

## NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

### MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 2 -RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Thursday, 14 February 2013

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:** Councillor Matt Lynch (Chair), Councillor Suresh Patel (Deputy Chair), Councillors Tony Ansell, Sally Beardsworth, Elizabeth Gowen and Danielle Stone

**Witnesses** John Farrell Asset Director EMS) Item 5 (A)  
David Farquhar Assistant Director of Highways NCC Item 5  
(B)

**Officers** Julie Seddon Director of Customers and Cultural Services  
Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer  
Joanne Birkin Democratic Services Officer

#### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Dennis Meredith and Sheridan New - Co-optee.

#### 2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2012 were approved and signed by the Chair.

#### 3. DEPUTATIONS/ PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

#### 4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

#### 5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

##### (A) DIRECTOR, ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

John Farrell, Assets Director, EMS attended the Panel to present the written answers to the core questions which had already been submitted.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

Mr Farrell stated that he had been a resident of Northampton for five years and on a personal level he had been very concerned to see the numbers of shops which had closed over that time.

Mr Farrell felt that since the environmental management of the town centre had been outsourced there had not been strong enough engagement with other partners. Work had been undertaken to try to improve this but there was still a need for improvement. He considered that engagement with Police Community Support Officers (PCSO'S) and (Business Improvement District) BID had to be strong to deliver improvements to the appearance of the town centre.

Mr Farrell felt that education played a vital role in the management of public perception of the town centre. The town centre had to promote the image that it was a pleasant place to visit. If the perception was negative then people would not come, and spend time in the town. The town centre experience was rarely about retail alone but included the range of services available, types and quality of places to eat and places of interest. There had been some significant changes made in the town centre cleaning regime, in particular the extension of sweeping hours until 8pm which he hoped would result in an improvement in the perception of the level of cleanliness in the town centre.

Mr Farrell commented that the traders in the town used a wide range of collection companies for their trade waste. This led to a variation in standards of service and did not necessarily accord with standards which the Borough Council would like to see in the town centre. There needed to be a strengthening of enforcement to tackle problems surrounding the collection of trade waste. There were issues arising from the litter created from the trade collections. Trade waste collections were normally in plastic bags which tore or leaked rubbish if not properly sealed. The requirement for trade waste to be containerised could be considered.

Mr Farrell supplied the Panel with a list of hotspots which covered litter from food outlets, graffiti, leafletting and those which related to more general matters including mess left from commercial waste collection. He stated that EMS had also introduced some enhanced cleaning including an enhanced litter bin washing programme and weekly jet washing of urination hotspots. EMS were also working with local wardens identifying disused shop fronts which had become untidy due to litter or fly posting or were subject to misuse and these were being addressed.

The Panel were advised EMS were now able to respond more quickly to any problems which were identified in the town centre. He expressed his concern that if resources are diverted away to deal with these problems on a regular basis then this would leave resources stretched and daily routine duties might suffer.

Mr Farrell advised the Panel that there were some services which were not under the EMS contract and this had caused confusion over how any potential problems were addressed. EMS were not responsible for some car parks or for the setting up of the market. He went on to say that there were negotiations underway to make contract changes which would clarify these issues.

It was generally agreed the best way forward for positive education was to engage with primary schools and use the children to educate their parents on litter and recycling issues. It also had to be easy for people to take care of the town centre and consideration should be given to the proper siting of litter bins and strategically placed recycling bins .Where robust litter disposal arrangements were in place it should be reinforced with

penalties for dropping litter and strong enforcement of that. Mr Farrell said that there were preparations underway to get schools involved in recycling campaigns.

Members asked if there were variations in litter patterns at different times of the day and were advised that there are peaks at lunchtime and early evening and at weekends and after events, more detailed analysis could be provided.

Members also asked whether there were any incentives for shop keepers to keep their own frontages tidy. Mr Farrell stated that Mc Donalds assisted in clearing the area around their shop but generally shop keepers did not consider that this should be their responsibility. It was noted that more should be done to encourage people to look after their own areas. There was also a need for stronger enforcement. Inspections should be carried out after cleaning had been done in an area and any potential problems quickly identified and resolved. Local wardens and EMS needed to be vigilant for environmental breaches and there should be more enforcement action taken when breaches occur.

Members asked if EMS had been involved with the Police engagement campaign that was underway, identifying issues within local communities, in particular the “broken window” syndrome of tackling minor environmental issues before they lead to bigger problems. Mr Farrell commented that they had only been involved on the periphery but he would welcome any opportunities to strengthen that engagement.

