

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 2 February 2017

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Jamie Lane (Chair), Councillor Graham Walker (Deputy Chair); Councillors Tony Ansell, Vicky Culbard, Janice Duffy, Elizabeth Gowen, Sam Kilby-Shaw and Zoe Smith

Councillor Mike Hallam, Cabinet Member for Environment (Items 6a and 6b)

Councillor Stephen Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing (Item 5)

Councillor Brandon Eldred, Cabinet Member for Finance (Item 5)

Glenn Hammons, Chief Finance Officer, (Item 5)

Phil Morrison, Strategic Finance Manager (Item 5)

Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing (Items 5 and 6 c)

Debi Waite, Private Sector Housing Manager (Item 6 c)

Ruth Austen, Environmental Health and Licensing Manager (item 6a)

Mike Kay, Chief Executive, NPH (Item 5)

Sharon Henley, Northants Police (Item 6a)

Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer

Members of the Public Alice Grundy, Silvie Turner, Robyn Maycock, Jade Williams, Rebecca White, Chairle Layn, Rosie Allen, Norman Adams, Angela Bartlett and Tom Appleyard

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T Eales, Parekh and Sargeant.

2. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2017 as a true and accurate record.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Mr Norman Adams, individual, addressed the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on agenda item 5

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Reporting and Monitoring Working Group – General Fund MTFP 2017/2018 - 2021/2022, draft Council wide draft budget 2017-2018, Housing Revenue Account (HRA), Rent Setting 2017/18 and Budget Projections 2017/18 to 2021/22

Ms Angela Bartlett, Secretary, WASPRA, and Tom Appleyard, individual, addressed the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on agenda item 6(a) – Keep Northampton Tidy.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTING AND MONITORING WORKING GROUP – GENERAL FUND MTFP 2017/2018 - 2021/2022, DRAFT COUNCIL WIDE DRAFT BUDGET 2017-2018, HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA), RENT SETTING 2017/18 AND BUDGET PROJECTIONS 2017/18 TO 2021/22

Mr Norman Adams, individual, addressed the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He commented that since April 2012 there had been a loss of 470 Council properties, equating to 974 bedrooms. In his opinion, one bedroom properties does not replace what has been lost. Mr Adams went on to query how many Council properties are currently being used as temporary accommodation. Mr Adams closed his address by commenting that Council housing stock should only be used as permanent housing.

Mr Adams was thanked for his address.

Glenn Hammons, Chief Finance Officer, presented the report of the Reporting and Monitoring Working Group to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He highlighted that the Working Group had agreed that two issues would be subject to budget Scrutiny:

- How NPH are delivering within the total fee for Housing Services that NBC provides to them, details around how they are delivering the efficiency savings required with a reducing financial envelope. Outlining the proposed new housing stock development proposals with specific reference to garage sites plans. HRA Budget Risk
- Budget pressures on temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation caused by rising instances of Homelessness and the plans in place to mitigate this

Temporary Accommodation

Councillor Stephen Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, and Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing, provided information regarding the budget pressures on temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation. A spreadsheet was circulated, showing the sharp rise in the number of homelessness applications, homelessness acceptances and homeless households in temporary accommodation between November 2015 and October 2016. It was explained that homelessness is increasing across the country. At the end of October 2016 there had been 140 people in temporary accommodation (a mix of Council stock, self-contained accommodation and Bed and Breakfast) but this has since increased to 169. Although it was acknowledged that the housing stock should not be overused as temporary accommodation, it was noted that the number of people in bed and breakfast accommodation has increased and more hotels are now being used.

Homelessness applications have doubled in the past six months, but Officers have been working very hard to continue making good quality decisions as quickly as possible to prevent a serious backlog of decisions.

The loss of private rented accommodation remains the main cause of homelessness and has increased sharply over the past year. It now accounts for approximately 60% of homelessness acceptances. Other reasons include relationship breakdown and family exclusions.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee was advised that, in order to prevent them from becoming homeless, people are seen as soon as possible. Of the 774 households that were prevented from becoming homeless between November 2015 and October 2016, 101 were helped to secure suitable accommodation in the private rented sector.

