

**Council
Monday 27 March 2008**

Portfolio Holder Presentations

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**Report of the Leader of the Council,
Portfolio Holder for Partnerships and Improvement**

Aspire for CPA excellence / High standards of service

Housing Benefits Service

I received a letter from James Plaskitt MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Work & Pensions on 20th February confirming that his department would no longer need to be closely monitoring our Benefits Service. This represents a major milestone on our improvement journey. Benefits was one of the services most heavily criticised in the March 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment as 'letting down the most vulnerable in society'. It is, therefore, particularly pleasing that they should be the first service out of 'engagement'.

The service is now consistently performing at the top of second quartile and continues to improve. This is down to the hard work and dedication of our staff and their colleagues throughout the council and to the guidance provided by the team from Kendrick Ash.

Recruitment for a Benefits Manager is now in hand. Once in post Kendrick Ash will withdraw their support in a planned and controlled manner to ensure that we are able to maintain performance with only internal resources. I am very confident that our staff will continue and improve on the excellent levels they are now delivering.

We now look forward to other services being released from engagement in the next few months. Finance, Planning and Leisure are all candidates to be next.

Inspections

Inspectors were on site on 25th & 26th February for a general Direction of Travel inspection. The impressions and initial feedback were generally positive. The results of the inspection will form part of the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter from the Audit Commission.

The Streetscene, Waste Management & Sustainability inspection is taking place on 10th March. Inspectors have been provided with a detailed 'self assessment and a Service Improvement Plan. We expect the inspectors report will be made available in April.

Work is continuing for the Housing Progress Assessment inspection planned for May 2008.

A clear vision for Northampton

Northampton Sustainable Communities Strategy

A Sustainable Communities Strategy for Northampton has been successfully developed by partners on the Local Strategic Partnership. The strategy will underpin the development of Northampton through to 2031. The strategy has

been approved by the LSP Board and is on this agenda (17 March Council) meeting to consider its adoption by Northampton Borough Council.

Northamptonshire Sustainable Communities Strategy

The consultation on Northamptonshire County Council's Sustainable Communities Strategy was launched in January and will end on 10 April. The Council is formulating a response to the consultation which will include views expressed by councillors at Overview and Scrutiny and at the LAA event for all councillors held on 13 March.

Initial concerns have been expressed at the lack of strategic vision in relation to Northampton within the context of the county, and in particular the impact of the growth agenda on the town and surrounding area. With a projected population of approaching 300,000 by 2031 Northampton will be equivalent in size to many cities and therefore will have a significantly greater role within the county and beyond than the strategy recognises. The impact of that growth on economic and infrastructure investment must be reflected if Northampton is to secure investment to support the growth agenda. Councillors are encouraged to contribute to the consultation and promote the need for the widest possible response from partners and communities to ensure future investment in Northampton and Northamptonshire.

The failure of the strategy to adequately recognise Northampton's position in a 'hierarchy of place' not only affects Northampton. It negatively impacts on the positioning of all towns and villages within the county.

Act as advocates for Northampton to partners

Ministerial Visit

Iain Wright MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in DCLG, visited Northampton on 26th February (technically a Parliamentary Visit) at the invitation of Sally Keeble MP. The Leader and Chief Executive were involved in a 'round table' discussion with the Minister and partners.

Topics covered included:-

- Improving Northampton Town Centre
- Regenerating Brownfield sites
- The urgent need to progress Planning Policy for the area
- The strengths and weaknesses of Northampton as a place
- Improving partnership working between the main agencies
- Raising the level of 'ambition' locally

The meeting was positive and the minister expressed his pleasure at the ambition being shown by participants.

Later in the day he visited the Goldings Estate and saw some of the problems left by a previous, poorly planned and executed expansion of the town.

Raising the Tibetan Flag

The Tibetan flag was raised outside the Guildhall on 4th March – the ninth year that this ceremony to remember the plight of the people of Tibet has taken place in Northampton. Caroline Scattergood, the driving force behind this event, told an audience of over 100 that she had recently been informed by the UK representative of the Dalai Lama that Northampton's celebration was unique in involving the Mayor, Council and local people in the flag raising.

Tony Woods
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Safety

Safe, clean neighbourhoods for people to live in

Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Overall trends show recorded crime in most categories significantly below last year's levels. Compared to the most similar Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership areas, as defined by the Home Office, Northampton is now in line with its peers on most measures. However, we are determined to see a further step change reduction in crime and will be working to make sure that all the Council's services are properly joined up to achieve this.

