Limited in March 2012 where it described the oak tree as having ‘No significant visible defects in the base and trunk, crown healthy, no works required, suitability for retention high.’ The tree was ‘unsympathetically pruned’ early the following year. The works were carried out without the knowledge of the Council. A further survey was undertaken by Marlow Consulting in July 2014 where they described the same oak tree as ‘Base obscured by Laurels, large deadwood, crown healthy, BS 5837 category B’ (moderate arboricultural quality)’. No mention of the very poor pruning of the tree and its implications was made in this report.

On 18th January 2016 a Conservation Area notification was received by the Council proposing to fell the oak tree. The Tree Officer carried out a site visit to inspect the tree on 22nd February 2016, the oak had been unsympathetically pruned and not in accordance with best practice. There were significant stubs evident and the crown was now asymmetrical reducing any amenity value the tree once had. It was now also more susceptible to disease and decay which would likely reduce its lifespan.

Councillor Perry said that in response to a Conservation Area notification the Council could do only one of two things – make a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) to prevent the works or not make a TPO and allow the works to be undertaken. When assessing the oak tree the Tree Officer used the Tree Evaluation Method for Preservation Orders (TEMPO). The result of the TEMPO assessment concluded that a TPO was defensible, however, the decision to make a TPO was down to the judgement of the tree officer but, primarily due to the tree’s reduced amenity value, lifespan and limited public visibility, the Tree Officer recommended that no TPO be made. The decision notice not to make a TPO was made on 25th February 2016 under delegated powers.
The enquirer’s letter of objection to the tree works application 16/0077 was received in the Council offices on 23rd February 2016 but unfortunately due to the high volume of correspondence received for processing in the department during this period the letter did not reach the case officer before the application was determined. This was regrettable and the team apologised for this. As explained the case officer carried out an assessment on the tree and given the circumstances of the poor pruning which had reduced the amenity value of the tree and affected its lifespan coupled with the limited public visibility he concluded that it was not worthy of a TPO and could therefore be removed.

Councillor Perry said, however, that there was also a new application 16/0169 for an alternative development for the erection of 2 detached houses which was as yet undetermined. An objection to the application had been received from the enquirer and would be considered in the assessment. Although there was a proposal for two new trees to the rear of the properties, officers would explore the potential to secure the provision for a new tree in the front, as replacement for the felled oak tree, through the planning condition process.

Questions from members of the Council

(1) Winterley Lane Rushall infilling of mineshafts

Councillor Worrall asked the following question of Councillor Perry:

“Planning consent for the infilling and capping of 19 limestone shafts at land off Winterley Lane expired at the end of March.

Given that, in answer to my previous question at February Council, you stated that just one out of nineteen shafts had been filled with only weeks to go before expiry of planning consent, and given the widespread local perception that this is not so much a serious land reclamation project as a lucrative long-term high-volume aggregates recycling business in the green belt, would you now explain to Council how long the operators will be allowed to once again continue without the benefit of planning consent, what options for effective action are available to Planning Committee and the Environment Agency, who will pay for the ongoing costs of repairing the carriageway and any damage to adjoining property, and restoring roadside hedgerows and trees now being damaged or destroyed by HGVs, and when it is expected that the land will be restored to peaceful green belt grazing?”

Councillor Perry replied that the last condition discharged prior to the lawful commencement of development on site was signed off on the 31st March 2015. Accordingly development was allowed to proceed on site until the 1st April 2016. As the 12 months work period was prescribed in the description of development and not through condition, any request to extend the period of work on the site required the submission of a new planning application and could not be secured through a variation of condition.
Officers had been in discussion with the applicants who were in the process of preparing a new application to be submitted to the Council for consideration. A meeting had been arranged with officers this week to discuss the requirements for this submission. The applicant had made an assessment of the amount of material on site and it was understood that nearly, if not all the necessary material was available to fill the shafts. The agent had advised that as of 1st April 2016 the site was no longer receiving imported waste and the operator intended to surrender their Environment Agency permit as no more waste was being imported. The anticipated end date for the works was understood to be July 2016.

