

Northampton Borough Council

Northampton Pensioners' Forum

Thursday, 13 September 2012

Officers at the meeting

1. WELCOMES AND INTRODUCTIONS

The co-chair Roger Rumsey welcomed everyone to the meeting .

Present were Councillor Brian Oldham – the co-chair of the Forum, Mike Hill, John Rawlings, Ann Timson, Liz Percival, Norman Sharp, Mary Dyer Atkinson, Harry Tuttle, Hazel Tuttle, Brian Nichols, Dave Hewitt, Tony Mallard, Joyce Smith, B Isaac, Dave Green, Norman Adams, C Owusu- AKuffo, Gloria Bartley, Brian Nicholls, Marcia Lewis.

Councillor Mary Markham.

Officers- Lindsey Ambrose, Joe Biskupski, Nicky McKenzie, Freya Bullen and Lauren Humber.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Mr Sam Owusu-Akuffo.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 May 2012 were approved.

Matters Arising

Bus Interchange

The Co-Chair confirmed that a letter had been sent to the Head of Planning expressing the concerns of The Pensioners Forum on the long term viability of the bus interchange as to its suitability for the needs of the elderly and vulnerable.

Community Governance Review

Members of the Forum felt that further updates were required on the next stages of considering whether to create new Parish Councils and agreed this should be on the agenda for the next meeting. Councillor Oldham commented that he would be leafleting all of his constituents. The consultation on the review would be ending on 19th October 2012.

4. CLLR MARY MARKHAM- HOUSING MATTERS (INCLUDING HOUSING IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION)

Councillor Mary Markham, Cabinet member for Housing explained to the forum that

there were currently several housing related consultations going on.

The current Council accommodation waiting list has more than 9,900 people on it, more than 500 of which were in emergency bands. Numbers were increasing and all avenues that might alleviate the problem had to be explored.

The changes to the Housing Allocation Policy would not affect current tenants. However future tenants may be offered shorter tenancies and there could be restrictions of length of tenancies.

There is no money available to build properties; the only anticipated new build would be in 2014 when 16 properties are being provided. Stock Options have to be examined as a method of realising funding for future projects. £2 million has been set aside for an appraisal on stock options which she considered would ensure that the best solution was found. Councillor Markham also stated that the money needed to be seen as an investment in providing the best solution and that the expenditure would all be published.

Concern was expressed that consultations did not lead to the views of the public being taken into consideration but that it raises expectations and leads to frustration when new measures are implemented anyway.

Houses in Multiple Occupation(HIMO)

Tony Mallard expressed concern that houses in multiple occupation are becoming a big problem and that he felt that the relaxation of the planning regulations might make things worse.

Cllr Markham stated that the problems caused by HIMO's had been the reason she had stood as a Councillor. She considered that it was possible that the changes to the welfare reforms would make things more difficult. The Council is working with the National Landlords Association. Whilst appreciating that the rogue landlords are less likely to be members of the Association she felt that working with the Association sent a positive message to the responsible landlords and encouraged them to report rogue activity.

She stated that at the present time there isn't a planning policy in place which sets out the saturation levels of HIMO's allowed in each area. Initially there was no register as to where these properties were but now the authorised HIMO's were logged and shown on the website. Also a specialist officer has been employed to deal with HIMO's and there will be further staff employed to undertake inspections of these properties.

Forum members gave examples of properties where problems had been experienced. They felt that many of these properties were unlikely to have planning permission for multiple occupation. Pressures on property lead to more houses going into multiple occupancy and private landlords can make large profits from a single property.

5. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS CONSULTATION

Nicky McKenzie, Housing Allocations Manager gave a presentation on the potential changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.

The main proposed changes were: -

- Reduction of bands from 5 to 3
- Additional priority for working households
- Additional priority for voluntary work
- Government has determined that there should be priority for armed forces personnel. Wider exclusions from the housing register
- Clearer local connections criteria
- Refusal of 3 properties excluded in the future.

In reality housing is an increasingly scarce resource and it has to be accepted that customers currently on band C and D will not have any chance of being housed. Therefore this needs to be made clear to the applicants, who can then be assisted to make proper alternative housing provision.

One of the effects of the potential changes will be to reduce the housing register from 9,900 to 4,5000. Part of this will be achieved by concentrating on the top two bands and also there will be the introduction of local connections, for example people who have lived in Northampton for 3 years out of the previous 5. Currently there are 5000 applications a month and only 70 lettings a month. Up to 200 requests are being received every week and this is not sustainable with current staff resources.

There are proposals for tenancy checks before being allowed to join the Housing Register and potential tenants may be excluded if they have caused damage to properties or have been convicted of committing hate crimes for example.