The reduction in anti-social behaviour incidents is particularly satisfying, as this is a major concern to local people. At the end of January the number of incidents was 22% down compared to a year ago. Effective case management and early intervention by the multi-agency Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (hosted by this Council) have been key contributors to this success.

Safer Stronger Northampton Partnership

The Safer Stronger Northampton Partnership is moving closer to having a dedicated team of staff located together to improve its ability to respond rapidly and effectively. Initially these will be Borough Council and Police staff. This is expected to help lead to a seamless service to the public.

Places for people to enjoy

Cultural Strategy

The Cabinet's adoption of the interim cultural strategy in February was a major milestone in developing this town's cultural life – including music, sport, arts and physical recreation for all tastes in our diverse community. We will be consulting widely on what kinds of facilities and activities people think our town needs now and in the future. This is a real opportunity to put Northampton on the map, and build pride in our town, and it is hoped this will capture the imagination of many people.

Leisure and Sports Development

The leisure service continues to achieve recognition for quality, most recently in its improved score in being re-awarded its Chartermark. Sports development rose by two categories from 'Standard' in February 2006 to 'Highly Commended' under the QUEST quality assurance assessment this February. Scoring is based on a number of different aspects of the service such as customer care, health and safety, partnership working and social inclusion. The department's Kings Heath physical activity project was a runner-up in the Healthy Communities category for the Sustainable Communities national awards in London at the end of February. Evidence of the popularity of our leisure services comes from the continuing growth in Direct Debit sales, now also on-line.

Museums and Events

The museum service's 'Venezia!' festival has proved a positive talking point, even before its official press launch which took place on 26th February. Sponsors have been queuing up to be associated with this programme of events. Meanwhile, planning for the 2008 Balloon Festival is moving forward, while a group of councillors will be meeting soon to consider the longer term development of Northamptonshire's premier event.

Consult widely on key decisions affecting people's lives

Single Equalities Scheme

The Cabinet adopted a Single Equalities Scheme for the Council at its meeting on 11th February. The scheme incorporates the existing Gender, Race and Disability schemes and extends our commitment to equalities to include age, religion and belief and sexual orientation. The Single Equality Scheme sets out how Northampton Borough Council will ensure that everyone has equal access to council services, job opportunities and to having their voices heard. It brings all equality groups together without losing focus on the specific needs of any community and helps demonstrate that equality and diversity are at the heart of what we do and reinforces our commitment to the equality agenda.

Community Engagement Strategy

The Council's Community Engagement Strategy was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 3rd March. The Community Engagement Strategy sets out the principles by which the council will engage communities in the development of council services and activities. In addition the strategy sets out a process for engaging communities and ensuring effective management of the information gained from such interactions. The methodologies and techniques to deliver the strategy will be developed separately. These will be included in a detailed costed action plan to deliver the strategy which will be submitted to Cabinet by June 2008.

Value for money / High standards of service

Restructure Update

We have recently appointed a Service Improvement Team Leader. We expect to recruit a Partnerships and Support Services Manager as soon as the new structure is in place.

One Stop Shop Pilot Project

A pilot evaluation is scheduled to take place on 28th February with recommendations to Management Board regarding future options for integrating into the One Stop Shop if this is successful and of mutual benefit to NBC and Police.

Complaints Management

Complaints monitoring has recently seen an improvement in performance, with a corporate response rate of 87% of responses provided on time to stage 1 complaints, councillor enquiries and MP enquiries in December. Due to an increase in volume performance fell to 66% in January and the Customer

Liaison Team are working closely with service areas to address this downturn. An action plan has been created to improve the corporate complaints board. Divisional management teams are also being approached by officers to develop 'learning logs' which will enable them to learn from each complaint received.

Call Care

Connection charges to external organisations, which have not been reviewed since 1995, was recently commissioned to ensure that the services provided value for money. Charges applied were consistent and fair and met the overall costs of providing the service.

Brendan Glynane
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing

High standards of service

Housing department performance

First and foremost I must add my personal congratulations to the revenues and benefits service for their hard work in improving services and achieving disengagement. In other areas of performance, I am pleased to report progress in rent collection and voids management.

For the 5th month running the staff have achieved a higher than 100% collection rate in rent income. This means that the level of arrears is reducing month on month and the percentage of rent collected this year is on target to move out of the bottom quartile for this best value performance indicator.