The Committee asked questions, made comment and heard:

- In answer to a query regarding the prevention of homelessness, Phil Harris advised that Officers will liaise with landlords (to persuade them to renew a tenancy or offer their tenants alternative accommodation), speak with families or help people to apply for rehousing through the Housing Register before they become homeless.
- In response to a question about the possibility of finding more accommodation like County Chambers, Phil Harris advised that in January 2017, Cabinet had given its approval to establish a Social Lettings Agency and that, as part of this initiative, the Council is planning to lease 40 properties for use as self-contained temporary accommodation.

Councillor Hibbert and Phil Harris were thanked for their informative address.

HRA

Councillor Brandon Eldred, Cabinet Member for Finance, and Phil Morrison, Strategic Finance Manager, LGSS, gave the Committee a short presentation on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The presentation detailed:

- Summary of the HRA
- Assumptions
- Risk – including Higher Value Void Levy

Phil Morrison highlighted:

- Currently there was a balanced 2017/18 budget with a working balance of £5 million, which had been risk assessed
- A proposed capital investment of £35 million
- The Authority for 2017/18 will be the second year of the four year 1% rent reduction as laid down in the Welfare Reform and Works Act 2016.
- Currently Voids and bad debts are relatively stable
- The Asset Management Plan had been and will continue to be reviewed

- The detail of the Higher Value Voids Levy had been delayed and would now not be implemented before 2018/2019. A Housing White Paper is pending. One estimate indicates that it could cost the Authority in the region of £10 million a year.
- Finance will work on a number of issues in 2017/2018, reworking the HRA 30 Year Business Plan to try and ensure a sustainable HRA in the future

The Committee asked questions made comment and heard:

- Concerns were raised regarding the loss of Council stock. The Committee was referred to the Development Plan.

Mike Kay, Chief Executive, Northampton Partnership Homes, addressed the Committee. Mike Kay advised that from January 2015 when NPH had been contracted to deliver the service, the financial plan had always detailed that NPH would provide efficiencies.

Subsequently, the Government had decided that all rents would be reduced by 1% annually for four years. This would be at a cost of £20 million over the four year period. Pension pressures had also impacted upon NPH, with a forecasted £300,000 to £600,000 deficit in the Pension Fund.

Strategic alternatives to the voluntary right to buy scheme had been investigated for discussion with the Council; however, NPH is reliant upon the detail in the awaited White Paper. Pay to Stay is now a voluntary initiative.

NPH engaged consultants to carry out “sustainability modelling” on the Council stock regarding how economic it is to maintain each property; this data will inform the 30 year Business Plan. Most of the contracts that NPH inherited have, or are due to expire and NPH has developed a number of new value for money contracts which will deliver efficiency savings.

Mike Kay went on to speak about NPH’s Board which is the accountable body and its Finance Committee that regularly reviews NPH’s targets; noting that the Board has a Statutory responsibility. Mike Kay referred the Committee to reductions in costs. In year one this had been £1.3 million, in year two £2.95 million, plus the Pension deficit. Year one had been achieved and year two was currently being reviewed. It was highlighted that Years 3 and 4 would be more challenging. The Committee heard that NPH had implemented new infrastructure systems such as total mobile working, whereas staff who are required to be on site go straight to site rather than coming into the office first. The system is more efficient. A new Sustainable Strategy will be delivered. NPH is working with the Board regarding new delivery models, tough decisions will be taken.

The Committee heard that PV systems had been delivered to 1,200 Council properties; giving tenants a significant saving on their electricity bills.

Regarding the loss of 90-100 properties per year through right to buy, NPH was looking at a new Council house building programme on how these units could be replaced Mike Kay highlighted the support and advice received from Finance Offices, LGSS, and thanked them for this.

The proposal to build new Council homes is a 10-year strategy which was submitted to the Council in September 2015 and is currently awaiting the council to undertake its due diligence process with a view to approving the strategy. A number of properties have been boarded up for a number of years which have been a priority to redevelopment of new homes and which have contributed to 99 properties either having been purchased, constructed or pending development, they are a mix of one bed, two bed, three bed and four bedded properties. There is a waiting list of people wanting to downgrade to one bedded properties, as well as a demand for larger family homes. NPH will look to match supply to demand area by area.

A Garage Strategy has been developed and this is currently with the Council awaiting approval. There are in excess of 3,300 garages of which over 50% are currently empty. Some were built 40-50 years ago and are not big enough to house a modern car.

