

Northampton Diverse Communities Equalities Forum

on Wednesday, 18 July 2012 at 6:30 pm until not later than 8:30 pm

in The Godwin Room - Guildhall

1. Welcomes and Introductions

Everyone introduced themselves: Cllr Suresh Patel (Councillor Co-Chair), John Rawlings (Community Co-Chair), Olive Robinson (ACES), David Smith (individual), Eileen Bertha-Armah (Northampton General Hospital), Jenny Campbell (Inspiration FM community radio), Lindsey Ambrose (NBC), Gary Parsons (NBC), Ian Swift (NBC) and Nicky Atkinson (NBC).

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Dana Hannon (Northampton Link), Christiana and Sam Owusu-Akuffo (Divine Prayer Society), Morcea Walker MBE, Alaa Abouzanad (Northants Association of Supplementary Schools).

3. Minutes and Matters Arising

The Minutes were agreed – subject to noting that Chris Mistry should have been included as at the meeting.

It was noted that Cllr Patel, John Rawlings and Lindsey still had yet to meet up with the Police about their future involvement with the forum.

Penny Osborne should be arranging for someone to come to this meeting next time to talk about education and bring some statistics.

4. ACES

Olive Robinson provided an update about the work of “ACES”.

Olive said she used to work for the county council until a couple of years ago. Her remit then was black elders in the county.

ACES has changed its name to reflect large range of ethnic groups e.g. Irish, using the service, not just Afro-Caribbean people.

ACES provides a wide range of day care services, advocacy, welfare rights, telephone befriending service, health programmes, and a day care centre to support the varied needs of older people. It has become a first port of call for many older Afro-Caribbean community. It helps with form-filling. If they can't help directly, they signpost. ACES is based at Park Avenue North. It was first established in 1992 when Olive joined the county council.

Service users are referred from the county council, hospitals and other services as well as individuals and faith groups.

ACES help people to live at home rather than have to go into residential care, particularly including established users who as they have become older have developed dementia. Were ACES not there, supporting these people would be a significant cost to local authorities.

Funding is a challenge and so ACES hold a lot of fundraising activities. There is a hope the people from the black community themselves will help support ACES due to the lack of any other specific services for older black people and the reluctance of black older people to go into residential care. Olive said that there are very few black older people in residential care in the county.

The annual dinner and dance attracts people from across the country, not just locally. It is one of the most significant events in the black community social calendar locally.

The staffing and trustees include lawyer and social workers.

The future of ACES is uncertain. Each year ACES submits a 3 year business plan to the county council. Each year the county council says it can't help ACES. But so far at the last minute the county council has been able to find a small pot of money, which enables ACES to continue.

The county council and ACES have both asked users what they would do if ACES closed – so the county council is aware as well as ACES. But it has not made a difference as if the county council do not have the funding to provide day care services, they don't have the money.

ACES has submitted information showing cost-benefit analysis to help the county council understand how much money ACES believes it is saving the county council.

Where clients are in receipt of direct payments, this can be taken into account by the county council – but they will only fund people for a certain number of days not every day of the week. Where people don't qualify for direct payments ACES makes a small charge for certain things. It is difficult to make ends meet from money service users receive for direct payments.

More information is on their website www.acescentre.co.uk and on their Facebook profile "ACES" or by telephone 01604 715044.

5. Housing Allocations Scheme Consultation

The Housing Allocations Scheme consultation was presented by Ian Swift.

By law local authorities must have a scheme. NBC's scheme came into force in 2008 when it adopted a choice-based lettings scheme. It can be difficult for people to use. Acts of Parliament dictate what the council can do. The law is changing. It means the housing service has to make some changes.

There are about 9,000 households on the housing register, which is about 27,000 people out of a town population of around 210,000.

In response to customer feedback, the council has produced a myth-busting leaflet e.g. to challenge 'you have to be black, eastern European, or gay to be housed'. A leaflet or DVD is given to all new customers and the information is available on the council website.

The council monitors the diversity of people on its register and looks at what it can do to take appropriate action to help them. It is getting more and more difficult to help people, for example as homelessness is increasing. Northampton has a relatively high amount of homelessness compared to other parts of the country – mostly due to people being evicted by family, friends or to losing private rented accommodation. It is very difficult for people to raise enough money to afford to get mortgages. This is adding to demand for council and other rented accommodation.