There is also a proposed reduction in the amount of time that a person will be housed in emergency accommodation.

The key point was that this scheme is currently out for consultation and every effort is being made to involve as many people as possible. Consultation packs have gone out to everyone currently on the Housing Register. Then the proposals will be considered by Cabinet in December.

Discussions were held around what powers of regulation related to privately tenanted properties. Work is on-going to try to ensure that private landlords comply with regulations and tenants will be referred to those landlords who have a good reputation, however increased pressure on housing will mean that there will be those landlords whose only interest is profit.

It was also pointed out that some of the people who were seen as “anti- social” neighbours were actually those who might be the most vulnerable. Councillor Markham agreed that the needs of these people must be kept in mind, and that

every effort needed to be made in order to ensure that they were given accommodation which was suitable for their needs.

6. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW

The Sheltered Housing Review consultation was presented by Freya Bullen

At the moment, support is only given to sheltered housing residents, so not all Northampton's residents who are potentially in need are able to access the support service. There are inflexible levels of support provided even though some people may have varying health and disability needs. People may just get a visit once a month, others 3 times a week, others every day with a very few getting a more intensive visiting regime. People in real need may not get as much help and quality of help as required, while other people get more help than they need – because the system is too inflexible.

There are increasing numbers of elderly and disabled people in Northampton. Although many people want to stay living in their own homes, the current sheltered housing service only helps those who have moved into the council's sheltered housing.

Things need to change and improve to help more people and to help people more appropriately.

There are community rooms across the Borough, many of those are under-used but could be a good space for people in the community to use and help toward tackling feelings of isolation.

The proposal is that everyone would have an assessment and support would be tailored to fit the needs of an individual. The service would be expanded to include other people not just those living in sheltered accommodation. This would be a benefit to those who wanted to stay in their own home. The service could also be flexible to cover periods where there may be more intense support required for example recovery after a hospital stay.

This would also interact with other services, so an assessment would look at any gaps in the provision of services or indeed any duplication.

Members of the forum commented that they felt this would lead to a dilution of the service, with budgets being stretched further. There were also concerns about the safety of residents in sheltered housing and some feeling that vulnerable residents would not access the services because they would not open doors to admit officers.

7. TENANCY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

There was insufficient time to discuss this item. However it was emphasised that there was consultation going on and urged any forum members who were Council tenants to make take part in that.

8. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE

There will be changes to the Council Tax and Council Tax Benefit systems and there will be an Open Day to publicise the changes. This will be held on 10th October and there will be two sessions between 3-4.30pm and 6 and 7.30pm.

Forum Members thanked Lindsey Ambrose for all of her work with the forum and wished her good luck in her new role when she left the Council at the end of September.

9. AGENDA ITEMS FOR NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The next Forum meeting to include an update to the Community Governance Review. A future meeting to include an item on consumer awareness.

10. DATE AND VENUES OF FUTURE FORUM MEETINGS

1st November 2012 at 2.00pm

The meeting concluded at 4:10 pm

Questions and feedback from Pensioners Forum

Community Governance Review

Q1 Who is on the Steering Group?

A1 Six cross-party members are on the CGR Steering Group – Cllr Mackintosh, Cllr Eldred, Cllr Larratt, Cllr Wire, Cllr Mason, Cllr Beardsworth

Q2 Why is the Council able to say no to what people vote for?

- turnout, marginal, etc considerations to be taken into account

A2 The General Purposes Committee agreed for 12 proposals made in the first stage to go forward for detailed consultation in the second stage. The list of proposals can be found at www.northampton.gov.uk/cgr or by contacting Keith Mitchell on keithmitchell@northampton.gov.uk tel 01604 837072. The detailed consultation on the 12 proposals is being undertaken in two parts – a survey of views from people and organisations across the Borough as well as a local advisory poll (referendums) of the registered electors in the areas affected. The Council will take account of evidence provided in both of these parts when deciding to approve proposals or not. Under the CGR guidance from Central Government, the Council is responsible for undertaking the consultation and also for making the decision on whether proposals are implemented. There is no requirement to undertake a poll but NBC wanted to include this consultation method as well as a survey. The type of poll being undertaken is governed by different legislation to a normal election and the results are advisory rather than definitive.

Q3 Will we end up paying twice e.g. if my area takes on street lighting will I have to pay the parish and still have to pay the NCC which calculates its council tax including providing street lighting?

A3 If services are taken over from the County by a Parish, the County's costs will be reduced and they may decide to reduce their Council Tax charge, but that decision is up to the County.

Q4 Can't we have community area meetings/parish meetings instead? You dont have to pay for those like you do for parish council.

