

SEFTON AREA PARTNERSHIP OF LOCAL COUNCILS
Aintree Village-Formby-Hightown-Ince Blundell-Little Altcar
Lydiate-Maghull-Melling-Sefton-Thornton

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Area Partnership held on Monday 21st July, 2014 at Maghull Town Hall

PRESENT:

Cllrs M.Coles (Chair, Formby), T.Price (Formby), D.Warren (Hightown), I.Cowell (Clerk-Ince Blundell), R.Baker (Melling), D.Beaumont (Clerk-Melling), G.Lee (Melling), K.Hounsell (Thornton), D.Miles (Thornton), Andrea Watts (SMBC)

APOLOGIES:

Cllrs J.Colbert (Aintree Village), G.Downey (Aintree Village), T.Asbury (Hightown), T.Robertson (Lydiate), T.Carr (Melling), K.Sharpe

The Chair welcomed all present and our Guest Speaker, Andrea Watts of SMBC to the meeting. He then expressed his concerns about the lack of direct contact with the Neighbourhood Team and their performance since changes in SMBC Management last year, and was also keen to point out that Parish Councillors are very often closer to the communities we represent than Ward Councillors. Cllr Coles then outlined some of the themes we've been concerned with of late; namely the River Alt, Recycling and local governance changes, before expressing his commitment to getting the revised Parish Charter signed off as soon as possible.

1. GUEST SPEAKER

Andrea Watts – Head of Governance, Neighbourhoods & Partnerships, SMBC

1.1 Outline of the Neighbourhoods department

Following Steph Prewett's departure, and the restrictions of an even tighter budget, Andrea explains that her own role merged with that of Steph Prewett's. Andrea now has responsibility for even more areas, including Strategic Partnerships, Hate and Gun Crime, Domestic Violence, and Democratic Services and Governance. As such Andrea is heavily reliant on the Service Managers below her.

Apart from taking Service Managers under her wing, the SMBC Structure has not changed. Andrea was initially told this was an interim situation, but given the current situation SMBC finds itself in she cannot see this changing soon.

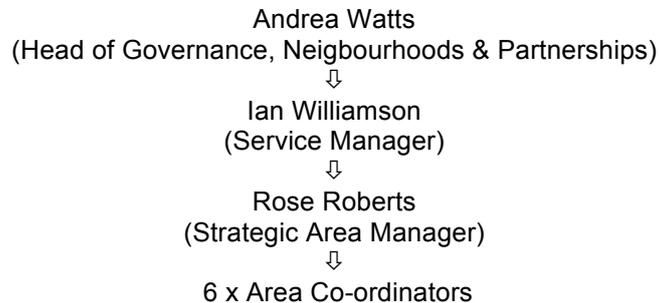
Despite her busy schedule Andrea expressed her willingness to come and speak to us whenever she can fit us in to her busy diary.

1.2 Financial Situation

From 2011/12 to the end of this financial SMBC had to make savings of £115 million. From the 2015/16 to 2016/17 SMBC must make a further £54 million savings from a disposable budget of £180 million. In essence SMBC have less money to manage the services they currently operate. These reductions are based on anticipated Government grant reductions and inflation. As such these cutbacks are likely to have significant impacts on Service Delivery over the next 2 years.

The Chair stressed that we do not want to see Service standards drop, so to a certain extent Parish and Town Councils are filling the gap with the provision of discretionary services, although they are not prepared to do so in any case for Statutory services.

1.3 Reporting Relationships in Neighbourhood Services Management Structure



Difficulty in contacting the Neighbourhood team was raised. Andrea agreed to circulate a list of contact details, which will also include an overview of each Team Members responsibilities.

Those present expressed a desire to see the Year Book return, even if this incurs a small cost chargeable back to member Councils. Andrea agreed to look into this and to report back.

The issue encountered with Officer Alex Spencer failing to respond to letters and emails and to organise/attend important meeting; thus stagnating the progress of important projects was also brought to Andrea's attention who agreed to look into this as a matter of priority.

