

Northampton Borough Council

Northampton Pensioners' Forum

Thursday, 16 January 2014

Present: Cllr. Oldham (Co-chair), Roger Rumsey (Co-chair), Cllr. Bottwood (Cabinet member for Finance), Ann Timson (Spring Borough Residents Association), Tony Mallard (Eastfield Residents Association), Norman Sharp, Brian Nichols.

1. WELCOMES, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Christiana Owusu-Akuffo, Mike Hill, Mary Dyer-Atkins, and Jean Anderton.

2. BUDGET 2014/15 - CLLR. BOTTWOOD

Cllr. Bottwood gave an introduction to his role and the background to the budget in terms of debt and changes which have been put forward in order to stream line services.

Cllr. Oldham said that when managing budgets in the authority, it is important that the books do not go into debt. Authorities do not have the choice to go without, services still need to be provided that the people want. There is a restriction on what the authority can spend, cannot go above what the central Government provides.

Cllr. Bottwood spoke about the borough, 2014-18/19, if we do absolutely nothing, 2018/19 we will have a £9.6 million gap (33%). Current reserves are £3.1 million. Therefore we have to bring in some measures to cut spending and increase income.

AT raised the issue of Decent Homes Standard and the spending of money to replace kitchens etc. in council homes where new kitchen isn't wanted. This is where cuts can be made. Cllr. Bottwood explained that there are two separate parts of the budget, the General Fund and the budget for Housing. The way the Government has structured housing means that funding for housing is ring fenced. This money for housing has to be spent on homes, which includes the Decent Homes Fund from Government. This money has to be used in a prescribed amount of time, and wouldn't be able to move this grant over to general fund. If it is not spent, the Government would ask for money back.

Cllr. Bottwood went through the Budget in a Minute. This information can be found here: <http://www.northampton.gov.uk/budget2014>

Questions and Feedback of the Forum:

Parking

NS asked why NCC not doing anything around Parking meters on street? Cllr

Bottwood said that NBC are working hard to get NCC to do the same as us. However, due to their budget constraints also and own priorities, they are not able to reduce charges. Have to consider Whole County and not just the town.

Business Incentive Scheme

TM thought it was a good idea to cut parking charges and to introduce the business incentive scheme. TM suggested that empty shops are rented out on a short lease to art groups and voluntary groups to stop them looking empty. Also, TM suggested Arts Markets on Sundays are a good way to encourage more into the town on a Sunday. Cllr. Bottwood said that if the empty shops are Council owned, then this suggestion is easy to do, however landlords of those properties would be reluctant as they want long term tenants. The key would be to get more people into the town, and make the town more attractive, so that people are coming to the town to have a day out, as well as coming to shop. As a result, we would then be in a better position to look at increasing business.

Cllr. Bottwood highlighted that there is a lot going on with Northampton Business. Have a look at Northampton Alive and you will see examples of things taking place which will make the town look more attractive, encourage more businesses to come to our town and move the town forward in the right direction.

Museums

AT asked what the opening hours would be and what the increase of events would be. Cllr Bottwood advised that this has not been decided yet, as this is only a proposal, but NBC would test opening the museums more and increase opening hours through the year to identify if the demand is there.

Staff Terms and Conditions

RR said that is it visible that all across the country services are being contracted out and that the core business of a local authority is shrinking. Why is the chief exec of council's salary not shrinking? Cllr. Bottwood answered this question, highlighting that over the last 3 years, NBC have reduced senior management and saved a lot of money. Cllr Bottwood highlighted that this is not about cutting jobs, but about making services more effective. NBC are continuing to look at cutting costs without cutting out staff to try and make sure services do not suffer.

TM asked whether the ALMO will take out costs? Cllr. Bottwood said that staff costs in this area would be saved but still have to put money into the ALMO.

Abington Street

NS highlighted the dispute between Abington Street being opened and not opened and asked whether saving the £3 million proposed spent on this would solve the

budget gap problem. Cllr Bottwood discussed the difference between Capital and Revenue, and that therefore this Capital save would not change the budget gap. With response to the dispute of whether or not to open up Abington Street, NBC has only said they will open it as people have said they wanted it. In a consultation, 388 letters went out, and only 12 responses were received: 9 against, 2 for and 1 not bothered.

NS asked whether the shops on the street have been consulted. Cllr. Bottwood advised that he is not in a position to answer this, and that Cllr Hadland as portfolio holder for this area would be more appropriate to invite to the forum to discuss this further and in more detail.

Cllr. Oldham told the forum that at the last cabinet meeting, this issue was raised. With regards to the café there, they will not lose their pavement areas, as pavements will be wide enough to still have outdoor seating. RR further advised that this was in the manifesto of Conservatives when running for Council.

Cllr. Bottwood also highlighted to the forum the benefit of having better access for older people at the top of Abington Street – better access..

BN raised a number of queries that he would like a response to:

- How much have the Borough have got to play with?
- How much funding NBC are getting from central government? Cllr. Bottwood advised that the exact figure was not yet known.
- With reference to the staff savings – have the unions been spoken to? Cllr. Bottwood advised that the process is continuing, and unions are aware that this is an ongoing process.
- What will happen to the statue on Abington Street?
- Do NBC pay women less than men like Birmingham City Council? Cllr. Bottwood said that he wouldn't like to comment on this due to not being his area of work, however there are a large amount of female staff in management and executive roles in NBC. Cllr. Oldham also stated that he was not aware that this is the case in Northampton.

It was agreed that a written response could be given to BN if required. BN stated that he was happy with the figures but would have liked some more credit figures. AT agreed. It was raised that suggestions are good but they do not have substance or exact figures. It was questioned when these figures would be made available. Cllr. Bottwood stated that the problem with this is that all proposals are draft figures – some figures are included in the 'Budget in a Minute' papers. Cllr. Oldham notified

the forum that the rubber stamping of budget is on the 24th February.

AOB

NONE

4. DATE AND VENUES OF FUTURE FORUM MEETINGS

The date of the next meeting is on Thursday, 6th February from 14:00-16:00.

The meeting concluded at 15:30