During the past month, 125 empty council homes have been let. There is now less than 1.5% of the housing stock empty. This performance is comparable with top performing councils.

Weekly meetings are being held with service managers to review performance and address issues. The property maintenance teams are working towards a target of 10 days on average to complete works to empty homes and performance is significantly improving in this area.

Partnership Working

The corporate manager for housing services attended the East Midlands regional conference attended by the Chief Executives of both the national Housing Federation and the Housing Corporation. The key messages from the conference were that local authorities have a strategic role in delivering housing growth and that housing associations must work in partnership with us to deliver affordable housing solutions. We will be looking to build on this message in the weeks to come by engaging the registered social landlords in meaningful dialogue.

Choice Based Lettings & HomeSwapper

We are working towards introducing a Choice Based Lettings scheme which will allow those on the housing register more choice in where they live. This is one of the most exciting schemes introduced by the Council for many years and will change the lives of our housing applicants tremendously. The scheme will give the applicant more choice and autonomy and will enable greater simplicity, with feedback showing exactly how housing is being allocated. This will allow social housing applicants the choice usually only available to those in the private housing market and will help create more stable communities. A project team has now been established to deliver Choice Based Lettings by this summer.

A new scheme called HomeSwapper has also been introduced for existing tenants. This is the largest UK database of social housing tenants looking to move. HomeSwapper is for social tenants who want a house swap. This is also called mutual exchange and now that Northampton Borough Council has joined HomeSwapper our tenants can use the service for free.

Rough sleepers

The official rough sleepers count was held on 27th February. The housing service worked in partnership with CAN and others to conduct the count.

IBS Housing System integration

A number of additional modules to the IBS computer system used by the Housing service have successfully gone live on the IBS housing system. These include former tenant arrears, anti social behaviour and estate management.

Sally Beardsworth
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration

Improve our town centre / A safe, attractive town / Parks, leisure & cultural heritage

Market Square

Joint working with local traders and retailers has continued. Work is on track to establish a programme to improve the use and quality of the square as the focal point of our town centre.

Beckett's Park Improvements

The implementation of improvements are on track for completion by the end of March. This has significantly improved the access and linkage between the Waterfront and Town Centre and a pleasant new riverside walk in Midsummer Meadow.

'Building for Life' design standards

I have attended a one day conference with Yvonne Falkner (Housing Strategy Officer) organised by the Improvement and Development Agency (IdeA) and Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to promote CABE's 'building for life' principles for designing new neighbourhoods. I look forward to promoting these principles to ensure that we achieve higher standards to create a strong sense of place for new developments, good links to neighbouring places and high standards of sustainability.

Local Development Scheme

The four planning authorities have agreed a detailed Memorandum of Understanding to establish a Joint Committee responsible for the Joint Local Development Documents for West Northamptonshire. The Secretary of State has been formally requested to establish the Statutory Committee.

A Shadow Board is to be established prior to the establishment of a Statutory Committee.

The Joint Core Strategy remains behind programme, in part due to the success of public consultation to which more responses of greater length were received than anticipated. It has, therefore, taken longer than expected to process the results. Furthermore, we are awaiting clarification following government proposals for changes to the regulations regarding the process for preparing plans. We are, therefore, unable to progress certain aspects of the strategy until we know the outcome of these proposals. Additional resources are now beginning to be allocated, but recovery of the delay is unlikely. The proposed amendments to the planning system may result in further amendment to timescales.

Work on Sixfields Area Action Plan has commenced with consultation on the Sustainability Appraisal already underway. The potential for establishing the Planning Policy context through a Masterplanning approach is currently being established. The current work will inform and support either an Action Plan or Masterplanning approach.

High standards of service

Establishing an Integrated Planning Service

The recruitment process for Head of Planning, Development Control Manager and Building Control Manager has progressed through the search phase to the advert stage. The interviews for Head of Planning are planned for the week commencing 14th April 2008. The appointments to the Development Control Manager and Building Control Manager will follow with the newly appointed Head of Planning.

Richard Church
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Environment

Safe clean neighbourhoods for people to live in / Improve our town centre

Street Scene

We are now in the final stages of confirming the partnership arrangements with Choices Horticultural. Once the service level agreement is finalised Choices will then operate out of Abington Park providing support to, and learning from our own qualified on-site horticultural staff. At no extra cost to the Council ten extra gardeners will be working out of Abington Park, acting as extra eyes and ears around the park, thereby adding to the general sense of security. The arrangement will also give us access to the gardeners' specialist skills to make picnic tables, look after the sensory garden, and look after the polytunnels on Southfields allotments to grow plants for use in parks across the town. Northamptonshire County Council are also providing £5,000 to improve the mess facilities at Abington Park to be used by their and our staff.

