

## **Northampton Borough Council**

### **Northampton Disabled People's Forum**

**Wednesday, 17 October 2012**

#### **Attendees at the forum:**

Cllr P Larratt (Chair)  
Martin de Rosario (Co Chair)  
Ann Timson  
Cllr B Mennell  
Cllr D Stone  
Larry Barber  
Barbara Barber  
Primrose Landstowne  
Graeme Wilson  
Mrs Boyes  
Laura Bessell  
Joe Biskupski

#### **1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the forum and gave a warm welcome to Joe Biskupski who would be attending the forums to replace Lindsay Ambrose in his capacity as the Community Engagement Officer. The Chair thanked Cllr Stone who was also in attendance at the meeting, and would be introducing Agenda Item 5 – Northampton Retail Experience – consultation questionnaire, as a Member of Scrutiny Panel 2 – Retail Experience.

#### **2. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Lindsay Ambrose, Mr Shah and Christine Woodhams.

#### **3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING**

The minutes of the forum held on the 14<sup>th</sup> July 2012 were agreed.

There were no matters arising.

#### **4. CONSULTATION NEW LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SCHEME**

The Chair welcomed Laura Bessell to the meeting and explained that a consultation was currently being undertaken. The purpose of this was as a result of Council Tax Benefit – a financial help towards the cost of paying Council Tax bill's had been removed by the Government. Local Authorities had been asked by Government to design their own scheme to assist people in their community to meet customers Council Tax commitments. It was explained that the point of the consultation was to ask about how the new scheme should be devised.

The Chair asked what safeguards had been put in place for vulnerable people and was informed that the Government had not specified who constituted a 'vulnerable

person'. It was noted that the Government had stated that Pensioners would be protected from entitlement as they were unable to increase their income but those people who were of a working age would be affected. It was explained that the Government had stated that every Local Authority in the Country would receive reduced funding of 10%; this would mean a budget deficit of approximately £1.9 million and the consultation was a means at looking at alternative ways of bridging the gap.

A member of the forum stated that there were people, especially vulnerable people, who would not be able to increase their incomes and would suffer severe detrimental effects should there be a change in their benefits and the amount that they had to contribute to Council Tax. It was further stated that a legal challenge would be sought should the changes be implemented. In response, the Chair stated that they had few options as they legally had to impose Government Legislation, but that feedback through the consultation process would be taken into consideration.

Members of the forum asked for clarification as to who would be classed as 'disabled' and/or 'vulnerable' and what, if any, benefits would be available to them.

Laura Bessell confirmed that she would speak to the Director of Resources and report back to the Forum in the near future.

The Chair commented that he wanted to see vulnerable people protected and welcomed the forum members to feedback and participate in the consultation.

## **5. NORTHAMPTON RETAIL EXPERIENCE - CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE**

Councillor Stone explained to the forum members that the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was to look at what issues affected the people of Northampton. She further explained that the Members of the Scrutiny Panel 2 – Retail Experience would be producing a report which would show the opinions of the public on their retail experience in Northampton and would examine what improvements could be made. She commented that not only were comments welcomed about the town centre but also from local areas and the experiences people had in their locality, including choices, access and opportunities.

It was explained by the Chair that a list of questions, specifically relating to the Retail Experience had been circulated to members of the forum with the agenda. Councillor Stone stated that whilst shopping habits had changed since there had been an increased use of the internet, there was a need to look at all issues, especially where access issues could be addressed.

Members of the forum discussed the questions.

One member of the forum suggested that there should be a reduction in the business rates that are being charged and that there should be a decrease in the rental of premises as a means of encouraging more retail businesses to invest in Northamptonshire. The Chair clarified that the Council had no influence over the business rates as they had been set by central Government. He also commented

that landlords of premises set the rent for properties and therefore the Council had limited influence.

Concern was expressed about the number of empty shops and one suggestion was that a conversation could be had with landlords in order to discuss negotiating a lower rental of properties. Councillor Stone commented that the Business Improvement District was developing ways forward by looking at a variety of options to improve and attract new business to the area.

One forum member voices their concerns that there were too many eateries, pubs and clubs in the town and that any further development or expansion of these should be halted. Another expressed her dismay at the lack of gardening and electrical stores within the Town Centre. Concern was also voiced about the lack of public toilets in the Town Centre and it was commented that due to this, people would not visit Northampton and would choose to go elsewhere, where facilities were available, especially people with specific needs for such facilities. It was further suggested that parking facilities could be improved to increase footfall in the Town Centre. The Chair informed the forum members that there were 3 car parks within the Town Centre where charges were not applicable for the first hour, which was of great benefit for people coming in to the Town to shop.

A suggestion was made that there should the retail experience should address different levels of affordability to cater for people with a variety of budgets. It was commented that one solution to the problems of unaffordable business rates would be the pooling of funds by a number of business to rent one large property, rather than a number of small ones, thus saving on overheads.

It was commented that the Bus Interchange would also increase the amount of foot fall in the Town Centre, which in turn would increase the use of the Market. It was noted that work was being undertaken with market traders in order to work towards improving trade for the market holders. It was noted that any blue badge and disabled parking spaces that would be lost due to the changed location of the Bus Interchange, should be replaced and that taxi drop off points be allocated to enable disabled people using taxi's to be able to adequately disembark from the taxis.

Other comments that were made included making signage more visible to ensure that motorists and pedestrians are given instructions on how to access the Town Centre, making sure that the Gateway into Northampton was clear and clean and well maintained and that some signage could be erected to reflect the modernisation and developments within the Town Centre.

The Chair thanked Councillor Stone for her report and suggested that any further feedback from the Forum members would be forwarded on to her.

## **6. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

It was noted that World AIDS Day would be held on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012 at the Guildhall. The Chair explained that it was an event that was led by the forums and

asked that anyone with any ideas for the event get in contact with the Council.

It was explained that on the forum website, information had been provided about a current consultation that requested feedback about the services that the Council provided. Members were encouraged to feed into the consultation and if requested obtain a paper copy.

Graeme Wilson (Northamptonshire Sport) reported that since the Paralympics held in August (2012) there had been a surge in demand for a number of sports in the area. He commented that a number of events had been very well attended including the Disabled gymnastics, and an Olympic Torch lecture. The location of the Northamptonshire Wheelchair Basketball team had moved to the University of Northampton and that membership had recently increased. It was also reported that a number of coaching courses had been run in the area to enable people to coach less able bodied people and make them aware of their needs within the sport.

## **7. ITEMS FOR NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS**

Feedback about was requested about Policy change at the Northampton General Hospital, East Midlands Ambulance Service and access to local hospitals.

The Chair requested that a representative from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) be invited to address the forum about the use of St Catherine's House for appeal hearings especially with regards to the accessibility.

A request was made that the impact of downsizing of homes by people with disabilities be addressed at the next meeting.

## **8. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting will be the week commencing the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012.

The meeting concluded at 7.31pm.