

## **Northampton Borough Council**

### **Northampton Pensioners' Forum**

**Thursday, 31 October 2013**

**Present:** Roger Rumsey (Co-Chair), Councillor Brian Oldham (Co-Chair); Jean Anderton, Jacqueline Forrest-Smith, Sandra Frampton, D J Hewitt. Tony Mallard, Brian Nichols, Norman Sharp and Ann Timson.

Steve Archer (Partnership and Development Manager), Richard Birchett (Interim Head of Landlord Services), Alice Morgan (Community Development Officer) and Dale Robertson (Programme Director, Stock Options Appraisal).

#### **1. APOLOGIES, WELCOMES AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and welcomed Steve Archer, Richard Birchett and Dale Robertson who would be addressing the meeting on items contained on the agenda.

Apologies were received from John Rawlings and Joyce Smith.

#### **2. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING FROM THE LAST MEETING (12 SEPTEMBER 2013)**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2013 were agreed as a true record.

It was noted that there had been no feedback to the comments made at the last meeting on improving the town's parks, although many items had been carried out, including installing a soft surfaced path in Eastfield Park.

#### **3. CONSULTATIONS - LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - STEVE ARCHER**

Steve Arche, Partnership and Development Manager, spoke about the consultation which would run from 4 November to 1 December to seek views on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme in the Borough. The current level of support to people was 91.5% and it was intended to reduce this to 64% for working age people by 2015/16. People of pensionable age were not affected by the changes. The consultation would be primarily web based but would include drop in sessions in November 2103.

Forum members commented that people on benefits are already struggling and any reductions in benefit would hit people of working age very hard.

Richard Birchett, Interim Head of Landlord Services, and Steve Archer stated that the review of properties under Council Tax bands was not connected to the reduction on Housing Benefit for households under-occupying social rented housing or the local Council Tax Reduction Scheme consultation.

Steve Archer was invited to attend the Forum at its meeting on 6 February April

2014 to report on the outcome of the consultation and subsequent action.

## **DISCUSSIONS/EVENT PLANNING**

### **HOUSING STOCK OPTIONS - RICHARD BIRCHETT AND DALE ROBERTSON**

Richard Birchett, Interim Head of Landlord Services, and Dale Robertson, Programme Director of the Stock Options Appraisal, gave a presentation on the Stock Options Appraisal. The Housing Options Panel will be making a recommendation on the way forward (the highest scoring option was for an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) to a special meeting of the Cabinet on 4 December and from there to Council on 9 December. Before that, however, housing conferences will continue to be held with tenants on 5 and 6 November 2013 to listen to tenants' views.

In answer to questions and comments from Forum members the officers responded as summarised below:

- A number of service and property improvements had been drawn up by members of a Tenants Panel and Employee Focus Group incorporating the views of 3,700 responses to the options appraisal Tenants Survey received in 2012.
- Phase 1 and 2 works of the Decent Homes Programme had not been carried out well but supervision and management had been improved. The contractors were now performing significantly better. One contractor would commence Phase 3 after Christmas. The other two contractors on Phase 3 are permitted to continue with the programme when current performance is improved and works had been completed to the satisfaction of the Council and tenants.
- A Forum member suggested that local authorities needed to be more robust in drawing up contracts with their contractors.
- Steps were being taken to help tenants understand what an ALMO is, including conferences, telephone calls and visits to tenants' homes where requested.
- The Council would continue to own the housing stock if an ALMO was created and there would be a Management Agreement between the Council and the ALMO. There may be financial penalties if the ALMO did not reach specified targets.
- Changes in the way local authority housing was financed by the Government in 2012 meant that councils no longer had to pay "negative subsidy" to the Government but in return had to take their share of the national housing debt. For Northampton, this meant that the Council had to take on nearly £200 million of national housing debt. This debt is paid back over a thirty year period from the Housing revenue Account and not Council Tax.
- Richard Birchett gave his telephone number (01604 838955) and email address ([rbirchett@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:rbirchett@northampton.gov.uk)) should any tenant have any problems with contract works. He stated that he wanted Housing Officers to be out on their patch more often and to be easily identifiable.

In answer to a question, Councillor Oldham stated that he was not in a position to

comment on whether there would be whipping when the Council voted on the Housing Stock Options.

Richard Birchett and Dale Robertson were invited to attend the Forum's meeting on 6 February 2014.

### **HOUSING, BENEFITS AND SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH FUNDING CUTS - LAURA BESSELL**

Councillor Oldham stated that Laura Bessell, Benefits Team Leader, would not be attending this meeting, as this was a sensitive area and she was seeking to obtain the information she needed to present to the Forum at a future meeting. Forum members expressed deep concerns about the impact on people in sheltered accommodation of the changes to Supporting People.

Steve Archer, Partnership and Development Manager, stated that he would discuss this issue with Laura Bessell and express the Forum's concerns.

### **TRANSPORT - GENERAL FORUM DISCUSSION**

Concerns were expressed regarding the number of vehicle movements there would be around the North Gate Bus Station when it opened in Spring 2014 and their impact on pedestrian safety. Concern was also expressed that no aerial plans of the bus station were available for study.

It was **agreed** that this issue and transport be included on the agenda for the Form's next meeting.

### **5. PLANNING THE WORK OF THE FORUM FOR 2013/14, INCLUDING ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AT THE NEXT MEETING**

The following items were agreed for the next and future meetings of the Forum:

- Transport (including the new bus station) – next meeting;
- Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme – February 2014 meeting;
- Housing Stock- February 2014 meeting;
- Northampton General Hospital – future meeting;
- NHS and GP services – future meeting.

### **6. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

Members of the Forum provided information and updates on issues affecting them, as summaries below:

- Street cleaning was not considered effective and the contracts were not sufficiently robust. It was noted that a blitz on street cleaning in the town would be undertaken in the week commencing 4 November 2013;
- The poor condition of pavements and potholes in the road were issues of concern. These should be reported to the relevant Ward Councillor to follow up.
- A Forum member expressed concerns at the delays in creating a wet room in her home.

- Concern were expressed that tenants generally did not know what improvements were scheduled for their homes.
- A Northampton Community Safety Consultation was circulated for Forum members to complete. The deadline date had been extended to allow time for responses.
- Concern was expressed at the dwindling numbers of people attending Forum meeting and the lack of people in the over 50 age group. Some concerns were also expressed that people without access to computers were being marginalised.
- A Forum member expressed concern regarding an article in a local newspaper regarding building homes in a local park. It was noted that the article was inaccurate and the homes would be built on the edge of the park and not in the park
- Alice Morgan asked forum members to send her any questions or queries for inclusion on future agendas.

## **7. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

It was noted that future meetings of the Forum would be held on the following dates:

- Thursday 12 December 2013
- Thursday 6 February 2014
- Thursday 20 March 2014.

The meeting concluded at 3:58 pm