He said that the applicant had confirmed that they were intending to work towards the restoration of the site to grassland as per the planning permission. Any enforcement action would be considered at the end of the restoration period to ascertain whether it had been carried out in accordance with the planning permission. The state of the area would be assessed at or just prior to the end of the restoration period and ensure it was completed to a reasonable standard at the “developer’s” cost.

Councillor Perry reminded members that the right and proper place for the merits of such matters was Planning Committee, when members of that Committee were provided with full papers and appropriate professional advice.

Councillor Worrall asked the following supplementary question:

“What happens if it takes longer than July 2016 to complete the work?”

Councillor Perry replied that it would be decided by Planning Committee and it was hoped that a liaison group would be set up.

(2) Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990

Councillor D. Coughlan asked the following question of Councillor Perry:

“Can you please explain to me what we as councillors have to do to get a Notice under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990 issued to require proper maintenance of land.”

Councillor Perry replied that the National Guidance stated:

“An enforcement notice should only be issued where the local planning authority is satisfied that it appears to them that there has been a breach of planning control and it is expedient to issue a notice, taking into account the provisions of the development plan and any other material considerations. Enforcement action is discretionary, and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control. Where the balance of public interest lies, will vary from case to case.”
Addressing breaches of planning control without formal enforcement action can often be the quickest and most cost effective way of achieving a satisfactory and lasting remedy. For example, a breach of control may be the result of a genuine mistake where, once the breach is identified, the owner or occupier takes immediate action to remedy it. Furthermore in some instances formal enforcement action may not be appropriate.

In deciding, in each case, what is the most appropriate way forward, local planning authorities should usually avoid taking formal enforcement action where:

- there is a trivial or technical breach of control which causes no material harm or adverse impact on the amenity of the site or the surrounding area;
- development is acceptable on its planning merits and formal enforcement action would solely be to regularise the development;
- in their assessment, the local planning authority consider that an application is the appropriate way forward to regularise the situation, for example, where planning conditions may need to be imposed.”

He said that the Council's enforcement policy explained: following the initial site inspection, an assessment will consider the expediency to pursue action. It was generally not expedient to pursue enforcement action for the following reasons such as: if the outcome of any enforcement action would not result in a significant environmental gain or benefit; there is no evidence of a breach of planning control; or permission may be granted for the development.

Investigations were prioritised such that those posing a serious threat to the environment or public amenity, for example development causing a serious traffic hazard (irreversible environmental damage or posing a very high risk to safety) would be high and those such as building work which was unlikely to be given planning permission without substantial modification or removal.

Councillor Perry said that notwithstanding the loss of the two investigating officers to Birmingham City the planning team had continued to process and investigate all enforcement cases. The Council was seeking replacements and he was pleased to confirm that an additional enforcement officer started last week. If there was a specific case she wished to discuss please do not hesitate to contact the team.

Councillor Coughlan asked the following supplementary question:

“The process appears to have broken down when it comes to Willenhall. Does she and other Councillors have to get MP’s to intervene or will officers follow the process.

Councillor Perry replied that officers would deal with these matters.

(3) Pupil premium

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Towe:
“Given that Pupil Premium funding is additional funding given to schools, based on eligibility for free school meals and intended to narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged learners and their more affluent peers and furthermore given that 2 years ago, in March 2014 four Walsall primary schools were named in a letter of concern from the Rt. Hon David Laws MP to Rose Collinson (The Interim Head of Children’s Services in Walsall) regarding their poor performance against Pupil Premium on the previous year’s data and given that 2 years have since passed by, would the Portfolio holder comment with regard to the use of Pupil Premium funding in Walsall Schools and its effectiveness in achieving the outcomes for which it is intended, with particular reference to:

(a) What is the amount of Pupil Premium funding allocated to all Walsall Schools in total?

