

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

Tuesday, 25 September 2007

PRESENT: Councillor Woods (Chair); Councillor Glynane (Deputy Chair); Councillors Beardsworth, Church, Crake, Hoare and Mildren

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the proceedings of the meeting held on 3 September 2007 were signed by the Chair.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

- RESOLVED:** (1) That Mr Adams, Mr Swinn and Mr Winder be granted leave to address the Cabinet in respect of item 5(A) Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Community Engagement Task and Finish Group and that Mr Swinn also be granted leave to address on item 5(B) Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Voluntary Sector Task and Finish Group and also item 6 External Auditor's Report.
- (2) That Mary Perry address Cabinet in respect of item 8 NBC Progress Assessment Summer 2007.

4. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were none.

5. ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

(A) REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TASK AND FINISH GROUP.

Mr Adams addressed the Cabinet and referred to one of the recommendations in the report regarding new ways for the public to speak at Council meetings. He recalled that a decision had been made by the Council's Constitution Working Party which restricted the opportunity to speak at Full Council and he asked how this stood up to scrutiny. He also referred to the late distribution of the Audit Report and asked how the public could comment on them if they were not afforded this opportunity at Full Council.

Mr Swinn then addressed Cabinet stating that he shared some of Mr Adams' concerns and asked Cabinet to overturn the decision regarding public speaking at Full Council. He stated that he considered the public should be able to address issues at Council as they had previously. He therefore suggested that recommendation 2 as detailed in the addendum to the Task and Finish Group's report should read "that Cabinet considers the old ways for the public to speak at Council rather than thinking of new ways".

Mr Winder then addressed Cabinet endorsing what the two previous speakers had said. He stated that overall he considered that the Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish report was a good report which looked at ways to enhance this authority's engagement with the community. He said there was a need to engage the public in the decision-making process and that there needed to be some trust built into this between the Council and the community and to ensure that there was a good channel of communication to ensure that the correct information was being imparted to the community.

Councillor Paul Varnsberry as Chair of the Community Engagement Task and Finish Group then presented the group's report. He stated that it had been established by Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 (Partnerships Regeneration Community Safety and Engagement) in order to perform a short focussed review of how the Council might engage more comprehensively with the residents of Northampton, particularly in new and emerging communities who were difficult to reach. He stated that specific attention had been paid to the role and function of neighbourhood management and partnerships in achieving this objective. He stated that evidence had been considered from a wide range of community groups including residents associations, religious organisations, parish councils, the Council's community forums, the voluntary sectors and officers of the Council. There had also been a desktop based research study of best practice operated by Councils from across the country. He stated that the conclusions and recommendations of the group were listed under items 1-15 on the addendum that had been circulated with the report. He thanked all those involved with the Task and Finish Group including the other members of the group, the staff particularly Tracy Tiff and Simone Wade and the various organisations and members of the public who had given their time and contribution to the group.

Cabinet then considered the report and the recommendations as listed in the addendum. It was noted that there were a number of the recommendations listed in the addendum that could be taken on board fairly quickly, for example recommendation 6 regarding Portsmouth City Council's Consultation Toolkit being recognised as an example of best practice and it being suggested that this be considered as a template for a consultation toolkit for Borough Council staff. Similarly the importance of neighbourhood management that would engage with communities across the town was recognised. In terms of public speaking at meetings, particularly Full Council comment was made that maybe the position was that the public needed to be made more aware as to how this operated and the information more accessible as to how to go about this and what options were open to them. To this end a leaflet on public engagement and speaking at Committees was being produced. Another point to be taken into account was the question of when engagement was most effective and that really this was at the start of the process when ideas and views could be exchanged rather than at the end of the process. The aim was to ensure effective public engagement that encouraged the widest possible range of people to engage at the earliest opportunity.

The Cabinet in receiving this report considered that it was an excellent piece of work.

RESOLVED: That the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Community Engagement Task and Finish Group be received and that the recommendations be looked at in detail with a report back to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee within six months. It was noted that some proposals could be adopted fairly quickly but that there were some issues where further clarity was required and would be referred back to the Task and Finish Group accordingly.

(B) REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY VOLUNTARY SECTOR TASK AND FINISH GROUP.

Mr Swinn addressed Cabinet as Treasurer of the Northampton Federation of Residents Associations. He questioned the extent of consultation with regard to this report. He referred to page 18 which listed those organisations that had passed the initial assessment and were considered for funding by Northampton Borough Council for 2007-2010. He commented that the list was full of people who were paid to do this work and asked about those such as himself who were purely voluntary and gave freely of their time. He expressed concern over recent efficiency savings within the Borough Council which in his opinion had reduced the workforce dealing with this particular area of work i.e. grants and voluntary sector.