Bradlaugh Fields

We have submitted an entry for Green Flag status for Bradlaugh Fields following the development of a new Management Plan for the park. The judges will be visiting in June this year to make their decision.

Consider the future of the planet in everything we do

Carbon Management Programme

I am pleased to announce that the draft Strategy and Implementation Plans have been completed and agreed by Cabinet. The Council agreed budget includes investment to achieve an 8.1% reduction in Carbon Emissions in the first full year of the Plan. This is to be met by a range of means, including funding energy efficient lighting in St John's Multistorey Car Park, upgrade insulation in leisure centres and specific areas of the Council's buildings, and purchase software which will allow us to monitor our energy usage.

The Strategy sets out the Council's aspiration to be Carbon Neutral by 2020 and achieve a 35% reduction by 2012. This programme includes real action with measurable outcomes, both in cost savings and Carbon Reduction. This is one way in which the Council can play a key role as a Community Leader in tackling Climate Change.

Our commitment to the Carbon Management Programme affirms and puts in to motion our manifesto commitment to put concern for the environment at the heart of everything we do.

Kerbside glass collection

Kerbside collection of glass to 4000 properties within East Hunsbury, Duston and St James commenced on 7th February. This has been very successful with over 20 tonnes collected within the first three weeks. This is a very positive step towards honouring our manifesto commitment to introduce kerbside glass recycling in the Borough.

This pilot will provide information on the recycling rates for glass and allow staff to plan the roll out to the rest of the town and to establish the investment required to deliver this.

Kitchen Waste

We are continuing to meet with the Northamptonshire Waste Partnership and other partners to discuss how we can progress the collection and recycling of kitchen waste.

High standards of service / value for money

Housing Repairs inspection

The date for our housing progress inspection has now been set for 5th to 16th May. The scope of the inspection will include the repairs and maintenance service and progress against our service improvement plan. The inspectors will also be looking at how we are improving our customer services and how we manage diversity issues and value for money.

Street Scene & Waste Management inspection

The Audit Commission inspection of Street Scene, Waste Management and sustainability concluded on the 14th March. The inspectors were on site for a full week and assessed the services against the key lines of enquiry. It is anticipated that the draft report will be provided by the Audit Commission during April.

A medium term Service Improvement Plan has been developed to identify future priorities for each of the services and provide a focus for further improvements.

Service Standards have now been revised and finalised to incorporate comments raised during a public consultation exercise

County Enforcement Pilot

On the 25th February 2008, the Council's Environmental Service hosted and led a county-wide event, targeted at Hotel, Guest House and Bed and Breakfast businesses. This was a partnership event including the County Council, all District Councils in Northamptonshire, the Health and Safety Executive, Northampton Enterprise Limited and the Fire and Rescue Service.

The pilot's aims were to give businesses the latest information on legislative requirements and examples of best practice, in order that they could undertake self-assessments and interventions leading to reduced inspections by enforcement agencies. Priority topics covered included: Slips, Trips and Falls, Manual Handling, Fire Safety, Trading Standards, Fair Trading and Product Safety. The event was very well attended with some eighty attendees. Initial analysis of delegate feedback indicates strong support for this approach to achieving legislative compliance.

Trini Crake
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Performance

High standards of service

Direction of Travel and Inspection Preparation

Work has been ongoing to support the Direction of Travel assessment (25th and 26th February). The report is expected to be available in March. Work is also proceeding on the Streetscene inspection taking place on 10th March.

Implementation of Performance Management System

Progress with the project is on track with the first training course having been completed for administrators. Further training is being rolled out and we are on course to implement the first phase by June as planned.

Corporate and Service Planning

The Corporate Plan was presented at Council on 28th February. It represents a clearer statement on what we will do to deliver the five corporate priorities and includes a range of specific targets.

ICT Services

The PC replacement programme continues to be rolled out. The need for modernised, efficient PC equipment was again highlighted in the Employee Opinion Survey.

Operation Flag

As a licensing authority for private hire vehicles the council is responsible for issuing and enforcing all aspects of the drivers private hire licenses. Private Hire vehicles are not allowed to accept passengers unless they have been pre-booked as it invalidates the insurance and protection of the public.

