

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 31 January 2013

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Les Marriott (Chair), Councillors Matt Lynch (Vice Chair), Councillors Tony Ansell, Mick Ford, Brendan Glynane, Elizabeth Gowen, Phil Larratt, Beverley Mennell, Brian Sargeant, Danielle Stone and Winston Strachan (substituting for Councillor Lee Mason)

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| Witnesses | Councillor David Mackintosh | Leader of the Council - Item 5 |
| | Councillor Mary Markham | Cabinet Member for Housing- Items 5 and 6 |
| | Councillor Brandon Eldred | Cabinet Member for Community Engagement- Items 5 and 8 |
| | Councillor Alan Bottwood | Cabinet Member for Finance- Items 5 and 9 |

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| Officers | David Kennedy | Chief Executive |
| | Isabell Procter | Director of Resources |
| | Julie Seddon | Director of Customers and Cultural Services |
| | Lesley Wearing | Director of Housing |
| | Catherine Wilson | Head of Business Change |
| | Tim Ansell | Housing Services Manager |
| | Tracy Tiff | Scrutiny Officer |
| | Joanne Birkin | Democratic Services Officer |

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| Observers | Rebecca Smith | Assistant Head of Finance |
| | Chris Cavanagh | Head of Regeneration and Development |
| | Gary Youens | Political Assistant |
| | Claire Young | HR |

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received by Councillors Jamie Lane, Suresh Patel, Nilesh Parekh and Lee Mason, Councillor Winston Strachan substituting for Councillor Mason.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th December 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. DRAFT BUDGET 2013-2016

The Committee considered a report on the Council Wide Draft Budget 2013-14.

The Overview and Scrutiny Reporting and Monitoring Working Group met on 9 January 2013 and identified the following budget proposals that it wished to scrutinise further.

The items were:-

- Savings Arising from Changes to Terms and Conditions (General Fund)
- Savings from moving services into LGSS Conditions (General Fund)
- Raising sponsorship to offset cost of NBC events Conditions (General Fund)
- Dealing with Welfare Reform and the Impact on Rent Income Collection Conditions (General Fund)(HRA)

Savings Arising from Changes to Terms and Conditions (General Fund)

Councillor Mackintosh as the Cabinet member with responsibility for changes to terms and conditions and Councillor Bottwood as Finance Cabinet Member addressed the Committee to discuss this Budget proposal. The main points of discussion were as follows:-

It was explained that this matter impacted on both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Accounts.

Members asked if the proposals had had an effect on staff morale and what feedback had been received during the consultation process. It was felt that there had been an impact on staff morale but that it needed to be taken in the context of the current difficult economic climate. Staff realised that there were several additional pressures on the amount of money available to deliver services which also had to change rapidly to encompass major new legislation.

It was explained that the whole consultation process had started in October last year. The main focus:

- Essential Car User Allowances – Removal of the essential car user allowance and replace with a casual car user allowance.
- Professional Fees
- Charging Staff for car parking.

At the same time employees were also asked if they wished to put themselves forward for voluntary redundancy or early retirement.

There were 22 people interested in voluntary redundancy 19 of those were in services which were to be subject to reorganisation. Therefore 3 people were agreed for voluntary redundancy release. The release of those concerned had been agreed by their managers and a Panel which looked at the impact that their leaving might have on the service.

Members questioned whether these changes could be implemented if they were part of employees' contract. They were advised that changes in the contracts were introduced as part of the pay and grading exercise and introduced a condition that non contractual conditions such as essential car users allowance could be changed if three months' notice was given.

The combined savings achieved from the agreed voluntary redundancies and the removal of the essential car user allowance was sufficient to achieve the required salary savings for this year. It was therefore decided to give 12 months' notice that the other proposals i.e. to remove payment of professional fees and the introduction of staff car parking charges would be introduced in 2014.

Members were advised that the Trade Unions had not agreed to the changes and had stated that they intended to hold a ballot of their members.

Members asked whether alternatives to essential car use had been considered and were advised that car-pooling had been investigated but that it was not viable for the Council to introduce. This may change in the future if a scheme was introduced as part of any future partnership agreements.