1.4 Parish Charter

The Chair thanked Andrea for her help with reviewing the Parish Charter, and stressed the importance of this being a 'living evolving document'. Andrea is keen that some of the ambiguities in the Charter are alleviated prior to it being presented to Full Council, Cabinet and the Area Committee as suggested by Cllr John Kelly, Chair of the Area Committee for this area. For example, what exactly constitutes a "*prompt response*"? Andrea then gave the example that service standards are published on the SMBC website which state how long it should take for SMBC to respond to correspondence.

In referring to Paragraph 29 of the Charter which relates to the relationship of SMBC with Parish and Town Councils, Ian Cowell was keen to remind Andrea that SMBC has no power or control over Parish and Town Councils, and as such this points needs further clarification.

It is intended that the Parish Charter will be put as an Agenda item for the Cabinet meeting on 11/9/14.

1.5 Projects & Priorities for 2014/15

Despite the restrictions imposed on SMBC to manage our communities, it is important that we know about the restrictions SMBC will face and how these will affect us as we feel we have an important role to play as Parish and Town Councils.

The environment is a very important issue to us, and we have a keen interest in Climate Change, Flood Management, and Waste Disposal, and also Crime related matters.

Formby Parish Council is currently involved with 2 important projects involving Wifi and Village design.

Andrea mentioned that each Service produces an Annual Service Plan, which includes a 12-24 month

forward plan, and also suggested that her team could produce a quarterly document detailing their Forward Planning and any decision made.

1.6 Communication

Andrea states she is reliant on her Officers for communication, and in view of problems raised tonight she needs to know when and where there are problems with this in order that she can address the problems. She promised to address the issues we raised.

1.7 Neighbourhood Plans

Melling, Maghull and Formby are currently in the process of producing Neighbourhood Plans. Sadly the Thornton Plan is currently in jeopardy due to the costs involved in producing it. The need for Neighbourhood Plans to take on the views of residents was stressed, likewise the importance of SMBC taking onboard such comments.

Last week Formby Parish Council signed off their Referendum and Terms of Reference. The cost involved in producing this Plan has been c.£20k.

Unfortunately Melling Parish Council have encountered problems with the Planning department in the last 12 months, and they feel that the goalposts are constantly moving with regards this.

Andrea was unsure of the ability of her Team to be able to help with the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans, and also did not know of the progress made to-date by the aforementioned Parish and Town Councils.

1.8 Questions / Comments

- (a) Is there adequate understanding by the Officers of what Parish & Town Councils can do?
It is difficult to make that assessment.
- (b) How are the proposed reductions/cuts to services decided?
There will be a full Consultation process. With the previous round of cutbacks Discretionary services were cut first, then staffing was reviewed. Reductions to staffing were made through staff redundancies, and through the merging of teams to reduced staffing levels to a statutory minimum. It is politicians who will make any decisions about changes to service standards, and who will identify where such changes will be made. All budget documents are published and open documents.
- (c) In the past as elected Parish and Town Councillors we have felt ignored by SMBC.
The need to work closely with all their Partners in future is fully appreciated.
- (d) Problems relating to the troublesome Area Committee structure were raised. It was also queried how the Neighbourhoods department feeds into the Area Committee?
Admittedly the Area Committee structure was troublesome in the beginning, and offered herself as a contact point if we don't feel the Area Committees are progressing with matters as we'd hoped. She also apologized for not having responded to our comments submitted to Cllr John Kelly at the Area Committee in April 2014.

2. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

2.1 Roundabouts

Admittedly the consultation about the new roundabout advertising signs was poorly conducted. Andrea explained the Head of Communications who left the Authority in the middle of the process did this and she apologises for this. These advertising signs will generate an income of £15k/p.a.

The Chair stated he has since contacted SMBC asking them to remove these signs in Formby. He is offended as Formby Parish Council have maintained the roundabouts in their Village for the past 4 years at their own cost since SMBC ceased to perform this function, and also because there are memorials on the roundabouts. Also Formby Parish Council will see no financial benefit from the revenue generated from these advertising signs, and they were not consulted about their erection.

Concerns were also raised that these signs could be a potential distraction for motorists.

3. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next ordinary meeting will take place on **Thursday 11th September, 2014** in the Council Chamber at Maghull Town Hall commencing at 7.30pm. Both Mark Long and Andrea Watts will be asked to attend as Guest Speakers due to their overlapping roles and involvement with the Liverpool City Region.