

**Council
Monday 2nd March 2009**

Portfolio Holder Presentations

1. Report of the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for Partnerships and Improvement (Page 1)
2. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Safety (Page 3)
3. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing (Page 5)
4. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Environment (Page 7)
5. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration (Page 9)
6. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Performance (Page 11)
7. Report of the Portfolio Holder for Finance (Page 13)



Portfolio Holder Report for Partnerships & Improvement

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March, 2009

Ministerial Meeting

I met with DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) Minister John Healey MP on 27th January, accompanied by Sally Keeble MP and the Chief Executive. This meeting was arranged jointly by Ms. Keeble and Brian Binley MP outside the consultation procedure for local government finance. This cross-party support from both of Northampton's current MP's was a welcome show of unity in the midst of recession.

Given that this year's local government settlement had been announced in advance of the meeting, I did not seek to challenge the below-inflation increase in government funds. Instead, we discussed practical ways in which the government could help with supporting the council's improvement journey.

In particular, we agreed on the need to accelerate council's improvement and transformation. Indeed, I pointed out the relatively low level of general reserves next to the investment the council needs to make in the coming year as part of the Strategic Business Reviews for Asset Management, ICT and Leisure & Culture. The Minister made no firm commitments, but asked that the council work with DCLG to explore possible means of support moving forward.

I also highlighted the need, not least given the recession, of pushing forward Northampton's many – and much-needed – regeneration projects.

More specifically, we discussed the importance of removing the Plough Hotel gyratory to connect the south of the town to the town centre; the demolition of the bus station enable development and to open up the north of the town; and the importance of improving the railway station and neighbouring riverside.

Beyond the town centre, we spoke of the need to invest in Northampton's social homes and bring them up to the government's Decent Homes Standard by several means.

Mr. Healey acknowledged the council's strides forward though reminded us that the council had had significant help from government in the past. The council will therefore shortly submit a paper to DCLG to accelerate the transformation programme.

MKSM (Milton Keynes South Midlands) Leadership Group

The council hosted a meeting of the MKSM Leadership Group on 10th February. This group, which includes Leaders and Chief Executives of several neighbouring councils, coordinates activities within the growth area. After the formal meeting, participants discussed the benefits of promoting one or more Multi Area Agreements (MAA's) within the MKSM area.

Supporting the Standards Committee

Group Leaders and I met with independent Chair of the council's Standards Committee, Ian Harley, on 17th February to discuss the benefits that it could bring to this council.

Each of the three group leaders confirmed their support for the work of the Standards Committee and the need for high standards in public life.

Tony Woods

Leader of the Council

Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvement



Portfolio Holder Report for Community Engagement & Safety

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March, 2009

Public Protection

Following anticipated changes in the Environment and Culture Directorate, the council's Public Protection team will be made up of two sections – Regulatory Services and Community Safety. The latter falls within the purview of this portfolio and would bring together the Northampton Anti social Behaviour Unit, with the council's Community Safety functions and its operation of close-circuit television (CCTV) into a single team. By working closer with police and other agencies, the council will be better placed than before to make Northampton a safe place in which to live, work and relax.

Community Safety

Consultation for the introduction of Designated Public Places Orders (DPPOs) to restrict the consumption of alcohol in public places was well received by residents, with over 90% supporting the council's plans to introduce a Borough-wide scheme.

Locations for appropriate signage have already been identified and are being approved by the County Council, Highways Agency and Town Centre Manager.

The council is following Best Practice guidance from the Home Office and will publish a leaflet for residents, setting out what changes to the law will mean for them. The council is also working up appropriate enforcement documentation and performance monitoring processes for Police and Neighbourhood Environmental Wardens.

CCTV

A contract for the installation of the 21 CCTV cameras on the Brackmills Industrial Estate has been awarded to a local business, Nova Integrated Security Systems. All cameras will be equipped with automatic number-plate recognition (ANPR) and will feed directly into the control room at St John's. Installation will be completed in the coming weeks and will support the council's other good work to make Brackmills an even better place to do business.

Leisure Services

Mounts Baths received an improved score during its most recent QUEST Audit, taking it into the 'commended' category.

Leisure Services also improved upon its Chartermark (Customer Service Excellence) score by improving its 'partial' scores from 7 to 4.

Direct Debit payments are on the rise at the council's Trilogy Fitness centres. Sales are up 52% in January on last year's figures. Council income from its leisure facilities was also up £180,000 on last year, more than half of which was received using the council's website.

New swimming pool facilities will be installed on 23rd March at Danes Camp. This will make swimming at Danes Camp a more family-friendly experience. Refurbishment work to the wetside changing areas at Lings Forum is also under way.

Up to £60,000 will be invested in the council's swimming provision as part of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) 'Free Swimming Initiative'. The council has opted to extend free swimming to the under-16s as well as over-60s – something other councils in the county have not managed to do.

