

## Consultation responses – Overview and Scrutiny Committees

### Comments and Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny 1

#### 5. GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2009 - 2012

Mr David Huffadine Smith addressed the Committee, asking why the Council had not approached Parish Councils regarding them running community centres in certain areas. He advised that Parish Councils do not have such large overheads as the Borough Council.

Mr Huffadine Smith was thanked for his address.

The Committee considered the proposals for the General Fund Revenue Budget 2009 / 2012 asked questions, commented and heard:-

#### **Community Centre efficiencies - Review management arrangements to balance income and expenditure**

In response to the question as to why the Borough Council had not made any contact with local Parish Councils over the Allotments / Community Centres, the Committee was advised that legislation is being put in place although there could be financial implications.

Generally Parish Councils are taking on more ownership and having more of a say in the facilities in their areas, the Council will be exploring this in more detail.

With regard to the Community Centre saving of £190,000 queries were raised as to how robust this figure is, if centres would be closing, where does the figure come from and how precise is it. The Committee was advised that risks are involved in this figure; there is the possibility of closures. It is dependant on need and demand in the community; some communities find it difficult to fund resources to support Community Centres. It was emphasised that there is not a proposal to close community centres, where communities are not in a position to support it.

The Committee asked that its concerns be forwarded to Cabinet:

- It has concerns whether the projected saving of £190,000 could be achieved.
- Ward Councillors should be consulted regarding any proposal to close a community centre, and
- Parish Councils should be fully informed and consulted on any changes and the Cabinet should investigate whether Parish Councils would be willing to manage any community centres within their areas.

## **Remove inflation of 3.3% on Grants to Voluntary Organisations**

The Committee asked for clarity about the funding of two organisations that received one year grants in 2008 and whether there was enough funds available to continue funding in 2009. If funding was not available it was suggested that part of the inflationary increase could have been used to provide funding.

## **Increase in Leisure fee income**

It was noted that an analysis was carried out on the Trilogy Membership and fees were cheaper than competitors and could stand a 5% increase.

## **Closure of Abington Museum 2 days per week (Tue & Wed) in winter, or all year round. Or every day during winter**

**Closure of Northampton Museum 1 or 2 days per week (Mon only or Mon and Tues). This will not be viewed positively by the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund and could impact upon future funding and would result in loss of status**

The following queries were raised with regard to the proposed closure on certain days of the town's museums:

- Would there be a loss of status to The Guildhall Museum if it was not open every day?
- Would it jeopardise the chances of the Council gaining National Status?
- Will more visitors be attracted if the Council achieves National Status?
- Is there any information on the Footfall at Abington Park to justify the days proposed for closure?
- Are educational visits still planned and well attended?

The Committee was advised that: -

- Any decision regarding reduced opening hours for Abington Park museum will not affect National Status
- Closing two days per week for the whole year would maximise a saving. It was emphasised that the estimated saving of £9,537 includes staffing costs and utilities
- Any proposed closures of the Museums would not affect educational visits. These would continue to be planned and are well attended
- It was agreed that there are too many options / details on what the options are and a breakdown will be circulated in due course.

## **Sports Development reduction in Multi Sports Activities in parks during summer 2009**

The Committee was advised that there would be no reduction in activities. Funding through Money for Youth had been awarded.

## **Cease the balloon festival and explore alternative events in parallel with the Market Square development**

The Committee discussed the proposal to cease the Balloon Festival in detail.

The Committee was advised that the Audit Committee had reviewed the expenditure for the Balloon Festival and was fully aware of the financial implications.

The Committee made the following comments: -

- The Balloon Festival is a centrepiece of Northampton and supports local businesses. That the necessary evidence be circulated to all members of the Committee for their full consideration and judgement.
- That the Audit Committee's assessment of the financial implications of the Balloon Festival be published to inform the budget decision process. .
- That minutes of the Balloon Festival Working Party be circulated to the Committee and clarification sought as to whether a report on the Balloon Festival was being provided outlining the options.
- That overall there was not enough available evidence available to the committee to support the proposal to cease the Balloon Festival and explore alternative events in parallel with the Market Square development.

## Comments and Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny 2

### 5. GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2009 - 2012

Mr Swinn, member of the public, addressed the Committee commenting that in his view the recommended increase in price for bulky waste collections would affect the most vulnerable groups, especially people under financial pressure. He said that it could encourage more 'fly-tipping'. In response to Mr Swinn's comment, he was advised that the appointment of 'Environmental Crime Officers' would tackle this issue.