The Committee made comment, asked questions and heard:

- Comment was made regarding anti-social behaviour that takes place on garage sites. Garages are often isolated from the properties; people like their cars to be parked outside their houses. It was queried whether front lawns could be turned into driveways for tenants. Support was voiced for the Garage Strategy.
- The Committee heard that the number of new properties that could be developed needs to stand up to challenge and be credible. A larger number could be developed subject to land availability and finance. Mike Kay added that people do not now want 1960's garage site and these provide an ideal opportunity to build housing. There needs to be a balance and issues such as where parking is put needs to be looked at. It is not proposed that all garage sites will be developed on; an option could be the building of housing, flats with a garage over or to replace current garages with larger garages or the provision of parking. A lot of tenants currently complain about the lack of parking spaces.
- Issues such as window cleaning were referred to.

The Committee congratulated NPH on the work that it had done.

The Cabinet Members and officers were thanked for attending the meeting and providing comprehensive details to the Committee enabling it to undertake budget Scrutiny on the two issues referred from the Reporting and Monitoring Working Group.

6. MONITORING OF ACCEPTED RECOMMENDATIONS IN OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

(A) KEEP NORTHAMPTON TIDY

Angela Bartlett, Secretary, WASPRA, addressed the Scrutiny Committee. Ms Bartlett commented that in her opinion she felt that some of the completion actions from the Action Plan were not completed. She referred to two key issues being some of the town centre,

Kettering Road, some back streets and the lift in St Michael's car park. Ms Bartlett had forwarded photographs to the Leader of the Council. She went on to refer to the road that she lived in and the concern of rubbish on the grass verges and the problem with certain doorways. Ms Bartlett advised that she would be lobbying MPs and Leaders regarding this. Ms Bartlett felt that actions 9 and 19 were key in the Action Plan. Ms Bartlett commented about fly-tipping and the need for a detailed, long term Action Plan. The Committee was referred to the state of some alleyways, the gathering of leaves in some kerbs and pavements and littering.

Mr Tom Appleyard addressed the Scrutiny Committee. He asked the Committee to imagine being an American Tourist and arriving at Northampton via Junction 15 of the M1. They would be greeted by broken bottles, littering and a number of other unsightly things. Mr Appleyard went on to speak about the Grosvenor Centre, and accessing it onto Abington Street. There are a number of dropped cigarette butts, chewing gum and in his opinion dirty shop fronts. He referred the Committee to a number of dirty alleyways in the town centre. Mr Appleyard spoke about the number of Fixed Penalty Notices for littering that had been issued. In 2011 there had been 207, in 2014, 206. A number had not been paid. Mr Appleyard, felt that the same area was cleaned time after time at a cost of £400,000. He commented that, in his opinion, people were under the impression that they could get away with littering and that this Action Plan would make no difference. He went on to comment on swans and cygnets that were dying in parks. Mr Appleyard suggested the need for coordination of the Action Plan.

Ms Bartlett and Mr Appleyard were thanked for their addresses.

Councillor Mike Hallam, Cabinet Member for Environmental Services, Ruth Austen, Environmental Health and Licensing Manager and Sharon Henley, Northants Police, presented the Action Plan to the Committee.

Councillor Mike Hallam reported:

- An eight month trial of a private company had taken place. The Company had been charged with issuing and dealing with Fixed Penalty Notices. Over the past eight months, 1,500 fixed penalty notices had been issued. A meeting was scheduled regarding the way forward.
- The Committee was referred to an incident of flytipping in Weedon Road. This had been picked up, first thing on the Monday morning and evidence found in the bags. A Section 46 notice had been issued.
- Junction 15 is the responsibility of the Highways Agency and Officers of NBC would liaise with them.
- Morrison's had now re-introduced "return the trolley for £1"
- Community clean ups work very well.
- Technology is being utilised more, for example, body cameras

Councillor Jamie Lane, Chair, advised the meeting that the report: Keep Northampton Tidy had been completed in 2015 and this action plan was a monitoring document of the accepted recommendations contained within the report. The Chair congratulated the Cabinet Member and officers on the production of the Action Plan

The Committee asked questions, made comment and heard:

- An issue with the report it app. when reporting leaves was brought to the attention of the Cabinet Member
- Most reports do come in via mobile ICT devices.
- The value of Councillors accompanying Environmental Services Wardens on walkabouts was highlighted. It was confirmed that such walkabouts still take place and the number of Wardens has not decreased.
- Concerns were raised regarding abandoned trollies in the Eastern district; Officers undertook to liaise with Tesco's.
- In response to a query regarding flyposting, Ruth Austen advised that a range of tools are used to deal with this effectively.
- The Committee heard that litter picking and clearing fly tipping does take up a lot of the budget

The Chair suggested that further monitoring takes place at the September 2017 meeting of the Committee.