Councillor Capstick as the Chair of the Voluntary Sector Task and Finish Group then presented the report and in doing so declared a personal interest following her appointment as one of the Borough Council's representatives on the Northamptonshire Rape and Incest Crisis Centre. She stated that this Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group had been set up to make recommendations arising from the review to Cabinet to assist in the budget process and medium term funding strategy for 2008-2011. In addition it had been found following a two day CEFAP meeting in March 2007 that a review of the partnership working with the voluntary sector should take place prior to funding awards for 2008 & 2009. Funding for the voluntary sector organisations had been rolled over in 2007 & 2008 for the fifth year and a new approach and strategic view needed to be thought out between Northampton Borough Council and the voluntary sector. She stated that the review had been a short focussed piece of work that was linked to the Council's corporate priorities and examined a range of information. The group's evidence had been taken from a range of sources and these included witness evidence from the Portfolio Holder (Regeneration and Community Safety, Community Engagement) and from the former Portfolio Holder and CEFAP Chair. She thanked all those who had taken part in the group. She drew attention to pages 4 and 5 of the report which set out the recommendations which were divided into short term recommendations and medium term recommendations.

The Cabinet then considered the report. Councillor Beardsworth commented that she was surprised that there was no mention of N-COMPASS which was an umbrella organisation that dealt with the voluntary sector and supported new organisations and stated that she would look into this further. Councillor Mildren commented that from a financial perspective this was a very useful report and would form part of the budget process. It was recognised that there was the need to look at the delivery of the services in the most cost effective way and that partnership working and function sharing was another element of the engagement process.

RESOLVED: That the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Voluntary Sector Task and Finish Group be received and that the recommendations be looked at in detail in conjunction with the budget process it being noted that Cabinet recognises the urgency in terms of the voluntary sector and will report back to Overview and Scrutiny as soon as possible.

6. EXTERNAL AUDITORS REPORT (FOLLOWING THE AUDIT OF THE STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS)

Mr Swinn addressed the Cabinet in respect of the External Auditors report and made comment on the use of resources as set out on page 4 of the report and the twelve criteria specified by the Audit Commission to ensure that resources were deployed effectively. He commented that only one of these twelve criteria had been achieved.

Councillor Mildren as the relevant Portfolio Holder then presented the report of KPMG the External Auditors which gave their opinion on whether the Council's financial statements presented fairly the position of the Council as at 31 March 2007 and its income and expenditure. He commented that under page 4 of the report "Use of Resources" this was based on the 2005/06 assessment and that the 2006/07 evidence had been submitted on 3 September 2007 and was currently being reviewed. It was anticipated that following that improvements would be acknowledged across all areas and it was anticipated that scores would be increased across a number of areas. He stated that the Statement of Internal Control and the Accounts had been updated and that this had been summarised on page 8 of the report. He added that there had not been any material adjustments. He drew attention to the fact that there had been some adjustments to page 11 of the report which identified that there were now no uncorrected audit differences. He stated that the Statement of Accounts would be considered by Council at its meeting on Thursday.

RESOLVED: That the External Auditors report be received and noted for submission to Full Council accordingly.

7. RE-PRESENTATION OF THE ACCOUNTS POST AUDIT

Councillor Mildren as the relevant Portfolio Holder submitted a report asking that the above external Audit Report by KPMG on the 2006/07 Financial Statements Use of Resources be noted and highlighting the comments made by the Audit Committee at its meeting the previous evening in terms of the 2006/07 Statement of Internal Control and Statement of Accounts. He advised that Audit Committee had in discussing the accounts and the KPMG report determined that no further amendments were due to be made to the accounts but that further information had been requested in terms of the following:-

The external audit fee for all of the accounts had increased by £30,000 to £150,000 and a breakdown of these additional expenses had been requested.

An analysis had been requested from officers on the debts of the authority and the bad debt provisions set aside for these.

An update had been requested from KPMG before the meeting of Full Council on 27 September regarding the Use of Resources score. The 2005/06 conclusion was being used for the 2006/07 score when the information submitted for 2006/07 had yet to be reviewed. It was noted that KPMG were liaising with the Audit Commission on this and the timing issues.

RESOLVED: (1) That the KPMG unqualified opinion of the 2006/07 accounts be noted as set out in item 6 above.
(2) That Cabinet note and support the comments made by Audit Committee and recommend to Council that the 2006/07 Statement of Internal Control and the 2006/07 Statement of Accounts be approved.

8. NBC PROGRESS ASSESSMENT SUMMER 2007

Mary Perry addressed Cabinet with regard to the findings of the Audit Commission's Progress Assessment undertaken in June 2007. She stated that she was pleased to say that there had been progress. However on a cautionary note there was still the need to ensure that the improvements were embedded and made resilient and sustainable. She stated that there were still areas that required improvement and these were highlighted under Section 3.3 of the report. She added that a broader assessment would be carried out shortly.

Councillor Woods commented that every effort was being made to ensure that the financial planning was robust and that a new corporate planning process was underway with the aim of producing a robust corporate plan. Plans were in place to revise the Council's approach to service planning in order to better reflect corporate and partnership priorities to make targets and outcomes clearer and to make service plans more accessible to a wider audience. Budget monitoring was already in place and Management Board was taking action to address the issues arising. He stated that Cabinet fully accepted the report and that this was a first positive report and that he was looking forward to future positive reports very soon. The hard work done in order to achieve this position was recognised and the efforts of staff and all three political parties was recognised in helping to achieve this and hoped that this positive trend could continue but was not an opportunity for complacency.

RESOLVED: That the Audit Commission's progress assessment for June 2007 be received with the progress to date being noted and the actions set out in Section 3.3 of the report being approved.

The meeting concluded at 6.40pm

