

Northampton Pensioners' Forum

on Thursday, 6 February 2014 at 2:00 pm until not later than 4:00 pm

in The Godwin Room, St. Giles Square, Northampton, NN1 1DE.

Present: Cllr. Oldham (Co-chair), Roger Rumsey (Co-Chair*), Steve Burd (Stagecoach East Midlands), Tony Mallard (Eastfield Residents Association), Ann Timson (Spring Boroughs Residents Association), Christiana Owusu-Akuffo (Pensioners Voice), Jacqueline Forrest-Smith (Pensioners Voice), Doreen Minney (Pensioners Voice), Anne Mackay (Community Member), Norman Sharp (Community Member), Brian Nichols (Community Member), Erika Cochern (Community Member), Madeline Boys (Northampton Trust), Anna White (Pensioners Voice), Michael White (Pensioners Voice), Dave Hewitt (Community Member), Steve Archer (NBC Officer), Vicki Rockall (NBC Officer), Alice Morgan (NBC Officer*)

(* Chaired the meeting)

(** Took minutes)

Agenda

1. Welcomes, Introductions and Apologies

Apologies were received from Mike Hill.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

Item 5, p. 3. It was raised at a previous meeting that an attendee had parked with a blue badge on double yellow lines on Cliftonville Road outside the hospital and received a parking ticket. This was later disputed and the parking ticket was revoked. To add to this JR told the forum that if there are yellow lines on the curb itself as well as the double yellow lines on the road, no parking is permitted even with a parking permit.

Item 5, p.3. AT, first name and telephone number had been given out previously. AT wants to know who authorised this without her permission. AT has not yet heard anything – **Action:** VR to follow up.

Item 5, p.4. DH told the forum that Amey have now taken over Enterprise, and that he believed Enterprise workers will be tupe'd over to Amey.

AT asked for clarification over the Decent Homes Standard and the money from central government. The minutes state that money would have to return to the central government – is this accurate, or will the money actually be ring fenced? **Action:** AM stated that this may just be inaccuracy of the minutes and that she will get clarification for the next meeting.

3. Northampton Bus Station - Steve Burd

SB raised with the forum the two key issues which have come up often in discussions around the new bus interchange; namely the size and the location of the bus station. SB assured that the current Northgate site however is the best possible solution

out of the proposed sites for the future bus station. Furthermore, it will be a brighter and more modern space compared the Grey friars.

SB described the way that the routes will work:

- Any buses going to the South will depart from the eastern side of the Drapery.
- Any buses going to the West will depart from the west side of the Drapery.
- Leicester, Peterborough, Kettering and Bedford buses will be departing from the interchange
- Milton Keynes buses will depart from the drapery.

SB stated that there are difficulties with the Northampton road system when moving from East to West. In the short term, some routes have been planned to approach the Drapery via the town hall. This may face problems with unloading vehicles on that road, however this has been discussed with NCC and a solution for the long term is being sought.

The decision of where buses would depart from was ultimately a decision made by NCC. There is a geographical basis to the decision, and furthermore the split of bays has been down to discussions around queuing space, size of vehicle and the times of services for maximum utilisation. It has been ensured that, as far as possible, only one operator is on each bay, but similar routes have been grouped together.

Long distance coaches will now be departing from Victoria Street as there is not room for the coaches in the interchange. Furthermore, up until now National Express tickets have been available from the Travel Centre in Greyfriars. National Express tickets will not be available to buy from the new travel information kiosk in Northgate, but National Express are making arrangements for these to be sold elsewhere.

In order to ensure there is not overcrowding in the Northgate and the Drapery, there will be a maximum of 8 buses departing from a bay every hour. One bay does have 9 – but this is the exception, and most bays have much less. Some areas of the station have larger queuing space than other areas, so where possible Stagecoach have tried to place the services appropriately again to avoid overcrowding.

Action: SB agreed to send AM the interior and exterior plans for bus locations to be circulated to the forum.

A forum member raised that the pedestrian crossings outside Northgate could create congestion due to the huge amount of traffic that will be going through. SB said that it is appreciated that the area will be slow for buses to get through.

There is no route where there has been a reduction in frequency as a result of the new bus interchange. The only changed to the frequency of services are actually improvements.

A Forum member asked for clarification over the figure of 25 years which was given to the site as to whether this was a 25 year lease. SB advised that operators were not aware of a 25 year limit on the lease or any fixed time period on the use of the station, and that this was possibly the estimated amount of years until some refurbishment is needed.