Members also queried how the staff car parking fees would be determined. Consultation had been based on a percentage of salary scheme, but feedback received from staff had been divided between preferring that or a flat rate fee scheme. Members also queried whether they would be included. They were advised that during consultation it had become obvious that there were many different elements that needed to be considered before the scheme was introduced and this was one of the reasons that it had been deferred for a year.

Savings from moving services into LGSS Conditions (General Fund)

Councillor Bottwood addressed the Committee to discuss this Budget proposal. The main points of discussion were as follows:-

The principle to take part in negotiations with Northamptonshire County Council and Cambridgeshire Council was agreed by Cabinet last year. Detailed arrangements are now being considered.

There have been several project teams looking at various elements of the proposal and the current focus is maintaining levels of service when services transfer over to Local Government Shared Service (LGSS) Draft Service Level agreements are being considered and will be reviewed by Management Team in the next week. Services were in the process of making preparations to ensure that when the changeover happened there would be no detrimental change in the service delivered to the customers.

Members queried where the setting up costs were coming from and whether the £415,000 anticipated savings in the first year took these into account. They were advised that the setting up costs were being found from an improvement reserve. It was confirmed that the £415,000 was an estimate at a point in time and would be recalculated at the negotiation

phase, taking into consideration issues such as where staff were based, office accommodation etc.

Members also asked whether the project was still on course to deliver those savings. David Kennedy, Chief Executive, confirmed that a timetable was being worked to and the initial proposed start date was 1 April 2013, but it was acknowledged that there could be a delay to 1 May or 1 June 2013. If there was a delay there would obviously be a corresponding reduction in the amount of savings achieved this year. Members were advised that there would be a review of all budget options undertaken by the Director of Resources before the final budget consideration and if necessary figures would be revised at that stage.

The financing of local government is undergoing rapid change and it was increasingly important to ensure that services were being provided at the best possible cost and that involves more effective partnership working under agreements such as LGSS.

Members questioned whether the aim was to simply to provide services at the same level, but were advised that this was a starting point and that it was hoped that by working in partnership then improvements would be made and there would be an increase in the quality of service over time. There were some services that the Borough Council currently excels at and the aim is that by working together the other partners will adapt best practice and their services will improve. In a similar way other partners' areas of expertise would influence Borough Council services.

With regard to risk, there will always be an element of risk when undertaking such a high level change process; however members were assured that the various project boards were continually undertaking reviews to risk levels.

Members were reminded that there has been an LGSS Scrutiny Inquiry which has been looking at the details of the agreements as they have become clear. All Members have been invited to attend those meetings

Members were advised that the details of the LGSS Scrutiny Inquiry were available on the Intranet.

Raising sponsorship to offset cost of NBC events Conditions (General Fund)

Councillor Eldred, Cabinet member for Community Engagement addressed the Committee to discuss this Budget proposal.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

The aim of this budget proposal was to obtain sponsorship from local businesses for events .This began at Christmas when a local car company sponsored a Christmas tree in the Market Square. The ultimate aim would be to create enough sponsorship to make the Events Team self-funding and generate income which could then be used to provide further events.

The budget contribution for the first year was set at £5,000 but the second year is £70,000. Members queried whether this was achievable and whether someone had been specifically employed to seek company sponsorship for events. No specific staff had been taken on, there had been a sponsorship and promotion pack created last year which would be used. It was felt that the initial £5,000 was cautious and that there would be a lot of opportunities for sponsorship associated with the Northampton Alive event at Delapre Abbey. The tickets for Northampton Alive were selling well and it was hoped that if that proved a success in its first year then it would build a reputation and it would be easier to attract sponsorship in the future. It was emphasised that it was intended to obtain sponsorship for other events and hopefully grow the whole events programme.

Members queried whether costs for cleaning up and reinstatement after events like those at Delapre Abbey had been taken into account. It was emphasised that the Delapre Abbey event was being run by professional organisation and that these issues would be dealt with.