A4 These are forms of community governance and petitions could have been established in favour of these.

Q5 Why haven't I been asked - I live in Parklands?

Cllr Oldham says he thinks people stop collecting signatures once got enough to meet the required threshold.

A5 Information about the CGR was publicised in early February in the press, on the radio, to local community groups, community centres, on the Council's website, at public briefings. It was then

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down to individuals in each area to set up a petition and to canvass support from local residents. These lead petitioners have employed various ways to promote their petition but may have chosen not to contact every household.

Q6 How will I know about the next stage? How will I get a chance to say no?

A6 The detailed consultation on the 12 proposals agreed by the GP Committee to go to this second stage is being undertaken in two parts – a survey of views from people and organisations across the Borough as well as a local advisory poll (referendums) of the registered electors in the areas affected. The survey is taking place over the 7 weeks from 3 September to 15 October. This has been publicised in the last 2 weeks in the press, on the radio, to local community groups, to community forums, community centres, on the Council's website, and at public briefings to be held on 11 September 1-3pm and 13 September 6-8pm at the Guildhall. There is also a display in the One Stop Shop for the next 7 weeks. Information and the survey can be obtained online or from the One Stop Shop or from community centres, Parish offices, or by emailing or phoning Keith Mitchell – keithmitchell@northampton.gov.uk tel 01604 837072.

The advisory poll will be held on 15 November in affected areas when you will be able to vote YES or NO to the local proposal.

Q7 Are we having postal votes?

A7 Due to the high costs of a postal vote, the advisory poll will be undertaken at polling stations only.

Q8 How are the boundaries of proposed parish councils defined?

A8 The proposed parish boundaries have been defined by the lead petitioners/campaigners. In the main, these boundaries follow existing ward boundaries.

Q9 Feedback: people are confused which ward they now live in as boundaries have changed. This makes it very difficult to understand this process which is all under the new and unfamiliar boundaries.

A9 The new ward boundaries approved in 2011 have been available on the Council's website since then. There is a detailed map in the CGR consultation document that shows the current ward boundaries and the proposed new parish boundaries. Detailed maps of proposed new parishes can be found on the CGR web pages at www.northampton.gov.uk/cgr

Q10 Feedback: why haven't you provided petitions explicitly letting people know they can petition against having the already existing ones?

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A10 The Council's CGR information document published in early February did state that CGRs allow people to create, merge, alter or abolish parish councils.

Q11 Feedback: surely the next step is devolving powers to the parishes? Creating a unitary county council? People dont realise. This is the first time the leading party at NBC is not supporting a unitary Nton. If you devolve more there won't be a case for a unitary Nton. You'll also find that NCC cllr = NBC cllr = parish cllr and getting income for all of these roles.

A11 Officers unable to answer – this is a political question.

Q12 Feedback: why is the information so ambiguous and full of jargon? People won't realise what this work is about - it looks like something the planning consultants might have done.

Cllr Oldham: shares people's concerns that they need to have all the facts on this.

A12 The Council is obliged to refer to the official title of the review and to the relevant legislation. We have endeavoured to use meaningful phrases, such as Parish Council reviews, and more detailed explanations wherever possible.

Q13 Feedback: it doesn't make much sense to me - where's it coming from? is it the Big Society? why are we being asked now?

A13 The local Conservative party manifesto included a plan to undertake the CGR. In addition, Government guidance suggests that it is good practice to carry out a Community Governance Review every 10 – 15 years. There has not been a review of community governance arrangements in the town in recent years and in many parts of the town there are no parish councils.

Q14 Why is no other council in the East Midlands or the county doing this?

A14 Government guidance suggests that it is good practice to carry out a Community Governance Review every 10 – 15 years. Other Council's in the East Midlands or the County will make their own decisions on the frequency of carrying out such a review. There are many councils across the East Midlands that have undertaken a CGR recently or are currently undertaking a CGR including Wellingborough Borough Council, Bolsover DC, Erewash BC, High Peak BC, South Derbyshire, Hinckley & Bosworth BC, Blaby DC, North West Leicestershire DC, Harborough DC, Charnwood, Erewash BC.

Q15 Will we end up with half the town parished and half not - or could NBC decide that so much of the town is parished that it will force the rest of the town to be parished against the wishes of the people?

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A15 Cllr Oldham: in W Hunsbury I just said I'd like it to match the ward boundary; proposed parish area - it would depend on who the cllr leading the petition is and what they've decided with their residents have decided what they want the parish to be considered as; yes some of the town will be parished and some won't be - as some wards have not got petitions people in them won't get the opportunity to be asked to vote.