As previously reported "Operation Flag" has been undertaken before with twenty-eight private hire drivers falling foul of the sting operation. So far twenty-four drivers have been prosecuted for plying for hire and/or insurance offences and the Council's Licensing Committee have taken action against four of these drivers to suspend the drivers licences or to reprimand them

This enforcement action will continue as part of the Licensing department's activities to ensure that the public have full insurance protection when using private hire vehicles.

BOHO Lounge

An application was made to NBC for a licence at the former Snooker Club in Bridge Street Northampton. The Licensing sub-committee rejected the application because of concerns about crime and disorder issues of such a large establishment in the centre of the leisure zone of the town.

An appeal was made against this decision and was up held by the Wellingborough Magistrates Court as they reached the conclusion that crime and disorder would not increase. The concentration of licensed premises in this area is a concern to a number of stakeholders and the policy framework to ensure a safe town centre needs further consideration.

Publish targets & performance on monthly basis

Overall Performance

Performance reports for January show that 49% of our performance indicators are on course to meet their targets, with a further 17% within an acceptable tolerance.

Absence Management

After a significant improvement last financial year, the projected year-end position for the Council indicates we will not achieve the 9.5 Full Time Equivalent Target for Absence.

The overall projected result masks good and poor areas of performance. Management Board are considering the need for corporate actions, in addition to tackling the under-performing areas through the performance management arrangements.

Honest and even handed / clear vision and leadership for Northampton

Single Status

The Council has been working jointly with Trade Unions to implement new Pay and Grading arrangements from 1st April 2008. In December 2007 the Management Board reviewed the progress of the project and identified a risk that the current result of job evaluation would not enable the Council to achieve equal pay and thereby did not help the Council in achieving its legal obligations, and could be open to legal challenge. This view was confirmed by an external expert who subsequently reviewed the position.

Management and Unions have agreed to negotiate and agree a new process to ensure that the Council complies with national agreements on job evaluation by 1st April 2009. Equal pay claims, which are outstanding, will be negotiated with the intention of agreeing appropriate resolution by 30th April 2008.

Employee Opinion Survey (EOS)

The annual Employee Opinion Survey was undertaken in November 2007 and the results were published in February. The results show that measures have not changed significantly since 2006 but this needs to be considered in the context of the uncertain year for the organisation which saw the departure of a Chief Executive and the appointment of John Edwards as Interim Chief Executive.

The Cabinet received a report at their meeting on the 3rd March, which detailed the implementation of action plans by Corporate Managers, and the implementation of these improvement plans under the guidance of David Kennedy should ensure improved indicators when the survey is repeated in November 2008.

Brian Hoare
March 2008

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Finance

Live within means & consult on balance of services and taxes

Budget 08/09

It has been a busy month for finance. Cabinet met on 20th February to recommend the budgets for the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and Capital to full Council along with separate reports on prudential indicators and the treasury management. These were all subsequently agreed at the last meeting of this Council on 28th February.

A number of strategies have also been approved over the last month. We delivered the budget in line with the medium term financial strategy, published the Capital Strategy, which will underpin our capital programme and the management of the same. We also approved the Treasury Management Strategy as part of the budget report. This strategy guides the management of our debt and investment portfolio. On 3rd March we agreed an up to date procurement strategy, which will give direction and guidance for our procurement of goods and services and help drive improved value for money.

Sort out the Council's finances

Monthly Monitoring & Improvement

The latest Budget Monitoring was reported to Cabinet on 3rd March. We are still showing positive results, with an underspend of £346k. Work is well underway for the preparation of the closure of the authority's accounts.

Improvement in the finance department has been recognised by the finance government monitoring sub-board and we are now actively discussing disengagement criteria. Service Plans for the area are almost complete, again the focus is on delivering further improvement in the service and preparing for the use of resources inspection under the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Northampton Door to Door Service (NDDS)

Arrangements are agreed for them to move to premises at Westbridge Depot on 21 March and we are working with NDDS to ensure that this move takes place in a smooth and co-ordinated way. We are pleased that we have been able to assist them in this way.

Shopmobility

We are now making an appraisal of the costs of works to enable the re-opening the Greyfriars car park for general use, which would not require the re-location of Shopmobility. We now have clear costings for the alternative proposal of moving Shopmobility to adapted accommodation at the Mayorhold Car Park, which are being taken into account in arriving at the most appropriate strategy.

Malcolm Mildren
March 2008