

Crawley Borough Council

Minutes of Council-owned Neighbourhood Parades Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday, 23 June 2021 at 6.30 pm

Councillors Present:

R A Lanzer (Chair)

M L Ayling, T Lunnon, S Mullins, M Mwangale and D M Peck

Officers Present:

Sue Bader	Asset Manager
Karl Garnham	Central Patch Leader
Karen Hayes	Head of Corporate Finance
Karen Rham	Neighbourhood Services Manager
Jess Tamplin	Democratic Services Support Officer

Also in Attendance:

Councillor P C Smith Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development

1. Disclosures of Interest & Whipping Declarations

No disclosures of interest or whipping declarations were made.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Council-owned Neighbourhood Parades Scrutiny Panel held on 11 March 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. General Updates and Information

The following updates were given regarding the actions from the previous meeting of the panel on 11 March 2021.

Proposed neighbourhood parade in Forge Wood

The Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development, Councillor P Smith, addressed the meeting to answer a query previously raised by the Panel. It was clarified that, at present, the neighbourhood shopping parade proposed for the Forge Wood neighbourhood was due to be owned by the developer consortium (which includes Crawley Borough Council) but would likely be privately owned.

CBC Online Business Directories

The Panel heard that both the 'It's Local' business directory and the neighbourhood shops webpage (www.crawley.gov.uk/culture/shopping/neighbourhood-shops) had been publicised to councillors via the Councillors' Information Bulletin in March 2021. The directories had also been publicised to residents via some of the community noticeboards and the summer issue of Crawley Live magazine.

As per a prior request by the Panel, the engagement statistics for the neighbourhood shops webpage had been monitored since its launch in December 2021. The statistics were as follows:

- A high of 339 page views in December.
- Approximately 50 views per month during the first quarter of 2021.
- 74 unique views in April (to 21.04.21).
- 42 unique views in May through to the beginning of June.

4. Results of Consultation

The Panel heard that the Council-owned Neighbourhood Parades Survey (parade tenant section), which ran between 13 May and 11 June 2021, had received 23 completed responses from current parade shop tenants.

The Chair considered each question in turn and summarised the responses received. Panel members raised the following points:

- It was notable that 96% of respondents stated that they were not given business support advice by the Council before taking on a unit (Q4). It was agreed that the provision of advice before and throughout a tenancy, in collaboration with the Council's Economic Development team, could form the basis of a future recommendation. The responses to Q5 provided useful details on the topics of interest.
- Recognition of the various comments made in response to Q6 regarding the rent review process. Panel members discussed the frequency, transparency, and method of calculation of rent reviews. It was suggested that comparisons to the rent review policies of similar local authorities may benefit the Panel's future considerations.
- The high percentage of tenants that supported regular questionnaires (Q7) was acknowledged. It was agreed that this could form the basis of a future recommendation.
- Concern about the negative responses to Q8. Clarification was sought from officers regarding the split of responsibilities for maintenance of the parade units. It was confirmed that the leases state that tenants have responsibility for full repairs of a unit from the roof to the floor. It was suggested that, as part of a future recommendation, the language used in the lease could be made clearer and simpler to assist all parties in awareness of their maintenance duties.

5. Results of Consultation (Appendix B)

The Panel heard that the Council-owned Neighbourhood Parades Survey (public section), which ran between 13 May and 11 June 2021, had received 364 completed responses in total.

The Chair considered each question in turn and summarised the responses received. Panel members raised the following points:

- The responses received regarding community safety (Q1, Q2) were deemed notable due to the high number of respondents answering that the parades felt unsafe in the evening, and that they would be unlikely to report crime or anti-social behaviour due to a belief that no action would be taken. Panel members encouraged residents to report crime, and noted that many of the reasons given for feeling unsafe were matters for the Police.
- The responses to Q3 suggested that the work carried out daily by the Neighbourhood Services team was improving the public's view of the parades' appearances. Panel members discussed the balance between improving the tidiness of the parades and the permanent streetscene.
- Concern about the Council's authority to influence the make-up of trades on the parades. Panel members recognised the responses to Q4 and Q7, and it was agreed that a delicate balance needed to be sought to encourage a range of businesses in Crawley while not placing restrictions on potential shop tenants.
- Panel members noted that the parades had been valuable community assets over the past year (Q6).

Invited witnesses Karen Rham, Neighbourhood Services Manager, and Karl Garnham, Neighbourhood Patch Leader (West), were invited to speak on the item. The officers shared information from the Neighbourhood Services team (Patch Managers, Community Wardens, and the Community Safety team) in light of the Panel's discussions regarding community safety at, and maintenance of, the parades. The officers identified the following issues at the parades:

- Street drinking and related litter
- Outdated infrastructure e.g. loose paving, old seating and bins, outdated shrub beds/tree grates
- Fly tipping at clothing donation banks and at the rear of the parades
- Cigarette butts and drug paraphernalia
- Queries over the extent of CCTV coverage
- Flats above shops look outdated
- Anti-social behaviour in the evenings and overnight.