(b) To what extent you are satisfied that there is sufficient evidence that every school receiving Pupil Premium funding is using the funding specifically and directly to narrow the gap between the disadvantaged learners and their more affluent peers?

(c) To what extent are you satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the intended outcomes of narrowing the learning gap using Pupil Premium funding are being achieved by all schools in receipt of such funding?”

Councillor Towe replied that he was very pleased with the initiatives that were being run by the local authority in response to closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged young people, referred to as the pupil premium children.

The local authority held a successful Pupil Premium conference in September 2015 which he attended. This showed the local authority’s commitment to support the good work happening in our schools to benefit the pupils concerned. The conference was led by a national pupil premium Champion and over one hundred delegates had attended including head teachers and chairs of governors.

In answer to Councillor’s Smith’s question on the amount of pupil premium received by all Walsall schools Councillor Towe said that for 2015/16 it was £18.840m.

In supporting schools to ensure that funding was being used specifically and directly to narrow the attainment gap, the local authority through the school improvement team, provided the following:

- A pupil premium guide giving examples of good practice. This is available on the Walsall link, the children’s services website.
- A pupil premium section on the website that all schools and governors can access, which gives advice and guidance on how they should spend their pupil premium to ensure maximum impact on our young people’s attainment.
- Our School improvement partners undertaken pupil premium reviews.
- A school improvement partner who is the named pupil premium champion for schools
- Pupil premium network meetings take place termly. These are well attended by all schools
- During visits to schools, school improvement partners will evidence the progress and attainment being made by the pupils premium children, compared to others at the school and with those nationally. Schools will be challenged where underperformance exists and then supported to improve their practice.

Councillor Towe said that as this was a key inspection area for Ofsted, they would report on how a school was using their pupil premium funding to close the attainment gap.

Data on pupil premium children was gathered by officers from schools. Those statistics showed the gap was closing more effectively in our primary schools, but not so at secondary level.

Councillor Towe said that whilst we now have no direct control over the secondary schools, the school improvement team endeavoured to work closely with them to address the needs of these pupils.

(4) **Council tax arrears**

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Bird:

"Would the Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public, how much Council tax arrears, (attributable to the introduction, by the former administration, of the 25% Council tax payers to over 19,000 Walsall residents from April 2015 who were previously exempt from making any Council tax contribution) is still outstanding?"

Councillor Bird said that as at 31st March 2016 a total of 10,416 households were awarded the 'maximum' Council Tax Reduction of 75%’. Of these households 6,157 (or 59.11%) had paid in full by 31st March 2016. The remaining 4,259 (or 40.89%) continued to have an outstanding balance at 31st March 2016. The value of the total outstanding debt for these households was £655,406.99. Of this amount, £419,106.11 had now been secured by households entering into payment arrangements following the issuing of summonses.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

"Can you confirm that Walsall Council received £828,712 in Discretionary Housing Payment funding in the financial year 2015/16 and indicate how much of that amount has been spent by the end of that financial year?"

Councillor Bird replied that the figure of £828,712 which was being quoted by Councillor Smith appeared to be the Discretionary Housing Payment Grant being awarded to Walsall Council by the government for 2016/17.
He confirmed that the Government grant for Discretionary Housing Payments for 2015/16 was actually only £687,524. In this financial year the Council had awarded £703,092 in Discretionary Housing Payments to local residents experiencing difficulties in meeting their housing costs. That figure represented the full Government Grant for 2015/16 and an additional £15,568 (which had been funded via the Council’s Core Grant).

(5) Properties in the ownership of WHG

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Andrew:

“Can the appropriate Portfolio holder comment with regard to properties (for residential use) in the ownership of Walsall Housing Group (whg) and with particular reference to:

(a) How many applicants are presently on their waiting list for a whg tenancy?
(b) How many of their properties they have sold or auctioned off in the last 3 years?
(c) How many properties (for residential use) whg owns outside the Borough of Walsall?”