The forum discussed the future housing developments proposed by Daventry District Council, and how this may impact on bus services and infrastructure. Cllr. Oldham told the forum that the joint strategic plan between DDC and SNC is not supported by NBC and NCC. Not a point where the detail can be discussed, however there is still a consultation process going on. SB advised the forum that in order to adapt to growth and demand, Northgate still has more space for utilisation, and that not all 22 bays are to their

full capacity. Furthermore, Stagecoach has timetable reviews every 18 months – 3 years in order to adapt for growing congestion.

Facilities within Northgate include a convenience store, a travel information kiosk run by Stagecoach, a small open plan café facility and toilet facilities.

Communication – the forum asked that information and updates are made available for those that don't have computer access. SB advised that Stagecoach are producing leaflets and timetables to give out to passengers, and that notices will be put on buses.

NB – it was advised that if there are any concerns with the bus shelters and bays around the town, that these need to be fed back directly to NCC.

4. Taking the Forum forward

RR informed the forum about the Co-chairs meeting with the Leader in February. There is a clear commitment from NBC to supporting the forums, which is positive. JR agreed, and said that NBC should be thanked for what they have done and their commitment to the forums.

VR added that AM & VR are supporting all of the forums to come up to the same level. It is acknowledged that all forums are different, and that their individuality should be protected, however some consistency is required to ensure they are all effective. For instance, we need to ensure that all meetings are open, public meetings by default, where voices are listened to and increased attendance is encouraged from service providers (e.g. health, housing) as well as community members. Finally, it has been agreed that meetings will be bi-monthly to further ensure consistency across the forums.

RR said that the work and commitment of the two new officers' in post (AM & VR) in supporting the Pensioners Forum is much appreciated.

(A) Code of Conduct

VR gave an explanation of the Code of Conduct document, which has been introduced at all forums.

DH felt that the code of conduct, in some areas, would not work. Feedback:

- First sentence should read 'their' members, not 'it's' members.
- Second sentence – if this does not cover every eventuality, what happens in other eventualities?
- Point 1.1 – 'Contribute positively' – can't always contribute positively, if a negative or opposing opinion is held.
- Point 1.4 – 'NBC's Equal Opportunities Policy' – forum attendees need to see a copy of this if they are expected to comply with the code of conduct.
- Point 2.3 – 'Being fair' – What is 'Fair'? This is subjective.
- Alongside this document, the Chairs across all forums need to be given the skills and support to effectively run meetings.
- In the eventuality of the Code of conduct being breached, who will eject? The Chair must be given the authority to do so within the document.

VR stated that this is a common sense document. The ethos of this is what is important – about how to behave appropriately in a public meeting. Cllr. Oldham agreed, and advised the forum that this document is in place to make sure that meetings do not get hijacked.

DH asked whether there is a set of criteria for attendance. It was agreed that as a public

meeting, there is not a criteria and that anyone can attend who has an interest in Pensioner's issues.

(B) Action Plans

Due to time running out at the meeting, it was agreed that action plans for the forum would be discussed at the next meeting.

(C) Events Calendar

A copy of the draft events calendar for the NBC Forums was circulated. The purpose of the document is to encourage partnership working and promote the forums.

5. Local Council Tax Support - Steve Archer

Steve Archer updated the forum on the Local Council Tax Support consultation:

Key aspects of the 2014/15 LCTS:

Working Age people previously on 100% council tax benefit are currently being asked by NBC to pay at least 8.5% of their council tax bill – this is set to increase to 15% for 2014/15.

Pensioners will not be affected by the changes to the council's CTS Scheme and will remain fully protected. A full income disregard of War Widows Pension and War Disablement Pension will continue. Additional protection will also continue for those in receipt of disablement benefits and the scheme will continue to support people back into work through a 4-week run on period of support.

Alongside this the council's policies and procedures aim to support those in hardship and, in particular, to ensure that people who may be struggling with their finances and/or in debt are provided with specialist money advice. Major reforms to the rules for bailiffs will also take effect in April 2014, banning them from heavy-handed behavior but also making sure they can still collect debts fairly.

Consultation:

An extensive consultation took place between 4th November 2013 and 1st December 2013. The consultation included the following: an On-line survey, News release, 1,500 email invitations were issued to email addresses held on the Benefit and Council Tax database, Letters were issued to a random sample of 200 CTR recipients and a random sample of 200 local Council Tax payers.