The Panel noted that tackling these issues could improve public safety and encourage trade for the parade shops, but would involve significant costs. The Neighbourhood Services team were currently limited by staffing and resource pressures.

It was heard that Community Wardens were contracted to finish at 21:00 so were limited in tackling anti-social behaviour; out-of-hours enforcement could therefore be improved. The Panel agreed that, as the basis of a future recommendation, it could seek to influence the relevant authorities on the implementation of a zero tolerance policy on alcohol consumption at the parades.

Officers highlighted that a county-wide fly tipping campaign was imminent and it was hoped that this would provide successful results.

A suggestion was made that the CCTV provision at the parades be improved. It was agreed that the Panel could seek to influence a review of the CCTV coverage and assess any blind spots; this could form the basis of a future recommendation.

Actions:

- That officers investigate the opening hours of the public toilets at the parades and report back to Panel members.
- That the Neighbourhood Services Manager provide the Panel with a scaled estimate of the additional resources required by the team, along with details of what these resources might achieve.
- That the Neighbourhood Services team provide the Panel with photographs of the issues they come across at the parades.

6. Witness Sessions

The Panel invited several witnesses to speak throughout the course of the meeting.

Current Crawley Borough Council parade shop tenants were invited to share their views and experiences. Tenants from the Ifield, Furnace Green, Southgate, and Tilgate parades spoke as part of the session and raised the following points:

- It was not clear how to find details, obtain advice, or claim on a unit's insurance policy following damage to the unit. Tenants had experienced delays and insufficient communication with the insurance companies. The Asset Manager clarified that the Council arranged buildings insurance on behalf of the tenants via a three-yearly tender process to find the most suitable provider, but the cost of the insurance premium was reimbursed to the landlord by the tenant. Tenants were responsible for their unit's contents insurance, and also for the shop front's plate glass.
- The Council's role as landlord should enable tenants to run successful businesses which provide necessary services for local people. Rising costs were a barrier to this.
- The current rent review process was deemed unclear and unfair compared to other local authorities' processes. A suggestion was made that a unit's rent could be linked to its financial turnover. The Asset Manager confirmed that turnover was currently one way of calculating a unit's rent, for instance in a shopping centre such as County Mall, and a wholly turnover-based system could support a good variety of shops/use classes.
- Recent increases to the rent payable by tenants were considered extreme. Witnesses expressed frustration at the rising costs, the lack of room for negotiation with the Council, their communication with the Council's executive, and the parade tenancy policies which were deemed ineffectual.
- It was recognised that the combination of pre-2020 Government cuts to local authorities and the Covid-19 pandemic had adversely affected the Council's financial position; a panel member clarified that, unfortunately, savings needed to be made across the Council's budget. Tenants expressed understanding but asked panel members to acknowledge the value of the small businesses operating on the parades.
- The high occupancy rates of parade units in Crawley and the number of businesses on the waiting list for a unit were discussed, as well as the diversity of businesses currently on the parades.
- The Panel was asked to consider providing subsidies to small businesses on the parades, but it was likely that there were legal constraints on this. Panel members expressed support for retaining locally-owned and independent

businesses, and discussed the possibility of changing the selection policy/rental process to give preference to local businesses.

- Emphasis was placed on the importance of open communication between the Council and the tenants. The Panel was encouraged to continue its dialogue with tenants throughout its duration.

A witness requested from officers that they investigate the number of changes in tenancy across all council-owned parades in Crawley between 2003 and 2019. It was further requested that officers identify the number of rent reviews/lease renewals, both settled and non-settled, of parade shops in Crawley since 2018.

Councillor P Smith, Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development, also spoke on the item. It was highlighted that the Panel's scope was to examine Council policy and the bigger picture rather than focusing specifically on the rent review/lease renewal processes. Sympathy was expressed for tenants facing financial challenges, and the Panel was requested to continue to have careful and informed discussions on all relevant matters.

Actions:

- That officers find out how many changes in tenancy there have been across all Council-owned parades in Crawley between 2003 and 2019, and report these figures back to the relevant witness.
- That officers find out the number of rent reviews/lease renewals (both settled and non-settled) of parade shops in Crawley since 2018, and report these figures back to the relevant witness.

7. Date of Next Meeting

Panel members considered proposed dates for future meetings of the Panel.

Actions:

- That Panel members agree the date of the next meeting via email.

Closure of Meeting

With the business of the Council-owned Neighbourhood Parades Scrutiny Panel concluded, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 9.09 pm

R A Lanzer (Chair)