Councillor Andrew said that the number of applicants currently registered on the whg waiting list was 8,644. The total sold had been 359 which comprised the following:

- The following number of properties had been sold to existing tenants, under the Government's Right to Buy scheme, in the last three years:
  
  2013/14 - 113  
  2014/15 - 109  
  2015-16 - 88

- In addition whg had sold a number of properties voluntarily, primarily due to the condition of the property and the level of investment required to bring them back into occupation:
  
  2013/14 - 26  
  2014/15 - 10  
  2015/16 - 13  
  9 of these properties were sold to Beechdale Housing Association.

- During the same time period whg had built the following number of properties in Walsall:
  
  2013/14 - 197  
  2014/15 - 226  
  2015/16 - 237

Whg were also currently on site with 358 homes in Walsall.
Councillor Andrew went on to say that whg currently owned 57 properties outside of Walsall. A significant portion of these were acquired as part of the government mortgage rescue scheme. Stock outside Walsall represented less than half a percent of the homes whg owned.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

“Would residents on the waiting list in Walsall be eligible to apply for one of the out of Borough houses?”

Councillor Andrew replied that Councillor Smith should ask whg.

(6) Academies

Councillor Smith asked the following question of Councillor Towe:

“From an evidence based perspective, can you inform me, this Council and the public, especially members of the public with children at school, whether those schools that have become academies in recent years have seen their standards improve as a consequence, especially with regard to exam results and the narrowing of the gap in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers?”

Councillor Towe said that exam results showed that the results of good or outstanding schools converting to academies narrowed the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers whilst the poor performing schools transferring to academy status were not successful in achieving this.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

“What is your considered assessment of the announcement by the Government that all schools will be turned into academies?”

Councillor Towe said that he believed that we should have responsibility for our own schools. He went on to ask who would accept responsibility if something goes wrong in the future.

116 Recommendation of Cabinet

Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education – Agreed Syllabus

The report to Cabinet on 16th March 2026 was submitted.

It was moved by Councillor Rochelle, duly seconded and:
Resolved

That the Agreed Syllabus be approved, to be implemented from 1 September 2016.

117 Portfolio holder briefings

(a) Personnel and business support

A report was submitted.

Councillor Bennett, portfolio holder for Personnel and business support gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Bennett.

(b) Shared services and procurement

A report was submitted.

Councillor Arif, portfolio holder for Personnel and business support gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Arif.

118 Notice of motion – Academies

The following motion, notice of which had been duly given was moved by Councillor S. Coughlan and duly seconded:

The Conservative government’s announcement that every school will be an academy by 2020 heralds the final episode in the destruction of democratically accountable state education.

This flies in the face of any evidence about the validity of the Academy model as a vehicle for school improvement. This starts with the Education Select Committee who said that ‘There is at present no convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment in primary schools’.

Even OFSTED boss Sir Michael Wilshere now implicitly questions academisation. His recent report condemned several Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) for paying fat cat salaries, feckless support and failing the most disadvantaged children. Wilshere compared them to the worst Local Authorities of yesteryear, but that’s unfair. At least an LA could be held accountable at the ballot box.
At the recent Overview Scrutiny Panel, the panel was informed that children’s progress and attainment in council controlled schools is better and improving more quickly than in Academies.

Therefore;

This Council condemns the government policy of forced academisation, and calls on the Leader of the council to write to the Chancellor stating that taking power away from local Government regarding schools, undermines the whole Devolution project of Combined Authorities and the Governments Locality policy.

Amendment moved by Councillor Smith and seconded by Councillor P. Bott:

That the final paragraph be amended as follows:

That all the words after “Therefore this Council condemns the government policy of forced academisation be deleted and the following substituted:

“furthermore welcomes the concerns and reservations of such a policy recently publicly expressed by Walsall’s Portfolio holder for Learning Skills and Apprenticeships, Cllr. Chris Towe and calls on The Leader of the Council, on behalf of Walsall Council to communicate the Council’s concerns and grave reservations of such a policy to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Office of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Office of the Secretary of State for Education, the 3 Walsall Borough Members of Parliament as well as to the local offices of the Teachers’ Trade Unions and Associations, local Parent Associations and any other person or organisation that the Leader of the Council deems appropriate.”