The Panel also discussed current arrangements for consultation and felt that it would be useful if these arrangements were refreshed, as local Councillors were not always aware of some issues. There were existing groups such as BID and the Town Centre Group but Councillor membership on these bodies was limited. Local Councillors provide a link to the local community and it was particularly important that local residents were aware of changes that might affect the quality of their local environment. There were a lot of residents within close proximity to the town centre and that number would be increasing when the University accommodation was completed.

The Panel thanked Mr Farrell for his attendance.

#### **AGREED:**

1. That a potential recommendation of the final report be that it be recommended to Cabinet that EMS be asked to adopt a more robust approach in its approach to handing street cleaning schedules.
2. That a potential recommendation of the final report be that it be recommended to Cabinet that EMS be asked to commit to better engagement and understanding with partners.
3. That a potential recommendation of the final report that it be recommended to Cabinet that there is a need for better enforcement processes, particularly in relation to trade waste, with the co-operation of all partners.

4. That a potential recommendation of the final report be that an education package is introduced, for schools mainly at primary level, in understanding the importance of recycling and the prevention of littering.
5. That a potential recommendation of the final report be that the Borough Council adopts a more diligent approach to examining the town centre for problems on a daily basis, in partnership with EMS.
6. That a potential recommendation of the final report be that the Borough Council establishes a Working Group involving all partners and all local Councillors, to ensure that engagement with all partners is strengthened and ensures the involvement of local residents.

## **(B) NCC - HIGHWAYS**

David Farquhar, Assistant Director of Highways NCC attended the Panel to give responses to the core questions. The main points of discussion were as follows:-

In respect of communication and consultation of proposed highways changes Mr Farquhar outlined the standard procedure. If highways changes had been proposed that would affect town centre business then there would be communication through BID and the local media. There would also be letter drops to affected properties. In a more routine matter then the letter drops alone would be deemed sufficient. In certain cases when it is felt that there could be a significant impact then meetings would be held in the affected area. A forum meeting had been held in regard to the changes around the Plough Hotel.

Mr Farquhar commented that there would be significant changes to street furniture The most immediate of which would be in the Bridge Street and the Drapery areas. The Drapery would be timed to coincide with the bus interchange works. The Bridge Street area proposals had been made as a result of consultation with several partners with the aim of improving the Public Realm perception in that area and delivering a quality product to try and make the whole area more user friendly.

In the wider geographical area there were proposals to provide landscaping enhancements in the Castle Station Black Lion Hill area to coincide with the works at the station. One key aim would be to help to make this area feel more central. Enhancements would also be made to the Becketts Park/promenade area. He considered that the major issue over the next year or two would be keeping the traffic and pedestrian movements flowing whilst the developments were taking place. The main message had to be that there would be disruption. Communication would be vital to ensure that it would be kept to a minimum.

Mr Farquhar felt that communication with partners is vital, he attended Town Centre BID meetings and considered that such forums helped to build understanding between partners. Whilst he accepted that there needed to be robust consideration of matters such as protection of the public he considered that processes should be simplified where possible. He considered that it would be helpful if there could be more compromise and consensus between partners.

Mr Farquhar considered that Northampton possessed some attractive architecture which was not promoted to its full advantage. He also considered that historically, there were some misconceptions that did not enhance the Town's reputation e.g. that there was inadequate parking. He felt that in order to compete effectively then Northampton did have to enhance its' shopping offer but it also needed to send positive messages about what it had to offer.

Mr Farquhar commented that he believed that communications between partners had improved greatly over the past two to three years but that more should be done to make the town centre BID Company a focus and use that to ensure a consistent positive message. He stated that he personally did not do much shopping and although he used the town centre during the week whilst at work he did not shop at weekends.

He felt that there were a lot of positive things that were going on in Northampton and that it was vital for all partners to adopt a united purpose and focus on sending that positive message out to the public.

Members asked Mr Farquhar whether any consideration had been given to the expansion of cycle tracks in the town centre as encouraging a sustainable method of visiting the town. He replied that a team of people were looking at all methods of introducing sustainable transport. This included Smart bikes, cycle and pedestrian walkways and Infrastructure improvements. Work was also underway looking at potential cycle routes from the railway station, the University and Brackmills.