To help support the public the following were also made available and advertised in-line with the above:

- Dedicated email address for enquiries from the public
- Customer Service teams were made available to help the public complete the on-line form to mitigate any accessibility issues. In addition home visit were also available to overcome any specific accessibility issues.
- 4 drop in-sessions were run, aimed at providing those affected with a personal illustration on what the proposed changes would mean to them – ensuring they were able to provide a fully informed response.

A total of 35 responses to the on-line survey were received by the end of the consultation and 7 members of the public attended one of the drop-in sessions. Despite the fact that almost two thousand invitations were issued to take part in the consultation, the response rate remained low. This has also been the case at a national level, where the response to Local Authority engagement on local Council Tax schemes has also been relatively low.

Summary of findings:

Positive responses from the consultation centred on the concept of 'fairness', with everyone having to contribute and that the scheme does help support people in paying their Council Tax bills. Some acceptance of the current economic climate was also expressed, as was a view that if these changes were implemented it would prompt better budgeting and would incentivise people to move into work.

Negative responses included concerns about people being able to afford increasing contributions toward Council Tax bills. Anxieties were also expressed about how these changes will affect tenants' ability to sustain their tenancy and reduced support was also highlighted as a potential cause of hardship, particularly for vulnerable people.

Neutral responses resulted from the respondent not being affected by the changes, either because they were of pension age or were not receiving CTS.

Budgetary considerations (National perspective):

The Local Government Association (LGA) has recently highlighted the fact that when the responsibility for administering council tax support was handed to Local Authorities, it was against a backdrop of significantly reduced central government funding. The LGA suggest that the shortfall between the money councils receive to fund council tax support and the money they need to protect those on low incomes is going to get bigger and is likely to reach £1 billion by 2016. At the same time, they point out that councils are tackling the biggest cuts in living memory and in many cases cannot afford to meet the shortfall.

National perspective - Of the 326 lower tier and unitary local authorities in England:

268 councils reduced the provision of council tax support in April 2013 (82%)

58 councils made no change to the existing council tax benefit arrangements (18%)

Indications are that more Local authorities have decided to reduce the provision of council tax support in April 2014 because of the budgetary pressures referred to above.

A forum member raised concerns over the 'Bedroom Subsidy'. SA advised the forum that his team are working very closely with the Housing Team, to ensure those in most difficulty are supported. As a key tool, there is money available to help those most in need in the Discretionary Housing Payment Pot. This pot is carefully managed to ensure the right people are helped at the right time. They are doing their utmost to mitigate impacts where they can.

A question was raised as to whether bailiffs are able to charge whatever they like when they execute a warrant. SA was not of this for definite, but agreed to check.

A question was raised as to whether there is any evidence yet locally where private sector landlords are evicting those who are on benefits. SA said that they are conscious of this issue elsewhere in the country, and that they are keeping alert in case this does happen in the Borough. SA presented this information with the Private Landlord team with the suggestion that this is monitored.

6. Community News Exchange

7. Any Other Business

MB raised concerns around NCC and visits for the elderly. Cllr. Oldham advised that different officers have different approaches, but from his view most Officers do a fantastic job and work hard under difficult circumstances. MB was advised to follow her concerns up with NCC or the service concerned.

EC told the forum that this was her first meeting. She is involved in the Alzheimer's Society, the local radio etc. However, EC will not be attending the forum again due to

personal circumstances. Cllr. Oldham thanked EC for attending, and said that she would be very welcome to attend again in the future.

8. Suggestions for Items for Future Meetings or Forum Activities

On the agenda for the next meeting – NHFT.

For a future meeting, the forum agreed that they would like to invite somebody from Refuge Collection and Street Cleansing, a representative from Amey and a cabinet member. The forum would like an update from this service area and an answer as to whether the service is value for money.

9. Date and venues of future Forum Meetings

Thursday 29th May, 14:30-16:30, Jeffrey Room
Thursday 24th July, 14:30-16:30, Jeffrey Room
Thursday 18th September, 14:30-16:30, Holding Room
Thursday 13th November, 14:30-16:30, Jeffrey Room

Map and directions at: www.northampton.gov.uk/guildhall

For more information about this meeting please contact:
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More information about the Forum generally is at: www.northampton.gov.uk/forums



Facebook page: www.northampton.gov.uk/pensionersforumonfacebook

Please note that this Forum is supported and funded by Northampton Borough Council. The Forum may work in partnership and collaboration with other community groups, councils and local services from time to time. The views expressed and decisions taken by the Forum are not necessarily those of Northampton Borough Council.



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