Regarding the town's toilet facilities, Mr Swinn said that the Sheep Street facility is the one most used and he felt that it should be retained.

Mr Swinn was thanked for his address.

The Committee considered the proposals for the General Fund Revenue Budget 2009 / 2012 and heard: -

- One of the Council's roles is to provide public toilet facilities.
- Central Government does not provide funding to the Council for public toilets.
- Concerns were raised about the provision of toilets, in restaurants such as McDonald's. This could create a problem for parents taking children to the facilities as the children could expect to have a meal there.
- In response to a query about the provision of toilets in parks, the Portfolio Holder (Housing) advised that such a facility is no longer provided as in the past they have been vandalised.
- The Committee was generally supportive of the Richmond Scheme and realised that 'no size fits all'. The Richmond Scheme would be used as the basis and adapted to fit Northampton.
- In response to a query regarding children under the age of 14 using toilets in pubs, Steve Elsey, Head of Public Protection, advised that all such issues would be investigated and resolved before the scheme was rolled out.

Steve Elsey commented that services such as Environmental Health, Licensing, Environmental Crime will all be brought together with a move away from functional structure to a one area basis.

The Committee further heard that regarding the budget proposal in respect of the provision of Neighbourhood Wardens, it is suggested that they be reduced from 15 to 9 but it will be ensured that cover is provided for priority areas. The Committee raised concerns about the proposed reduced service, commenting on the need for Neighbourhood Wardens to be Borough wide.

Three vacant new Environmental Officers would be recruited to.

Major changes on Pest Control are proposed. The Pest Control Service currently provides a free service for the removal of rats, the other pest control services are subsidised for individuals who qualify. There are two proposed options: -

- Cease to provide the service
- That concessions no longer be applied to the Pest Control Service.

The Committee made the following comments: -

- With regard to blockages of sewers in a terrace property the Committee heard that the invoice is apportioned to all connected to the drain.
- In response to the Chair's query regarding the availability of a list of people who fall into the 'concessionary rate', it was agreed that the Committee would be issued with this list as soon as possible.
- The Bulky Waste collection is a 'seasonal' service with peaks and troughs.
- Pest Control is a non-statutory service.
- Bees and Wasps nests are dealt with by a private company. The Northamptonshire Bee Keepers Association will often provide help.
- Concerns were raised over the lack of Wardens to cover all areas. The Committee learnt that Supplementary Wardens will be used but the proposal is still in its early consulting stages and awaiting the outcome of the budget.

**AGREED** That Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2 (Housing and Environment's) comments on the budget proposals for 2009 / 2010 as detailed below, be forwarded to the Head of Finance.

**Increase the bulky waste collection fee from £10 for 3 items to £25 for 3 items to cover costs of delivering this service.** The Committee has serious concerns about this proposal, in particular the removal of concessions. This could cause a financial burden to those who would currently qualify for a concession.

**Introduce full Pest Control Charges, except for Rat treatment.** The Committee has serious similar concerns for this proposal, emphasising that it could cause financial burden to those who would currently qualify for a concession.

**Expansion of the Richmond Scheme to cover all public conveniences across Northampton.** The Committee is broadly in support of the introduction of this Scheme, as long as consultation is undertaken fully and public toilets are not closed before the scheme is fully implemented.

**Integration of the Park Rangers Service in Neighbourhood Environmental Services. Deletion of a post in 2008 / 2009 with remaining post being considered for 2009 / 2010.** The Committee did not make any specific comments.

**Restructure public protection services to support the introduction of a geographic focus to service delivery at a neighbourhood level, in conjunction with Neighbourhood Environmental Services.** The Committee expressed its disappointment at the loss of Neighbourhood Wardens, commenting that it appeared to be a backwards step. The Committee noted that the Neighbourhood Warden Service would be adjusted accordingly so that Neighbourhood Wardens be placed in the areas most needed. It was also noted with disappointment that a reduced service would be provided.

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## Comments and Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny 3

### 5. GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2009-2012

The Chair reminded the Committee that the Reporting and Monitoring Working Group is investigating the budget process and had made recommendations regarding which items each Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be consulted upon. Further discussions are to take place to consider the options.