During the discussion on this matter, it was moved, by Councillor Bird, duly seconded and:

Resolved

That Council procedure rules be suspended to enable the business of the meeting to be completed.

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared lost.
**Amendment** moved by Councillor Bird and seconded by Councillor Andrew:

That the final paragraph of the motion be amended as follows:

That the word ‘Chancellor’ be deleted and ‘Secretary of State for Education’ substituted and that all words after the word ‘schools’ be removed and substituted with ‘fragments and undermines the accountability of the education system at a local level’.

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared carried.

The substantive motion was put to the vote and declared carried and it was:

**Resolved**

The Conservative government’s announcement that every school will be an academy by 2020 heralds the final episode in the destruction of democratically accountable state education.

This flies in the face of any evidence about the validity of the Academy model as a vehicle for school improvement. This starts with the Education Select Committee who said that ‘There is at present no convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment in primary schools’.

Even OFSTED boss Sir Michael Wilshere now implicitly questions academisation. His recent report condemned several Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) for paying fat cat salaries, feckless support and failing the most disadvantaged children. Wilshere compared them to the worst Local Authorities of yesteryear, but that’s unfair. At least an LA could be held accountable at the ballot box.

At the recent Overview Scrutiny Panel, the panel was informed that children’s progress and attainment in council controlled schools is better and improving more quickly than in Academies.

Therefore; this Council condemns the Government Policy on forced academisation and calls on the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Education stating that taking power away from local government regarding schools fragments and undermines the accountability of the education system at a local level.

At this point in the meeting, the Council sat as charitable trustees. When considering the following items Council procedure rules did not apply.

119 **Annual report of Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee**

The annual report was submitted.
It was **moved** by Councillor Andrew, duly seconded and:

**Resolved**

(1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Trust recognise the work of officers from the Council’s Clean and Green Services, Finance Services, the Wildlife Trust and the Friends Group to support the Trust and extends its thanks accordingly.

120 **Bloxwich and Leamore Recreation Ground**

A report was submitted.

It was **moved** by the Mayor, seconded by Councillor Bird and it was:

**Resolved**

(1) That the Trustee (being “the Council) authorises the transfer of a portion of the Trust land to the Council (which parcel is identified on the plan at Annex A) for the purpose of retaining the caretaker’s house which has been constructed thereon as part of Sunshine School premises on the basis that the proceeds of the sale are to be held on an implied trust to support the use of the remaining trust land for the purposes of the charity.

(2) That the Trustee authorises officers to make application to the Charity Commission for an Order confirming the disposal of the trust land to the Council, such sale being a disposal to a connected party.

(3) That the Trustee confirms:

(a) that it is satisfied the trust land to be sold is not immediately required for the purposes of the charity;

(b) that it is satisfied the District Valuer’s valuation represents the current market value for the land; and

(c) that it is satisfied the proposed sale to the Council for the purposes of Sunshine School is in the best interests of the charity.

(4) That the Trustee acknowledges that it is usual practice for a trustee to advertise land that it intends to sell but that in this case the land is landlocked and surrounded by trust land and other land which is already in the ownership of the Council (and upon which the current Sunshine School stands).

(5) That the Trustee resolves:

(a) that it is not appropriate in this case to advertise the land for sale
on the basis that compensation being paid for the land represents the District Valuer's valuation;

(b) that the terms of sale are the best that can reasonably be obtained for the charity; and

(c) that the purpose of the sale to the Council is to enable the retention of the caretaker's house to Sunshine School.

(6) That the Trustee notes the plan at Annex A to this report which shows the trust land edged in black.

The meeting terminated at 9.25 p.m.

Mayor:

Date: