

## MINUTES

OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF A MEETING OF NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL HELD AT THE GUILDHALL, NORTHAMPTON, ON MONDAY 18 JANUARY 2010 AT SIX THIRTY O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING

**PRESENT:** HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR Councillor Hill (in the Chair).

**COUNCILLORS:** Beardsworth, Capstick, Caswell, Church, Clarke, Collins, J. Conroy, De Cruz, Davies, Duncan, Edwards, Flavell, Garlick, Glynane, Golby, Hawkins, B. Hoare, Hollis, Larratt, C. Lill, J. Lill, Malpas, B. Markham, I. Markham, Mason, Matthews, Meredith, Mildren, Palethorpe, Perkins, Reeve, Scott, Simpson, Taylor, P. D. Varnsberry, P. M. Varnsberry, Wilson and Yates

### 1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

### 2. MINUTES.

In respect of the minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2009 the Mayor proposed and Councillor Yates seconded "That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2009 as circulated be amended as follows:-

That on page 6 the paragraph referring to Councillor Clarke's question to Councillor P D Varnsberry and the response be deleted and replaced by "the Mayor ruled that as the title of the Portfolio to whom the question from Councillor Clarke in respect of Credit Unions was addressed did not exist that it was out of order and could not be presented" and

that on page 8 the paragraph referring to Councillor Clarke's question to Councillor P D Varnsberry and the response be deleted and replaced by "the Mayor ruled that as the title of the Portfolio to whom the question from Councillor Clarke in respect of the One Stop Shop was addressed did not exist that it was out of order and could not be presented".'

Councillor Clarke commented that he did not agree with the proposed amendment and that the minutes as printed were, in his view, correct. He requested that if agreement could not be reached that the minutes be not moved and the issue further investigated.

Upon a vote the amendment was carried.

**RESOLVED:** That, subject to the following amendments, the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 7 December 2009 be signed by the Mayor:

That on page 6 the paragraph referring to Councillor Clarke's question from Councillor P D Varnsberry and the response be deleted and be replaced by "the Mayor ruled that as the title of the

Portfolio to whom the question from Councillor Clarke in respect of Credit Unions was addressed did not exist that it was out of order and could not be presented” and

“That on page 8 the paragraph referring to Councillor Clarke’s question to Councillor P D Varnsberry and the response be deleted and replaced by “the Mayor ruled that as the title of the Portfolio to whom the question from Councillor Clarke in respect of the One Stop Shop was addressed did not exist that it was out of order and could not be presented”.

### **3. APOLOGIES.**

Apologies were received from Councillors S Chaudhury, I Choudary, R Conroy, Crake, Hadland, M Hoare, Lane and Woods.

### **4. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS.**

The Mayor commented that a shelter box to support the victims of the recent earthquake in Haiti was on display in the Guildhall and that a town-wide collection would take place in the town on 23 January 2010. The Mayor invited Councillors to make contributions.

### **5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND PETITIONS**

Mr Adams in referring to the Portfolio Holder for Housing’s report and the reference in it to a named company and asked if she was aware of a press release of 16 October 2009 which stated that the company had a proven track record on delivering decent homes and that the Council was delighted to be working with them. Mr Adams commented that he believed that the company had a proven track record of bid-rigging and colluding to push up prices. At the time of the press release this company had been named by, and was under investigation by, the Office of Fair Trading since April 2008 having illegally pushed up the cost to the taxpayer for schools, hospitals, police stations and other major works in the public sector. The Office of Fair Trading had fined them over £1m in November 2009. The company had registered an appeal but this was only in respect of the size of the fine. Mr Adams asked if the Portfolio Holder was still content that the Council should be associated with this company.

### **6. MEMBER AND PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

The Mayor advised that four questions had been received from members of the public and Councillors. The questions and responses had been tabled in accordance with the Constitution.

Mr Adams asked Councillor Beardsworth as the relevant Portfolio Holder whether she was aware of recent legal decisions which had resulted in Liberal Democrat controlled Portsmouth having to reinstate on-site wardens and Conservative controlled Barnet having to keep to current arrangements: If required could she give an assurance that NBC’s current service was legal? Councillor Beardsworth commented that the Council was aware of the recent legal determinations regarding

Portsmouth and Barnet and their sheltered housing services respectively. In reviewing the Council's own sheltered housing service the Council had kept itself abreast of developments regarding the legal challenges against other local authorities. Each case was made on its own merits and there were fundamental differences between Barnet and Portsmouth and the Council's position. The Council was confident that it had complied with its legal obligations.

In the absence of Mr McNabb the Mayor noted that his question and the response would be sent to him.

Mr Adams asked Councillor Beardsworth as the relevant Portfolio Holder the total numbers of housing stock subject to a type 2 asbestos survey; and how many had required the removal of some asbestos product; and how many of them had been registered with asbestos in situ that would need regular monitoring and whether that monitoring was in place. Councillor Beardsworth replied that the total number of housing stock subject to a type 2 survey was 1721 and that 212 had required the removal or seal/encapsulation of some asbestos and that 1104 had been registered with asbestos in situ that would require regular monitoring; and that monitoring was in place. As a supplementary question Mr Adams asked if the Portfolio Holder would agree with him that there was still a long way to go to get a full register. Councillor Beardsworth commented that a lot had been achieved but there was still more work that needed to be done.

Councillor Malpas asked Councillor Hoare that at the previous Council meeting he had asked the Leader of the Council whether or not a consultant was being employed to prepare for the closure of Cliftonville by finding space for additional staff at the Guildhall and if so at what cost to the authority. The Leader of the Council had been unable to give an answer but agreed to investigate and respond. However, he had not received a response. Councillor B Hoare apologised to Councillor Malpas and confirmed that the Council would be engaging specialist advice to make best use of private sector expertise. In doing so the authority was seeking advice from Counsel as to flexible working practices, more efficient use of its office space and attendant improvements to its information and communication technology systems. The tender process to commission this advice was not yet complete and therefore it was not appropriate to fully publicise the details at this stage.

## **7. CABINET MEMBER PRESENTATIONS**

At this point each of the Cabinet members made a presentation of their respective Portfolios which had been circulated with the agenda.

Councillor B Hoare presented his Portfolio Holder report. Councillor Palethorpe commented that in respect of the Leader of the Council's comments about improvements the Council had made and the Council's release from special measures that there were a number of former Councillors and a wide range of people that had contributed to the Council's improvement. Councillor B Hoare commented that he was happy to acknowledge the contribution that everyone had made. Councillor Hawkins in referring to the comment about WNDC, queried the

Administration's view of the WNDC being transformed into a democratically accountable regeneration vehicle. Councillor B Hoare commented that the Government had agreed that there should be a return of planning powers to the local district councils and that WNDC's focus should be on major projects and the supporting infrastructure.

Councillor Mildren enquired whether the figures for postal votes could be broken down by Parliamentary constituency; whether canvassers carrying out door knocking were the Council's own staff or otherwise brought in to do the job; and whether there was funding for this. Councillor B Hoare commented that he would find out if the postal votes could be split by Parliamentary constituency and as far as he was aware door knocking was carried out by the Council's own staff. There was no specific sum of money for this work but it was taken from the overall sum of money given by the Government for the Annual Canvas. Councillor Larratt enquired whether the Leader of the Council supported moves to retain Election night for the counting of votes rather than moving the count to the following day. He noted that South Northamptonshire had now moved their count back to Election night. Councillor B Hoare commented that when the count took place was a matter for the Returning Officer.

In the absence of Councillor Crake, Councillor B Hoare submitted the Portfolio Holder report for Environment. Councillor Larratt asked if the Leader of the Council would pass onto staff at Westbridge Depot the Council's thanks for all that they had achieved during the recent bad weather. He compared the situation with that in Milton Keynes and believed that the Council had done very well. Councillor B Hoare commented that the Council's staff had carried out an exceptional job in difficult conditions, there were many individual stories of assistance given to the public.

Councillor P D Varnserry submitted his report and commented that in respect of free swimming national figures for the latest quarter showed that the Council's Trilogy pools had maintained their second place in the region, behind Leicester, and in the nationwide listings they were the first pools run by a non-Metropolitan Council. He noted that the Funding Officer for Leisure & Culture had been chosen for a prestigious 15 month secondment to the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. His skills and talents would not be lost entirely during this period, however as he would return to the Council regularly to keep track of his duties here. The experience he would gain on his secondment would be extremely beneficial to the Council. Councillor P D Varnserry reported that the "A History of the World" was a project which was being co-ordinated by the British Museum and the BBC and which aimed to illustrate the history of mankind and the growth of civilisation through museum objects. The museum service's Shoe Heritage & Development Officer had been appointed the Northamptonshire Co-ordinator, responsible for identifying the county's list of ten objects. The 1945 "Escape Boot" which is held in the shoe collection has been chosen as one of the featured items. Councillor P D Varnserry announced that Billing Aquadrome would host the 2010 Northampton Balloon Festival. Additional events were planned and it was expected to attract a higher number of balloonists this year. On behalf of the Council we wished them a successful event with good ballooning weather. Councillor Clarke commented that Councillor Varnserry had previously stated that rumours about the future of