#### ANNUAL BUDGET

The Committee heard that there are three options for consideration in respect of the vacant Overview and Scrutiny Officer post:-

- Replace with an admin assistant
- Reducing hours of vacant scrutiny post
- Hold the vacant scrutiny post open for one year

It was noted that Meetings Services Officers will be undertaking the administration of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, ie, issuing the agendas and taking the minutes.

The Committee further heard and commented:-

- Reducing the amount of Officer support is not really an option as this would impact on the workload and could lead to inequalities and implications for the way in which Overview and Scrutiny and Officers work, research and investigations would have to be carried out by others.

The total saving for holding the vacant Overview and Scrutiny Officer post open for one year is £45,000. If the post was replaced by an admin assistant, the saving would be £18,000 and if the vacant post was replaced by reducing the hours of the vacant Overview and Scrutiny Post the savings would be £21,000. Directors are responsible for supporting Overview and Scrutiny and this function needs good, proper support.

- Three Overview and Scrutiny Committees was a reasonable decision to make but certain pieces of work that the Committees want to look at cannot be done due to lack of resources.
- It is not possible for one Overview and Scrutiny Officer to cover all topics. The Executive is held to account with four committees but the amount of Committees is a political issue for the whole Council rather than for this Committee.
- Overview and Scrutiny is not mature enough at Northampton. A good, stable working set up will allow it to evolve but the Committee felt it would not work in the short term.
- Overview and Scrutiny committees serve a very important function in this Authority. The Committee felt that the burden would be put on to Tracy Tiff, Overview and Scrutiny Officer, who works very hard to fulfil Overview and Scrutiny needs. Officers have done their work so that the burdens would not be too great on the current Overview and Scrutiny Officer but there is a need to ensure this is put in place and the Committee's comments are taken on board as we do not want the Officer to be off sick with stress.



A Job Share / Part Time option is covered under MTPS73B.

The Committee heard that Tracy Tiff's post of Overview and Scrutiny Officer is not at risk.

**AGREED:** That the Committee's comments on the budget proposals for the vacant Overview and Scrutiny Officer be noted as part of the budget consultation.

**NB:** Tracy Tiff, Overview and Scrutiny Officer, left the meeting at 6.10pm and returned at 6.30pm whilst consideration was given to the budget options in respect of the vacant Overview and Scrutiny Officer post.

#### 5a **POTENTIAL MOBILE TELEPHONE SAVINGS**

The Committee was advised that there are approximately 700 mobile 'phone devices' used by Officers and Members of the Borough Council. Mobile 'phone usage is being investigated; a saving of £10,000 should be feasible.

Statistics indicate that 720 mobile 'phone devices', represent 48% of staff at NBC, in Daventry, Corby and Trafford the ratios are 183 to 300 staff, 45% and 1400 to 1000 staff respectively.

The Committee heard that the Vodaphone tariff is one of the most economic and competitive but was not long-term commitment. Projects are in place to ascertain the usage of mobile 'phone devices' per department. Lone workers need a mobile phone device but work is ongoing to clarify the level of savings. The target is to check and make sure that the Officers who have a mobile 'phone device' actually require one. Currently the mobile 'phone device' bill is about £72,000 per year, which equates to approximately £100 per year per device.

5 (c) In respect of the budget proposal to reduce the head count in face to face operation by 1 full time post (closure of the Kingsthorpe Office due to the reduced footfall and demand) Cheryl Doran, Assistant Head of Customer Services, advised that currently at the Kingsthorpe site, between 200 to 220 people visit per week but it is envisaged that this figure will drop. District Offices are expensive to run and 60% of visitors had straightforward requests such as brochures, basic information etc.

It was emphasised that the proposal is to remove the 'face to face' officers, not the whole service. This also applies to the Weston Favell District Office. A saving of £55,000 for 2009 / 2010 for this office is envisaged. Should the cash desk be closed, the Committee heard that the public could make all transactions at the Post Office.

In response to a query if a complete closure took place what would happen to the building, Gavin Chambers, Head of Finance, advised that at the present time it would not be good to sell the premise, but the building could be rented out making an estimated saving of around £60,000.

With regard to access for vulnerable people this Authority provides 'Home Visits' and can continue to do so along with the help of the County Travellers Unit and Police, although it is not looking at recruiting more Housing Officers. Discussions can take place with the Benefits Team so that they can integrate such visits into their schedule of home visits. Vulnerable people also have the option of contacting the Officer by telephone and have the situation assessed that way.