Northampton Sports and Play Development Team

The council received a Bronze award against Chartermark criteria for 'Children and Young People's Partnership Engagement' and 'Active Engagement'. As ever, the council is looking to improve on its performance at the next available opportunity.

The council has secured £25,000 funding from Money4youth to pay for an exciting skating project at Lings Forum.

Recent results from Sport England's Active People Survey shows that Northampton now has a more active population than the county average.

Events, Museums and the Arts

Preparatory work is under way for the 'Great Northamptonshire Run', which will take place in October. The event is being led by Northamptonshire Sport and Northamptonshire Enterprise Limited (NEL), in partnership with the council and will attract welcome attention to the town and county as great sporting destinations.

Brendan Glynane

Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Safety



Portfolio Holder Report for Housing

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March, 2009

1. Mortgage Rescue Scheme

The council is one of the flagship authorities taking part in the government's pilot for Mortgage Rescue Schemes.

The Mortgage Rescue Scheme will provide a safety net for up to 9,000 homeowners across the country who may otherwise be at risk of losing their homes. In a year when up to 80,000 homes will be repossessed, the Mortgage Rescue Scheme is a vital tool at the council's disposal to ensure that as many residents as possible stay in their homes.

Depending on residents' circumstances, homeowners in Northampton may be offered either a shared equity option to reduce their monthly outgoings or a mortgage-to-rent alternative to keep them in their homes as Registered Social Landlord (RSL) tenants on reduced rents.

The council is working with the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), Community Law service and Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association locally to ensure residents in Northampton get the very best advice on offer.

The council has already received over 40 enquiries for mortgage rescue, and was recently visited by staff from the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit to see the good work being done by one of the government's leading authorities.

Sheltered Housing

The council looks after over 2,000 homes designated as Sheltered Housing and employs over 40 dedicated Sheltered Housing Coordinators. Last year, the council found that 86% of Sheltered Housing residents were 'satisfied' or 'highly satisfied' with the service they received.

The council recognises that there is still work to be done to make the council better placed to respond to the needs of an ageing population. Accordingly, there will be a further review of the Sheltered Housing service, in consultation with residents, such that sheltered housing is put on a sustainable, financially sound footing for the future.

2. Housing PFI

The council expects to hear back from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) about its Expression of Interest for Private Finance Initiative (PFI) funds in the Summer.

Reports on the council's Housing Asset Management Strategy and Investment Options Appraisal will be seen by Cabinet once the outcome of this is known. In the meantime, the council is actively exploring other options to bring some of the town's most neglected homes up to standard so that every one of the town's social tenants has a decent place to live.

3. Social Tenants' Rent

Following the council's decision to close its Weston Favell and Kingsthorpe Housing Offices, tenants are able to pay their rent at a number of Post Offices and shops throughout the town. In practical terms, this means social tenants across Northampton will be able to pay their rent at more locations than ever before, whilst being able to seek one-to-one advice at the council's excellent One Stop Shop in the Guildhall.

Single Persons Accommodation

With Robinson House about to become vacant, the council has commissioned a review of single persons' accommodation, which will be seen by Cabinet this Summer.

4. Tenant Participation

At the time of writing, Cabinet's decision to create area-based partnership boards, as recommended by leading consultant PEP, was subject to a call-in by opposition councillors.

Sally Beardsworth

Portfolio Holder for Housing



Portfolio Holder Report for the Environment

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March 2009

Public Protection

Consultation on the Division's new structure is ongoing. The Division is expected to have two sections – Regulatory Services and Community Safety – which should be in place before the Summer.

Regulatory Services would fall within the purview of the Environment Directorate, bringing together all of Environmental Health's functions together with Licensing, Neighbourhood Environmental Wardens and a new resource for Environmental Crime.

It is expected that Regulatory Services will be split under four teams, with the Central Area covering St Crispins, Castle and Abington wards and the District Area, the remaining wards.

Each team will have a mixture of Environmental Health, Food Safety, Health and Safety and Environmental Protection Officers, as well as Neighbourhood Environmental Wardens and the new Environmental Crime Officers. Practically, these changes will mean the council working more effectively than before to keep Northampton clean and tidy.

Environmental Health

The council's Environmental Wardens are now better placed to compliment the work of Police Constable Support Officers (PCSOs), ensuring there is no duplication between the work of council officers and PCSOs. Environmental Crime Officers will work to target fly tipping by issuing tough on-the-spot Fixed Penalty Notices and maintaining the council's excellent record for removing fly tips within 48 hours.

Glass Recycling

A report on glass recycling will be seen by Cabinet on 18th March. If approved, residents would soon be able to have glass collected free by the council from outside their own homes.

Cold Weather

The council's Streetscene team gritted Abington Street and major bus stops in Northampton on consecutive days during the recent cold snap.

The collection of brown wheelie bins was postponed to give crews a chance to catch up with collections affected by the weather – all crews did an excellent job under difficult circumstances.