The council has to prioritise how it gives housing to people. Currently there are “reasonable preference groups”. This is people who have to be given priority. These are known as people matched to “emergency” need and “Band A”. Then “Band B” level of need includes people with for example some disability. There are other Bands too such as Bands C and D. Many of these people never get housed because there is too much demand from people in more need than them. Overall about 50% of people currently on the register have no realistic chance of being housed. Rather than fill in a form and leave people simply allocated to a Band with no real chance of getting housed, the new proposals will look to remove people in Bands C and D from the register AND more will be done to provide some kind of advice to these people to help them to find housing that’s not within the scope of the housing register.

The council will still have to house some people e.g. victims of hate crime. But the new laws allow councils to choose to give preference to who they house from some other groups e.g. people in work, people seeking work or volunteering. Northampton Borough Council would like to do this, to help rebalance council estates. Many years ago most people living on council estates worked. Since then lots of people on council estates may just be on benefits.

The new law also says the council should give priority to people in the armed forces or who have had a relationship with someone in the armed forces.

The council has also got power to exclude people from the register e.g. because of their immigration status, people who have caused hate crime or domestic abuse or damage to property, or people who have refused lots of suitable properties offered to them.

The council has also drawn up a local connection requirement in line with government guidance. This is to help people who already have links to Northampton – either over a year or a period of at least a few years, to stay in Northampton.

There are new people coming to Northampton, for example London councils are already sending people from their area to be housed in private rented accommodation in Northampton because, due to the welfare reforms, they can’t afford to house them in their own authority area.

There is some conflicting guidance and law about how housing can be provided to people who foster children e.g. about whether children can have their own bedroom or not.

Jenny questioned why the council is spending money on consultations and whether the housing officers believe it’s worthwhile. Ian explained the costs are not great and are proportionate to the value of the consultations - it’s the officers core time, very little printing, using the Guildhall is not an external rent cost, etc all of which helps keep cost of consultation in proportion.

David wanted to know what people can actually influence in terms of the outcomes of this consultation. Ian explained that he can offer Cabinet what people have said about the

proposals, as well as what the council is obliged to do by law. At this point 63% of responses disagree with the proposal of removing people from the register. Ian will need to make a professional recommendation to Cabinet taking account of all evidence he has available e.g. national best practice about what really helps people, as well as what people say they feel about things in the consultation. Councillors in the end will make the decision.

More information about the scheme can be found at www.northampton.gov.uk/consultations.

People can take part in the consultation at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/nbcallocations>

6. Tenancy Strategy Consultation

The Tenancy Strategy consultation was presented by Gary Parsons.

A new law called the Localism Act says that local councils must develop a tenancy strategy by 15 January 2013. There are also other standards that councils and housing associations need to meet which say that the council must do some work in this area.

So the Council has drawn up a draft Tenancy Strategy and is asking people for their views about it in this consultation.

The Tenancy Strategy sets out what sorts of tenancy people can have when they rent property from the council. It says how long tenancies should be for, in future, to make the best use of housing stock. It is important for the council to think about the needs people have for housing because there's not enough properties available to meet everyone's needs. At the same time the population is increasing and people in Northampton and county are getting older and the number of people with disabilities is increasing. At the moment with more and more people asking to be housed, and not having enough housing for all of them, the housing register just keeps getting longer.

At the moment the council sees people who ask about housing. Officers fill in a form and tell people which Band they are being put into. Some of these people have little chance of ever getting a council house.

When people do get a council property, they get what's called an "introductory tenancy" for their first year. At the end of that they get a secure tenancy for life. This can make it difficult to react quickly e.g. when people cause problems to other people living near them. It also means people are staying in the limited council accommodation while other people who are in more need may be seeking housing and having to wait.

In future the proposals are that in future people will still get introductory tenancies for 12 months. After that period, some people will get a 5 year tenancy. Some people e.g. retired people and people with disabilities, will get a secure tenancy for life. Some people will get a tenancy for less than 5 years – in exceptional circumstances e.g. in a situation in which the tenant may have been involved in anti-social behaviour and while the council doesn't want to evict them it doesn't want to give them 5 years but just to give them 2 years during which their behaviour should improve. If people have the ability to live in other accommodation the council wants to help them to do so, to keep the council property for those most in need.