AGREED: That further monitoring takes place at the September 2017 meeting of the Committee.

(B) TREE MAINTENANCE

The Chair advised the Committee that it was monitoring the Action Plan in relation to its recommendations contained in the O&S Report: Tree Maintenance.

Councillor Mike Hallam, Cabinet Member for Environment, reported:

- The tree maintenance budget is not spent in one ward only
- The town is zoned into four areas. However, there is a need for a budget to deal with other areas in the "long years."

The Committee asked questions, made comment and heard:

- Support was given to the 90/10 split - reactive/proactive.
- In response to a query regarding priority areas and the four zones, the Committee heard that current Policies are under review and are being changed to allow for flexibility.
- The number of trees in Abington Park and Delapre Abbey were referred to.

It was confirmed that monitoring was complete on the accepted recommendations contained within the Tree Maintenance Scrutiny report.

(C) PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING (INCLUDING HIMOS)

Councillor Stephen Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing and Debi Waite, Private Sector Housing Manager, presented the completed Action Plan in respect of the accepted recommendations contained within

the O&S Report: Private Sector Housing (Including HIMOs). Debi Waite drew the Committee's attention to various actions contained within the Action Plan:

- Three Intelligence Officers have been engaged by Housing and Wellbeing Services. They gather information from every source. Through this hundreds of properties have been identified where it is thought offenses are taking place. A matrix system is used regarding priority.
- Should a warrant be needed to access the property; prior notice for access is not given.
- The Committee was given details of a recent successful prosecution which was in respect of failure to licence.
- Court cases require a huge amount of evidence.

The Committee asked questions, made comment and heard:

- The Committee welcomed the process
- In response to publication of cases, Debi Waite confirmed they are publicised as much as the Authority can.
- In response to a query regarding Article 4; the Committee heard that a report would be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 8 February 2017. Officers from Housing and Wellbeing provided intelligence to Planning Services regarding Article 4 and the new proposed area.

AGREED: That monitoring is complete on the O&S Report: Private Sector Housing (Including HIMOs)

7. CSP PERFORMANCE

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report regarding CSP Performance.

8. RESPONSE OF CABINET TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

(A) HEALTH CHECK OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY

The Cabinet response to the Overview and Scrutiny report: Health Check of the Local Economy was noted. It was agreed that monitoring would take place at the meeting scheduled for 26 June 2017.

(B) NBC OWNED STREET LIGHTING

The Cabinet response to the Overview and Scrutiny report: NBC Owned Street Lighting was noted. It was agreed that it would be requested that a process report is presented to the Committee at its meeting on 26 June 2017.

9. SCRUTINY PANELS

10. SCRUTINY PANEL 1

The update from the Chair of Scrutiny Panel 1 – Child Sexual Exploitation was noted.

11. SCRUTINY PANEL 3

The update from the Chair of Scrutiny Panel 3 - Homelessness was noted.

Councillor Elizabeth Gowen, member of the Scrutiny Panel, advised that concerns had been presented to the Panel regarding homeless families being housed outside Northampton. This had created problems with schooling and work. Some of the Agencies had not engaged with the Scrutiny process. An example of written evidence that had been submitted to the Panel was referred to. The Scrutiny Panel had been informed that some rough sleepers slept during the day as they felt safer doing this. There had been an increased number of homeless people presenting to the Council and the Scrutiny Panel felt that the Social Lettings Agency would help in this respect. The Scrutiny Panel, during its site visits, had felt there is a real need for free access to Wi-Fi for those housed in temporary accommodation. Councillor Gowen, on behalf of the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel, passed on thanks to the Housing and Wellbeing Team for all the hard work they have undertaken and continue to undertake on homelessness.

12. SCRUTINY PANEL 4

The report of the Chair of Scrutiny Panel 4 – Emissions Strategy (Action Plan) – was noted.

13. POTENTIAL FUTURE PRE DECISION SCRUTINY.

There were none.

14. URGENT ITEMS

There were none.

The meeting concluded at 8:10 pm