

Appendix 10H – Consultation Responses – Overview and Scrutiny Committee

As part of the overall consultation process, the budget was reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 January 2020. Below is an extract of the minutes of that meeting relating to this item. The full minutes can be found at this link: <http://www.northamptonboroughcouncil.com/councillors/documents/g8982/Printed%20minutes%20Thursday%2009-Jan-2020%2018.00%20Overview%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTING AND MONITORING WORKING GROUP - GENERAL FUND MTFP 2020/2021 AND DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS

Councillor Beardsworth addressed the Committee conveying her concerns regarding budget cuts to the Voluntary Sector; in her opinion, she felt it would be better for the Councillor Empowerment Fund to be cut to zero for each Councillor. She noted the budgetary pressures in respect of homelessness. In response to a query from the Committee, Councillor Beardsworth suggested that £90,000 should be allocated to the Voluntary sector; there is a need for people to receive the right care and treatment.

Councillor Beardsworth was concerned that charges for the collection of green waste would be implemented and heard that this had been resolved at full Council in February 2019 to be implemented in 2020.

Councillor Beardsworth raised concern regarding the number of households in temporary accommodation of 348. This was felt to be a big number. She commented that a number of staff had been employed to deal with this and help the homeless but there are not the homes available for them. There is a need to look at different ways to acquire temporary accommodation.

Councillor Beardsworth was thanked for her contribution.

The Chair advised that the O&S Working Group had met recently and considered the draft budget in detail and had proposed six items from the draft budget for the Committee to budget-scrutinise, three of which a written response was received. He highlighted the Committee would not be scrutinising the proposed budget in its entirety at this meeting.

Councillor Eldred, Cabinet Member for Finance, advised that a consultation drop in session on the budget is scheduled for 27 January 2020 and all are welcome to attend.

Housing – Temporary accommodation and income streams

The Committee heard that temporary accommodation is a serious issue and puts a strain on the budget; if required, funds would be used from reserves. Officers are investigating options for temporary accommodation such as “buy back” of former Right to Buy properties that have come back onto the market. One bedded bed and breakfast accommodation that is used as temporary accommodation costs around £12,500 per year; should NBC have its own accommodation this cost would reduce to £5,000. Borrowing would need to take place to acquire such buildings.

Councillor Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, and Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing, addressed the Committee commenting that temporary accommodation and homelessness is a massive challenge. Families in temporary accommodation has increased by 6%. Regular updates are produced and there is a detailed action plan.

It was noted that 100 less affordable houses had become available than had been forecasted. NBC is working with NPH regarding acquiring the first 22 ex-right to buy homes for homeless families. These are additional homes to those that are already being purchased.

The Committee made comment, asked questions and heard:

In response to a query whether temporary prefab accommodation could be used; Phil Harris advised that this had been previously investigated but there was a need for more permanent solutions to be looked at. A summary of choices and cost benefits would be produced for a future scrutiny meeting.

The Committee raised concerns regarding the increase in temporary accommodation of 6% and how it would be endeavoured to reduce this. The Committee further commented that planning decisions with less than 35% affordable housing is making an impact.

Councillor Hibbert confirmed that preventing homelessness is a successful area of work since the new team has been appointed. Phil Harris added that it is a priority to prevent homelessness where possible. £500,000 has been invested into the restructure of housing, money and advice services. The lack of affordable housing does have an impact.

The Committee further commented that 130 properties were sold under the right to buy scheme in the last 12 months and queried what impact this had made on affordable housing and whether right to buy could be prevented. In response, the Committee heard that Rent Plus and other affordable rent options are being investigated, there is a real benefit for there to be a variety of affordable housing models. Belgrade House will be for 120 key worker homes, under a lease agreement.

NBC is purchasing former Council homes that NBC and NPH is aware of the history of and are already in an NPH maintenance area. The first 24 homes have been purchased successfully. Other housing stock will also be investigated. Each purchase is looked at on a case by case basis. A trial is in place. The Committee suggested that it undertakes scrutiny of this trial and a report is submitted to a future meeting.