The tenancy strategy will be reviewed every 12 months in case it can be improved.

The people at the meeting discussed the proposals.

John said he wondered if the proposals might create ghetto-like situations with council estates becoming full of vulnerable people with disabilities.

More information can be found at www.northampton.gov.uk/consultations.

People can take part in the survey at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/nbctenancy>

7. Sheltered Housing review Consultation

The Sheltered Housing Review consultation was presented by Nicola Atkinson.

About 18 months ago the council identified the need to review the sheltered house service it provides. It realised it needed to look at other possible ways of working. This consultation is about what the council believe to be the best possible option.

The consultation continues to 24 September 2012 and everyone is welcome to take part.

At the moment, support is only given to sheltered housing residents, so 95% of residents of Northampton cannot access the service. There are inflexible levels of support provided even though some people may have varying health and disability needs. People in real need may not get as much help and quality of help as would be good, while other people get more help than they need – because the system is too inflexible.

There are increasing numbers of elderly and disabled people in Northampton. Although many people want to stay living in their own homes, the current sheltered housing service only helps those who have moved into the council's sheltered housing.

Things need to change and improve to help more people and to help people more appropriately.

There are 27 community rooms across the Borough are under-used but could be a good space for people in the community to use. The council is aware that community groups often are looking for space to do activities. Most of the community rooms are on bus routes so people who do not live on the doorstep to them could reach them quite easily. Some people in sheltered housing close to community rooms may not need help in their home itself but might find it difficult to get out and about. It may be that community rooms could be used more to bring help close enough for people to access it.

Like many public services, the council is also facing a reduction in funding to provide services.

The proposals the council is asking about are around personalised support, recognising individual support needs available to all who need it – not just to people in sheltered housing.

The focus will be on enabling – helping people to help themselves, reflected in a new proposed name “Independent Living Service”.

People can get help from Housing to take part in the consultation if they need it e.g. people to go round to a person at home or help to come into the council.

Olive highlighted the stress created among many of her service users when they receive papers from the council and fear they may be thrown out of their homes. Nicky explained how council staff are trained to support vulnerable people in this consultation and to tell people that this consultation is not related to their property or their future ability to live in that property.

Olive suggested Housing promote community rooms to Age UK and other organisations who are always looking for community venues e.g. for falls prevention and tea dance activities.

John mentioned that 'loneliness' is a word sometimes associated with 'independent' and asked about use of volunteers and wider groups of people using community rooms to re-create a natural community feel, rather than isolated segregated older people.

David cited work at West Sussex Council in which over 80% of service users said through consultation that they liked and understood what 'independent living' meant, so the council had gone with that.

More information about this consultation can be found at www.northampton.gov.uk/consultations.

People can take the survey at www.northampton.gov.uk/shelteredreview

8. Community Information Exchange

9. Any Other Business

There was none.

10. Items for Discussion at the Next Meeting

The next meeting is 27 September 2012.

Proposed items:

- Educational issues as identified at the June 2012 meeting.
- World AIDS Day Planning
- Holocaust Memorial Day Planning

Future meetings:

- 22 Nov meeting – Cllr Suresh Patel would like to present Overview and Scrutiny work about improving business and retail experience. NB: This is a meeting called specifically to deal with the Overview and Scrutiny business and is additional to those otherwise in the schedule of meetings.

11. Date Of Next Meeting

The dates of the next and future meetings are:

27 September 2012

ADD IN: 22 November 2012

Then 24 January 2013, 14 March 2013, 23 April 2013, 5 June 2013 and 31 July 2013.

Map and directions at: www.northampton.gov.uk/guildhall

For more information about this meeting please contact:
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More information about the Forum generally is at: www.northampton.gov.uk/forums



Facebook page: www.northampton.gov.uk/dcf

Please note that this Forum is supported and funded by Northampton Borough Council. The Forum may work in partnership and collaboration with other community groups, councils and local services from time to time. The views expressed and decisions taken by the Forum are not necessarily those of Northampton Borough Council.



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