There was some discussion around whether the proposed level of savings was achievable. It was accepted that it is a difficult economic climate and it may be harder to find companies who are willing to sponsor events if their advertising budgets have been cut. It remained to be seen if the proposals for this year were achieved which could give some indication. Projected levels for the first year were low and if necessary figures for future years would need to be reviewed in the light of the most up to date information.

The Chair suggested that it would be a useful role for the overview and Scrutiny Committee to monitor, in 12 months' time, whether the income generation of £70,000 could be achieved. The Committee agreed that this would be an important issue for it to scrutinise.

It was requested that data on the overall costs of events be forwarded to the Committee for its information.

AGREED: The Cabinet Member for Community Engagement be invited to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in a years' time to discuss how successful the raising of sponsorship had been.

Dealing with Welfare Reform and the Impact on Rent Income Collection Conditions (General Fund) (HRA)

Councillor Markham, Cabinet Member for Housing, addressed the Committee to discuss this Budget proposal.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

This was another item which had an impact on both the Housing Revenue Account and the General Fund.

The Welfare Reform Act will be introduced in April 2013 and Universal Credit will be introduced in October. The proposed budget was to provide an additional 2 or 3 members of staff on 2 year fixed term contracts. They will be available to provide advice and assistance on all aspects of the welfare reform changes as they impact on Council housing tenants.

There has already been a considerable amount of work done identifying 1,200 tenants who have been identified as being affected by the Welfare Reform changes.(70- 80 families who may be affected by the Welfare Reform Cap). It was confirmed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could be provided with more details on this data.

It was highlighted that the Council had communicated with people that it felt would be affected and was aiming to help prevent them from getting into difficulties. Existing housing staff have been contacting tenants, initial attempts at contact have been made by phone, including calls at evenings and weekends to talk to tenants and make sure that they are aware of the changes and how they might affect them and discuss their preparedness. If tenants cannot be contacted by phone then they will be written to, inviting them to come and discuss the changes with housing officers. Some tenants are aware of changes and are trying to make provision; others are unwilling or possibly in denial about what it means to them.

It was acknowledged that it was not just Council tenants that will be affected and that there were also other factors such as changes in local Council Tax benefit which will cause problems to some people. The aim is to try and prevent as many people as possible from falling into debt. Tenants would also be signposted to other agencies for help with budget management etc. If however they do fall behind in their rent payments then action will be taken to clear arrears and ultimately eviction action would be started.

Members welcomed the efforts being made by the Housing Staff but expressed concern there would still be many people adversely affected who would still not come and discuss their problems until they found themselves in difficulties and then the additional staff provided would not prove adequate. Out of those currently contacted 221 have acknowledged the problem and were taking actions, others said they would deal with it when it happened or did not actually accept that it was happening.

Members expressed concern that the other agencies might be unable to cope with resulting demand, as they too were under financial constraints. Members were advised that the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Chief Executive were aware of this problem and were meeting with other agencies next week.

Members also felt that there was a very real danger that some people would simply be unable to cope. There may also be issues regarding the fact that many people have had housing benefit paid directly to their landlords and never had to budget and pay rent directly. The Committee was informed that in some cases it may be possible for payments to be made directly.

It was likely that Members would also find themselves having to deal with an increased case load as people became affected by the changes and turned to Members for help. A Member briefing session on Welfare Reform changes is being held on 19 February.

Members asked what would happen to those people who were unable to meet their rent commitments. In very extreme cases then there may be some provision to help those people who are very vulnerable. In appropriate cases then action will be taken to obtain possession.

AGREED: The Cabinet Member for Housing be asked to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in six months' time to give an update on the impact of the new Policies.

6. HOUSING CONSULTATIONS FEEDBACK- TENANCY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Councillor Markham, Cabinet Member for Housing, Lesley Wearing, Director of Housing and Tim Ansell, Housing Services Manager attended the Committee to provide an update on the Consultation Feedback on the Tenancy Engagement Strategy.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

The Council has a good record of tenant engagement. The new engagement strategy builds on ensuring that the tenants are involved in the decision making process and the development of service improvement. All the feedback on the proposed strategy has been very positive and the consultation meetings have been very well attended.