Regarding Right to Buys, the Committee heard that the receipt of these are split 30% to the local authority and 70% to central Government.

In response to a query regarding Women's Refuges, the Committee heard that NBC gave support and funding to EVE; a local church has also opened a Women's Shelter.

In response to a query regarding meeting the budget next year, Phil Harris advised that he was confident that the Action Plan would set out to achieve its targets. However, more people had come for help and presented as homeless than expected.

Unitary – Budget of £2.4 million

The Chair confirmed that the Committee has asked for information how the budget of £2.4 million for Unitary would be monitored. Councillor Jonathan Nunn, Leader of the Council, advised that the West Northamptonshire Joint Committee had met on 7 January 2020 and received an update on the entire budget for Unitary which was £43.5 million; which includes NCC's transformation budget, Business Rates Uplift monies (Kettering act as accountable body) and funding from all 8 local authorities (Daventry act as accountable body. Adult Social Care and Children's Services are being transformed. Savings of £80 million per year are being aimed for.

A Member Briefing is scheduled for 27 January 2020, all Members have been invited to attend, this briefing will include details regarding the budget.

The Committee made comment, asked questions and heard:

- In response to a query, the budget of £2.4 million for Unitary had been put together following a lot of detailed planning and estimating. £1 million had previously been set aside for Unitary and £1.4 million is included in the forthcoming proposed budget for 2020/2021. Budget monitoring will take place.
- In answer to a query regarding the transformation period, the Committee heard that this was the biggest change exercise for any Council to go through.
- The Committee was advised that major change creates uncertainty but there is also positivity. George Chandler, Chief Executive, advised that one of his roles is to ensure communication to staff and Members stays consistent and upbeat. The next 15 months will be very busy and there will be real opportunities.
- £500,000 has been spent so far. The initial budget estimate of £1 million required from each local authority was incredibly low and it has been refined. It is a programmed budget over a 2-3 year period and not an annualised budget; it is possible there may be the need for virements between individual budgets as the work progresses. A further report will be considered by the West Northamptonshire Joint Committee at its meeting in February 2020.

Staff and Resources – Capacity and Sustainability

George Candler, Chief Executive, advised that there is always an element of risk in relation to retention of staff and resources during a period of change such as local government reorganisation. Currently there are 322 FTEs employed at NBC; there is always a level of vacancies, and some areas are proving difficult to recruit to. 42 employees left in 2019/2020. Exit Interviews are undertaken and based on analysis from the last 12 months the majority of staff leave due to promotion, sometimes outside local government. A small number leave because they are not happy in the role. No one stated they were leaving due to Unitary. It is understood, however, that employees want certainties and may look for another job during this period of change. It is important to make sure that regular, consistent and honest dialogue takes place with staff. There will also be regular briefings on the programme and newsletters will shortly be coming out for all staff and elected members. Training and development is key for

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staff and succession planning has also been identified to ensure long term continuity for roles. The Chief Executive concluded stating he felt, based on previous experience, that the majority of Officers will have roles in the new Unitary Authority.

The Committee heard that there will be a challenge to deliver BAU, Unitary and 'sprint to the line' work which may lead to a need to prioritise workloads.

At this point clarification of the charge for green waste collection was provided. This had been approved in the budget for 2019/2020 and the charge will come into effect in April 2020; it had originally been anticipated that it would come into force in January 2020.

The Chair thanked Officers for the written responses on the following, the contents of which were noted.

- EAC – Maintenance budgets
- Sustainability issues
- Councillor Empowerment Fund

AGREED: That:

(1) The Committee was content with the responses and information provided regarding the 3 issues and the written responses provided to the three further issues.

(2) The Committee undertakes pre decision scrutiny on the trial of the buy back scheme.