

# **NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **NORTHAMPTON DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM**

**Wednesday, 12 December 2012**

- Members: Councillor Larratt (Co-Chair), Councillor Mennell
- Public Members: Martin de Rosario (Co-Chair), Barbara Barber, Larry Barber, Rashmi Shah, Ann Timson and Mark Unwin.
- Officers/Speakers: Joe Biskupski (NBC), Laura Mead and Rita Cooper (DisabledGo), Steve Archer (NBC Revenues and Benefits), Graeme Wilson (Sports Development)

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

Apologies were received from Mr Jatish Shah and Mr John Wood.

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

The minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 17 October 2012 were agreed.

There were no matters arising.

### **4. DISABLEDGO - ANNUAL REPORT AND DIRECTORY**

Laura Mead and Rita Cooper from DisabledGo circulated copies of a presentation of Access Guides they had produced and commented:

- DisabledGo had produced Access Guides to over a thousand venues across the UK and they worked with local authorities, other public bodies, and private companies such as Marks and Spencer and Jobs Go Public;
- They were currently working with 14 or 15 new organisations;
- An App would be available soon;
- The Access Guides were compatible with different browser formats including speech browsers;
- Anyone could join the Forum;
- The Access Guides were found through an NBC home page and could be located by using a quick search (for example, for "leisure centres") or by clicking on a map. Searches could be filtered by use of icons (for example "leisure centres with a swimming pool");
- Symbols by each venue provided a shorthand way of seeing what the venue was like, such as level access, lift access to different floors, toilet facilities, whether staff were trained in British Sign Language, and whether information was available in braille or large format. They also provided a consistent approach to venues;
- If required more in depth information could be accessed for example, were controls in any lifts accessible to wheelchair users, were there vocal warnings of doors opening or closing and was there vocal advice on the floor level reached;

- Using the postcode box would provide a route planner including public transport information; and
- The Access Guides were updated annually, often by DisabledGo making revisits. This year's update had been recently completed and 20 new venues had been added to the Northampton guides.

Laura and Rita invited feedback on the access guides, experience of venues and how the Forum would like DisabledGo to proceed by either coming to a future meeting or by holding an open day. The Council's home page to the access guides and included venues were due to be revised in the Spring (2013)

Councillor Larratt thanked Laura and Rita for the detailed work they had done.

In discussion it was noted that:

- The DisabledGo access guides should be available through libraries, tourist information centres and the One Stop Shop if possible (Disabled Go would offer training);
- Venues could put themselves forward for inclusion in the guides or the Council could make suggestions;
- To help the partially sighted it would be helpful if venues could colour code (traffic light system) obstructions and the guides reflect this;
- The DisabledGo web pages needed to have text descriptions as well as maps to help the blind;
- It would be helpful if venues could mark glass doors and the guides reflect this;
- Sports facilities/clubs operating within a venue should be included; and
- Access to the guides other than via computers needed to be considered. (Leaflets were sent to venues.)

Joe Biskupski commented that he was the main NBC contact with DisabledGo and will work with them to make the most of their guides. He would make sure that some of the venues had paper copies of the Guides to hand out and would investigate the computer provision of the access guides through the libraries and One Stop Shop.

## **5. WELFARE REFORMS- IMPACT OF DOWNSIZING HOMES ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Steve Archer, from NBC Revenues and Benefits, commented that the current welfare reforms were on a massive scale and were the largest for 60 years. He referred to the "What You Need to Know About Changes to Housing Benefit" leaflet that he had circulated and noted that these changes had become known as the "bedroom tax". The Universal Credit was to be introduced from April 2013 and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had expressed a preference for applications to be dealt with online. He hoped that the DWP would provide help for those who did not have computers. Steve observed that it was too soon to have feedback from the pilot areas but no particular issues had come to light so far. There were concerns that as composite payments would be made to the applicant there would be problems where applicants were not good in managing money or where they spent it on other things rather than rent.

In answer to a question Steve commented that supported housing (sheltered housing) would be outside of Universal Credit but would be part of local arrangements. There was still to be a discussion as to whether this would apply to all

levels of supported housing or whether low levels of support, for example, for those not in receipt of Care and Support, would be included in Universal Credit. The Administering Body which had not yet been set up by the Government would decide what would be included.

In terms of the "bedroom tax", Steve reported that, nationally, it had been estimated that 0.5 million people would be affected and that £0.5bn would be saved as a result of this. In Northampton it had been estimated that over 1,000 people would be affected. Meetings had been held with Registered Landlords to discuss the issue of bedroom numbers and these would now be checked for accuracy: Housing Associations and the Council's Landlord Services would carry out visits or make telephone calls to confirm the situations of individuals. DWP had provided additional monies to help the disabled where substantial adaptations had been made to a property and to help foster carers. This additional money would form part of a small pot of money for discretionary locally determined payments. However this funding would be small in the context of the numbers of those affected.