The removal of traffic lights to enhance traffic flow was also discussed. Mr Farquhar commented that one had been removed from the bottom of St Johns Road in an attempt to ease traffic flow in that area. He advised the Panel that a review of traffic lights was underway with a view to removing some lights or making them part time only.

Members also raised that importance of proper public consultation, particularly in relation to planning applications. Mr Farquhar commented that often people objected to planning applications because they did not want the development but tended to use highways issues as reasons. Sometimes there was not an initial reaction to the consultation but objections were received when further consultation was carried out.

Members were assured that decluttering signage work was on going and Mr Farquhar wanted to see a 10,000 sign reduction throughout the county. He also wanted to ensure that street furniture was rationalised, using one pole for a multitude of signs where that was possible.

There was some discussion over the future of the Bridge Street area. Mr Farquhar felt that the proposals for the area were now more holistic and he hoped that it would provide a much more inviting area with properly considered street furniture and would fit into the whole infrastructure of the wider area. Some members expressed concern over the length of time that had been taken to improve things since the fire; however delays were not thought to be highways issues but matters of private insurance.

Mr Farquhar also commented that works to the Plough Hotel gyratory would provide opportunities to improve access/egress to and from the town centre

The Panel thanked Mr Farquhar for his attendance.

### **(C) NORTHAMPTON FEDERATION OF RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS**

The Panel considered the written response to the core questions which had already been submitted by Mr Tony Mallard, Chair of Northamptonshire Federation of Residents' Associations (NFRA).

**AGREED:** The evidence from the Northamptonshire Federation of Residents' Associations be used to inform the Panel's evidence base.

### **(D) HACKNEY CARRIAGE ASSOCIATION, NORTHAMPTON**

The Panel were informed that there had been no response to the core questions from the Northampton Hackney Carriage Association.

A Member raised concern over the lack of public toilet facilities for taxi drivers around the taxi rank area in Mercers Row. He stated that a number of drivers used the toilet facilities at All Saints Bistro and considered that public toilet provision needed to be examined .He felt that adequate public toilet provision was a basic requirement for people visiting the town .

### **(E) DIRECTOR, ACTM**

At the scoping meeting the Panel agreed that the Association of Town Centre Managers (ACTM) be asked to provide a response to the core questions. The ACTM were unable to respond specifically to the questions and instead provided background material. The Panel received a briefing note and two supporting documents:-

- 100 ways to help the High Street- A Toolkit for Town Centres
- Getting it Right- A Good Practice Guide to Successful Town Centre Management Initiatives

**AGREED:** The briefing note and supporting documents be used to inform the evidence base of the Review.

### **(F) NORTHANTS POLICE**

The Panel considered the written response to the core questions which had been received from the Police.

**AGREED:-** The evidence from Northamptonshire Police be used to inform the Panel's evidence base.

## 6. GROSVENOR CENTRE NORTHAMPTON

The Panel received a report on the visit made to the Grosvenor Centre, Northampton by Councillor Tony Ansell, Simon Dougall, Corporate Asset Manager and Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer. They met with Russell Hall, the Grosvenor Centre Manager.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

Overall the impression was positive. Councillor Ansell felt that the manager seemed to be very professional and that efforts were being made to introduce events and attractions to encourage people into the Grosvenor Centre.

There were some areas that were looking dated such as the first floor entrance to the bus station and there were some empty shop units on the first floor. The entrance on the ground floor opens to a series of temporary pitches such as those used by gold purchasing and media promoters but the area was clean and bright. It was noted that the frontage to the Grosvenor Centre was not cleaned by EMS.

The car park area is owned and maintained by the Council and there had been works to waterproofing, resurfacing and lighting works carried out in the last 18 months. At the time of the visit there were some lights out of order, a boarded up window and outdated maintenance sign. Some of the lifts were operated by the Borough Council and some by the Grosvenor Centre.

The Centre Manager stated that he felt that there was a negative public perception concerning the young people who hung around the statue of the Cobblers Last on the Abington Street entrance, however there did not appear to be any evidence that they were actually causing a nuisance.

**AGREED:-** That a potential recommendation of the final report be that a deep clean be carried out in the car park at the Grosvenor Centre, in the area around the lifts, and the advertising boards in situ in the lifts be better utilised.

## 7. NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY FORUMS

The Panel considered a briefing note detailing comments on the core questions from the Northampton Community Forums.

**AGREED:** The evidence from Northampton Community Forums be used to inform the Panel's evidence base.

The meeting concluded at 7:35 pm