The new Strategy introduces tenant scrutiny panels which will be examining specific areas of service. Those service areas being the ones that were identified through the tenancy agreement process. The chairs of these tenant scrutiny panels will form a Scrutiny Board.

The themes of the five boards will be:-

- Home- including repair issues
- Solutions – Considering choice based letting process
- Neighbourhoods- Communal Areas, estates, Anti-Social behaviour
- Involvement and Empowerment- Customer Service
- Strategy- Performance targets and value for money.

There will be support and training provided for tenants who wish to serve on panels. In March Housing will be holding a recruitment day looking for scrutiny panel members, mystery shoppers, volunteers for estate walkabouts etc. Training will then be tailored to need.

It was emphasised that this engagement would be in addition to existing processes.

Members were pleased to see that the proposals had been supported by tenants and hoped that the tenant panels might be able to join in with scrutiny done by the Committee. They considered that the tenants' panels might be able to identify work for a potential

Scrutiny Review, and felt that it would be useful if the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received updates on their progress.

AGREED:

1. The Cabinet Member for Housing be invited to the Committee in six months' time to give an update on the progress of the implementation on the tenants' engagement strategy.
2. Overview and Scrutiny Committee to receive regular updates from the Housing Scrutiny Panels.

7. CABINET'S RESPONSE TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

(A) CUSTOMER SERVICES

The Committee received the Cabinet response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Report on Customer Services.

The recommendations included in the Overview and Scrutiny report on Customer Services were all accepted.

AGREED:

1. The report detailing Cabinet's response be noted.
2. The report be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Monitoring Work Programme 2013/14.
3. The Cabinet member be invited to attend the Committee in six months' time to provide a progress report on the accepted recommendations.

(B) HATE CRIME

The Committee received the Cabinet response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Report on Hate Crime.

The recommendations included in the Overview and Scrutiny report on Hate Crime were all accepted.

The report included a recommendation that a Councillor Hate Crime Reporting Champion be elected and Councillor Matt Lynch has been elected to this position. Members asked if they could receive an update detailing the proposed work programme and reporting process for the Councillor Champion.

AGREED:

1. The report detailing Cabinet's response be noted.
2. The report be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Monitoring Work Programme 2013/14.
3. The Cabinet member and the Councillor Hate Crime Reporting Champion be invited to attend the Committee in six months' time to provide a progress report on the accepted recommendations.

8. MONITORING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACCEPTED RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED IN THE FOLLOWING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

(A) COMMUNITY CENTRES.

Councillor Brandon Eldred, Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and Julie Seddon, Director of Customers and Communities attended the meeting to provide an update on the accepted recommendations of the report.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

Of 21 Community Centres, the transfer of 19 had been agreed. There are just two at Parklands and Weston Flavell that are outstanding. Parklands had now submitted a Business Plan. There were issues regarding Western Flavell and agreements held by the County Council which were being resolved.

With regard to Western Flavell Members raised concern that the Community Centre user groups did not feel that they had been properly consulted over the potential change in Management. It was also commented that it did not appear to be part of the normal process to inform the local councillor when these changes were brought forwarded.

Members asked whether all opportunities were being taken to support the new management groups by using the Community Centres for Council business. It was pointed out that the Council would now be subject to hire charges and would no longer have any kind of priority over booking.

The transfer of the management of all of the Community Centres to local management groups was seen as best practice and there is starting to be some very positive feedback from communities with regard to the changes. There had been some instances where groups had not been happy with the groups chosen to run the centres, but on the whole these had been resolved. The project had also been nominated for a national award.

Members queried whether the creation of new parish councils might affect the future of some community centres. This would depend on whether the Parish Councils wish to be involved in running local Community Centres and would have to be considered between any new Parish Council as they were formed and any current management committee.

Members also asked whether it would be possible to be advised of the types of activities that are being held at the Community Centres and whether they are being self-sufficient.

AGREED: The Cabinet Member for Community Engagement be invited to the Committee in a year's time to give an update on how the Community Centres are being run, whether they are achieving self-sufficiency and whether they are providing a full range of activities for the local communities.

9. COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK FOR THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR.

Councillor Brandon Eldred, Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and the Director of Customers and Communities attended the meeting to provide an update on the accepted recommendations of the report.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

In the current economic climate it is vital that any grants given achieve the maximum impact. Therefore the grant process is currently being reviewed. In particular looking at the way in which the large grants can be geared to make the most impact.

Members commented that the County Council have moved to a system whereby the making of a grant is done via awarding a contract. This was being considered by the Borough Council but it was considered that it was still vitally important to ensure that there was still a system which would allow smaller organisations to be able to access grants without the process being too bureaucratic. There was concern that the voluntary and community sector have already seen their caseloads increase and that the forthcoming welfare reform changes will put them under even more strain.

AGREED: The Cabinet Member for Community Engagement be invited to attend Committee in a year's time to provide an update on how the grants process is working.

10. PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Finance attended the Committee. Committee considered the performance monitoring report to December 2012.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

Performance Indicators are constantly being monitored and reporting is done on an exception basis i.e. those items which are not meeting their current targets.

The figures received by Committee are usually at least a month out of date by the time that they receive them but there is little that can be done as figures need to be collected retrospectively.

Members asked whether there was an automatic trigger point at which an item showing red became an unacceptable risk. They were advised that the indicators are constantly monitored by officers and they will be taking action.

Committee members were asked whether there were any areas that they wished to see indicators on. Members responded that there was a new responsibility on the Council for peoples' well-being and that measures needed to be found for that.

Members considered that it would be important to concentrate on Performance Indicators which could be affected by the Welfare Reform changes and ensure that they were

promptly dealt with. In particular they considered that this would affect the rent collection and rent arrears figures- H1 12 and H1 13.

Members also noted that the trends for car crime and cleanliness of open spaces and parks seemed to be showing downward trends.

AGREED

1. A report be made to the next meeting of the Committee on Performance Indicators H1 12 and H1 13 to establish a base line against which to measure the impact of Welfare Reforms.
2. A report be made to the next meeting of the Committee on the Performance trends for car crime and cleanliness of open spaces and parks.

11. SCRUTINY PANELS

(A) SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - SERIOUS ACQUISITIVE CRIME, VIOLENT CRIME AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

The Committee noted the report on the progress of the Serious Acquisitive Crime, Violent Crime and Community Scrutiny Panel.

(B) SCRUTINY PANEL 2- RETAIL EXPERIENCE.

The Committee noted the report on the progress of the Retail Experience Scrutiny Panel.

(C) SCRUTINY PANEL 3- INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS AND SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS

The Committee noted the report on the progress of the Infrastructure requirements and Section 106 Agreements Scrutiny Panel.

12. LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARED SERVICES (LGSS) SCRUTINY INQUIRY

The Chairman gave the Committee an update on the progress of the Local Government Shared Services Scrutiny Inquiry.

The Inquiry has been meeting fortnightly and has been looking at each of the affected services in turn. It was the intention of the Inquiry to cover all of the service areas before the LGSS is approved by Council in March, although this date may be delayed. The last meeting considered ICT and the next will look at Revenues and Benefits and Human Resources.

The Inquiry has also been receiving a management overview of the progression of discussions on all the aspects of transition.

13. REPORT BACK FROM NBC'S REPRESENTATIVE TO NCC'S HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor Danielle Stone provided a briefing note on the Northamptonshire County Council's Health and Social Care Committee.

The main points of her update were:-

On a visit to Northampton General Hospital Members had been informed that of 650 beds, 150 were blocked because of needing to arrange adaptations or care for the patients in order for them to be released. Members were informed that there was a very good scheme which provided some beds in a care home environment whilst provisions were being made, however this was limited in its scope.

They were also informed that the health care commissioners were looking at payment by results schemes.

AGREED: That the update be noted.

14. POTENTIAL FUTURE PRE DECISION SCRUTINY

No items were identified.

15. URGENT ITEMS

There were none.

The meeting concluded at 8:35 pm