It was queried that if people had to downsize, were there the right properties available for people to move into and whether planners and developers were aware of what was needed for new and future developments. Steve commented that they were working with all partners on this.

Steve emphasised that if a tenant were deemed to be over occupying a property they either had to accept the reduction in Housing Benefit, take in a lodger or move to a smaller property. There was no other choice. The question was how people could be best supported bearing in mind the very limited funding available to give assistance.

Steve also reported that the current Council Tax Benefit Scheme would be abolished in 2013. Consultation on a new local scheme had been carried out and it looked like it would reduce benefit to working age people by 8.5%. In answer to a question Steve commented that the Council would contact everyone likely to be in this situation.

Ann Timson noted that there would be pressure on tenants to downsize and that they faced the prospect of moving to where appropriate property was available so that someone from the town centre might have to move to the outskirts of the Town. They would then face having to pay fares to travel into the town centre. Furthermore, there would be people who had just finished having to put up with the disruption caused whilst decent homes works had been carried out and found themselves moving to a property that had yet to have these works carried out. Rashmi Shah stated that he would be reluctant to move to an area he did not know.

Councillor Larratt acknowledged that there would be difficult situations to reconcile. He would take this up with Housing. Steve Archer commented that they would try to mitigate the effects where this was possible.

[In response to a comment Councillor Larratt stated that the Housing Service was not one of those that was likely to transfer to LGSS – Local Government Shared Services – which was a not for profit company set up by Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire County Councils to provide a number of back office services to them and Norwich City Council and which the Borough Council was also seeking to join. LGSS was responsible to a Board of Directors comprised of senior members from both County Councils as well as Scrutiny Committees.]

Steve Archer noted that people needed to be aware of the discretionary payment pot that would be managed by Revenues and Benefits. Input from the Forums and

partners would be needed to help decide how these funds could be best used. From April 2013 over 1,000 tenants would face a reduction in benefits: there were no magic answers and the situation had to be managed as best it could. Inevitably, tough decisions would have to be made.

Larry Barber suggested that perhaps consideration should be given to the building of prefabs as a way of meeting the social housing shortage.

Councillor Larratt stated that there would be no extra money available to local authorities from the Government despite their success in making extensive savings. The situation was not going to get easier. In respect of Decent Homes, the Council had the funding so the issue was about using it the best way it could. He repeated that there would be difficult situations and no doubt local authorities would be left to pick up the pieces.

## **6. DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE**

Councillor Larratt noted that Disability Living Allowance would be changing to Personal Independence Allowance. Assessments were currently being carried out and many appeals were resulting. St Katharine's House was being used for the County for the assessments and appeals however, it was not accessible nor was there any onsite or easy nearby parking. He had already asked that other more appropriate DWP buildings in Northampton and across the county be used instead. He sought agreement from the Forum to write to DWP as Co-Chair to reinforce this position.

It was agreed that Councillor Larratt write to DWP on behalf of the Forum in the terms set out above.

## **7. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

### All Forums Budget Consultation Meeting

Joe Biskupski reported that an all Forums budget consultation meeting would take place instead of the next Disabled People's Forum meeting on 22 January 2013 at 6.30pm in the Jeffery Room.

### Information to Tenants

Ann Timson criticised the lack of consultation with tenants over the recent Decent Homes works to blocks of flats in Spring Boroughs. She noted that there had been five different contractors working on the site each only responsible for their own activity and that during the works a number of issues had arisen. There had been no liaison with tenants and no apparent checks on the works being done.

Councillor Larratt suggested that this be the subject of a joint meeting with the Pensioners Forum and that Councillor Markham, representatives of Housing and the contractors be invited to attend.

### Sports Development Matters

Graeme Wilson reported that:

- NCC had awarded the Danes Camp Disabled Sports Group £250 for equipment;
- Ten people had attended a visual impairment sports day organised by

Northampton University. Some had travelled some distance to attend. A club was due to hold its first session on 10 February 2013;

- Olly Barton, a Northampton cricketer had won a Young Disabled Sports Achievement award;
- The Paralympics had been inspirational and there appeared to be more interest in sport of the disabled in Northampton; this should be encouraged;
- There were three Paralympians in the list of BBC Sports Personality contenders;

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

Decent Homes

Welfare Reforms

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

All Forums Budget Consultation meeting 22 January 2013 at 6.30pm in the Jeffery Room.

Next ordinary Forum meeting – 19 February 2013 at 5.30pm in the One Stop Shop.

The Meeting Concluded At 19.20 hours.

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