community centres had been “irresponsible”. However, the Council’s own published budget consultation referred to a 40% saving on community centres and documentation published by the JPU showed some community centre sites as development areas. Councillor P D Varnsberry commented that bearing in mind that an Overview & Scrutiny Task and Finish Group was looking at this issue it would be premature of him to respond at this stage. Councillor Malpas commented that although the 100% increase in standing orders at the leisure centres was good what did this actually represent in terms of usage. Councillor P D Varnsberry undertook to write to Councillor Malpas with this information. Councillor Golby enquired whether the administration had any plans to privatise the leisure centres. Councillor P D Varnsberry commented that leisure centres were currently performing at levels above those achieved by the private sector and personally he would wish that they were retained in-house. Councillor Palethorpe commented that during 2010 a five year investment programme in new equipment at the leisure centres would come to an end. He enquired as to whether there would be a new contract. Councillor P D Varnsberry commented that he recalled the previous Conservative Administration’s plans to close Lings Forum. Councillor Palethorpe commented that they had given the public options; the public hadn’t wanted to see Lings closed and so it wasn’t. In this instance there appeared to be no options. Councillor Larratt enquired as to the prospects for Blackymore Community Centre, currently owned by the Council and run by Wootton and East Hunsbury Parish Council, being transferred to the overall control of the Parish Council. He asked if the Portfolio Holder could write to him with the terms of the Lease and responsibilities of the Council and the Parish Council. Councillor P D Varnsberry commented that the results of the Task and Finish Group reporting to the community centres was awaited but in the meantime a copy of the existing lease would be supplied to Councillor Larratt. Councillor Meredith commented that Councillors should visit such centres to see what had been achieved. Councillor P D Varnsberry concurred that Councillors could visit the leisure centres if they wished to do so.

Councillor Beardsworth submitted her Portfolio Holder report and commented that the Housing Solutions Team had found accommodation for 20 rough sleepers from across the county during the recent bad weather. Councillor Clarke referred to Mr Adams’ comments in respect of the company named in her report and a list of 100 companies published by the OFT where investigations had concluded that collusion had taken place to increase bids submitted for public sector work. He enquired as to how many companies on that list the Council had dealings with. Councillor Beardsworth commented that the company concerned had submitted a competitive tender and their performance was being monitored. She undertook to write to Councillor Clarke in respect of the other queries he had made. Councillor Clarke commented that the company had colluded with other companies so that their bid had appeared to be the cheapest. The OFT were aware of this. Councillor Palethorpe congratulated the Council’s Sheltered Housing staff and enquired whether the Portfolio Holder accepted that it was important for Sheltered Housing Wardens to spend time with vulnerable tenants. Councillor Beardsworth commented that in the recent bad weather all vulnerable tenants had been contacted and the Council had worked with other agencies. Council wardens should not be seen to be too intrusive.

Councillor Church submitted his Portfolio Holder report. Councillor Larratt commented that he was pleased to see progress on the Becketts Park Marina and enquired as to the position in respect of the Sea Cadets Lease. Councillor Church commented that the Environment Agency and the Council were committed to seeing the Sea Cadets remain on the site which was where they wanted to be. He undertook to write to Councillor Larratt in respect of the Lease to the Sea Cadets. Councillor Larratt commented that the Portfolio Holder's report had referred to some good news in respect of companies and enquired whether there was any further news about the former Woolworths shop in Abington Street being re-occupied. Councillor Church commented that he was only aware of what had been reported in the Chronicle and Echo as this shop unit was privately owned. Councillor Mildren referred to a recent press article concerning possible supermarket developments on a number of sites around the town. Councillor Church commented that this was an article that appeared in the Chronicle and Echo resulting from a report to the WNDC Board in respect of developer interest in a number of sites around the town. He commented that this showed the pressure on the central area and the importance of having the Central Area Action Plan. Councillor Clarke commented that the JPU had published, as part of the Emergent Joint Core Strategy, potential sites for housing which showed 73 and 71 sites respectively within Castle and St Crispin Wards and only 3 in Weston Ward. Councillor Church commented that the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment was a list of sites as identified by developers. It was not a plan.

Councillor Perkins submitted his Portfolio Holder report. Councillor Reeve commented that concessionary fares cost the Council £1m a year. He enquired how much had been paid out and how much had been received. Councillor Perkins undertook to write to Councillor Reeve with this information. Councillor Palethorpe in respect of the reference to shared services enquired if the Portfolio Holder knew why Wellingborough Borough Council had pulled out of shared services in respect of Revenues and Benefits. Councillor Perkins commented that he had been surprised by this but he believed that they were in discussions with some other authorities possibly in Leicestershire. He noted that discussions were taking place with Lincoln City Council in respect of a possible shared service. Councillor Palethorpe sought assurance that resources would be put in place to prevent the Revenues and Benefits service from sliding backwards. Councillor Perkins commented that Revenues and Benefits was now much better placed than it had been a few years ago and that the Council wished to sell its services on a wider basis. Councillor Clarke in respect of concessionary fares enquired by how much the budget was currently underspent. Councillor Perkins commented that currently expenditure was below last year's increase but that the actual spend was much higher. The underspend was currently £360,000 however the service had to be used before expenditure came from the budget. In response to a comment made by Councillor Yates, Councillor Perkins confirmed that there were still three months of the year to go and that the budget represented anticipated spend as opposed to actual spend.

Councillor B Markham submitted his Portfolio Holder report and noted that Councillors may have received spam e-mails purporting to come from HM Customs and Excise and the HSBC Bank. These should be ignored and since the weekend

should have stopped coming through. If Councillors received these e-mails they were invited to inform IT Services. Councillor Flavell enquired as to the success of the new voice recognition system. Councillor B Markham commented that there had been some problems with some extensions, names and accents but of approximately 1400 calls per day only 200 were being routed through to the switchboard. Whilst he had noted that some Councillors had complained about the system the public generally seemed to like it.

## **8. OPPOSITION GROUP BUSINESS**

Councillor Palethorpe commented that listening to Parliament it was clear that there would be little money available for public finances for the foreseeable future and that the Council would be in a difficult position. He commented that the political parties could be in opposition to each other or they could jointly recognise the issues that were faced. It was easy enough for all parties to say that the Government didn't give the Council enough money. Councillor Palethorpe commented that when talking to the public the Council should use terms that the public would readily understand and not jargon, for example, "efficiency savings". All parties needed to work with the Chief Executive to ensure that the right services were delivered by the right people at the right level. He commented that it wouldn't be the Government departments that would have the final say on the services that were delivered but would be the public and therefore the Council needed to work together.

Councillor Perkins responded commenting that he welcomed Councillor Palethorpe's comments and he noted that some estimates indicated that to get back to the pre-crisis levels of debt would take until 2030. Whichever political party formed the next Government of the country substantial cuts would need to be made. However, the speed of those cuts would be important and the Conservatives had advertised that they favoured quick cuts which would affect Local Government both immediately and hard. He commented that the Council must be realistic in what it said about budgets and savings and that the Strategic Business Reviews would take account of potential funding cuts. The Council needed to have an open mind on how services were delivered and the quality that could be achieved. He commented that this would guide the Administration's policies and that they were prepared to make the hard decisions where necessary.

Councillor Palethorpe commented that he welcomed Councillor Perkins realism and that the funding for the development of the town would not come from Government but from other sources. He commented that it was important that the Borough was viewed as a whole and that the Council should be clear on what it wanted to achieve and should not be frightened of making decisions notwithstanding the situation of the town centre.

## **9. PROPOSED OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE STRUCTURE**

Councillor Yates submitted a report and Councillor Malpas seconded its noting. Councillors had had an opportunity to contribute to the proposals which would now be submitted to the Constitution Working Party to respond to. Comment was made on the need to provide more resources for Overview & Scrutiny if at all possible.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

## 10. COUNCIL TAX BASE 2010/11

Councillor Perkins submitted a report and Councillor P M Varnsverry seconded the adoption of the recommendation.

**RESOLVED:** That the Council Tax Base for 2010/11 be agreed at 66,896 Band D equivalent properties and the associated Parish Tax bases within this:-

	<b>2010/11</b>	<b>(2009/10)</b>
Billing	2,716	2,568
Collingtree	517	514
Duston	5,255	5,172
Great Houghton	288	286
Hardingstone	755	743
Upton	1,469	1,302
Wootton & East Hunsbury	6,340	6,331
Northampton (Unparished)	49,556	49,250
<b>Total tax base</b>	<b>66,896</b>	<b>66,166</b>

## 11. NOTICES OF MOTION

There were none.

## 12. MATTERS OF URGENCY WHICH BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THE MAYOR IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED.

None.

The meeting concluded at 20.10 hours.