All brown and grey wheelie bins have now been collected thanks to the good will and hard work of officers and residents.

During the recent cold weather, there were six accidents involving officers, one of which was a serious incident. Thankfully, the officer involved is fully recovered and back at work.

Trini Crake

Portfolio Holder for the Environment



Portfolio Holder Report for Planning & Regeneration

Northampton Borough Council

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Market Square

The council is consulting on plans for the Market Square's events and exhibition space following a successful public display on the Market Square from 18-21st February.

The council has worked hard to ensure that there will be weekend events on the Market Square (beginning 11th April), providing accessible entertainment for all of the town's communities throughout the calendar year.

The council welcomes feedback from residents and visitors and hopes to use constructive comments made as the basis for planning future events.

Marina

Cabinet agreed to submit a bid to West Northants Development Corporation (WNDC) to fund the installation of a Marina at Beckett's Park. Completion of the marina would be a key step in the park's Masterplan and would give a new lease of life to the river after decades of neglect.

Brackmills Business Improvement District (BID)

Proposals for the Brackmills BID have been launched and have already received enthusiastic support from a number of local businesses. A ballot of all businesses will be conducted in March to seek wider support for a Supplementary Business Rate (SBR) to implement this plan. If accepted, a small SBR would allow the council and business community to make Brackmills a more attractive place for businesses to trade and help attract new employment to Northampton.

Chrysallis Centre

Owing to deep cuts in government funding for Regional Development Agencies, the East Midlands Development Agency is no longer able to support the council's bid to create a business start-up centre on the Guildhall Road this year.

The council remains committed to the project and plans to re-submit proposals for the work as soon as funding is made available.

Concessionary bus fares

Government underfunding of concessionary bus passes is more acute than ever as take-up of bus passes increases. With 3.2 million trips expected next year, the council's estimated shortfall of £1.6 million will cost residents in Northampton 50p for every trip made.

Cabinet hopes to have the full support of members in tackling the adverse impact of the current funding formula on transport hubs like Northampton. Cabinet considers it unfair that residents of the Borough continue to subsidise bus journeys for visitors who live outside the town and hopes to maintain cross-party support and good will to lobby government to redress this iniquity.

Richard Church

Portfolio Holder for Planning & Regeneration



Portfolio Holder Report for Performance

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March 2009

Changes to customer payment

The council is working to make sure that tenants and residents are aware of the new ways to pay for its services. Information will soon be available online and in the council's One Stop Shop. Officers will be on hand in the council's existing cash offices in the run-up to the change to explain the alternatives to customers in person.

Following the switch, barcodes will be printed on top of every council bill to enable customers to pay in cash at Pay Zone locations around the town. Practically, this means more places to pay for customers – and for many local shops and Post Offices, some welcome extra income in these tough economic times.

ICT

Work is on track for the council's link to Government Connect (GN), the government's secure network for local authorities in England and Wales. Once the new system is in place, GN will provide a more secure means of transferring confidential data between councils and the government, and guard against future losses of confidential data at national level.

The council's server replacement programme for 2008/9 is now complete, with server virtualisation (replacing physical servers with online versions) also making good progress. 'Virtualising' the council's servers will enable multiple software applications to run on single servers. This saves the council money whilst reducing its carbon footprint – a win-win for Northampton's hardworking residents.

Human Resources

In recent weeks, the council has been focussed on making the transition to more efficient ways of working, as set out in its Revenue Budget for 2009/10. These changes will mean a leaner, more financially viable council for many years to come.

Performance Management

Performance data shows that the council is providing better services at a lower cost than last year. At this time of recession, the council is making sure it responds quickly and compassionately to our communities' most vulnerable residents, supported by its improved times for processing Housing Benefits

and re-letting vacant homes.

The council underwent a further Audit Commission assessment in January. The council hopes to be able to demonstrate further improvements to services, once these findings are published.

Cold Weather

On behalf of all Borough Councillors, I would like to record my thanks to officers for their hard work during the recent cold weather. Cabinet members have been informed of the many exceptional efforts by the council's staff to keep essential services running.

This council can be proud of its response to the conditions and on the strengthening sense partnership and teamwork of Team Northampton.

Brian Hoare

Portfolio Holder for Performance



Portfolio Holder Report for Finance

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 2nd March, 2009

Finance

The council's principal focus in recent months has been on setting a balanced revenue budget for the financial year 2009/10.

Asset Management

The council is working closely with consultants appointed by the Delapre Abbey Preservation Trust to work up a Parklands Appraisal. The preparation of this report, expected in May, will help frame a comprehensive bid for external funding that would allow progress to be made in restoring the Abbey and its surrounding area.

The council is also working closely with the Northampton Arts Collective (NAC) and partner authorities to ensure a viable business plan is drawn up for the collective's future activities. The council continues to offer NAC a site at no cost and is in discussions about what more can be done to assist with other reasonable costs.

Works are now being undertaken to renew a section of the roof at the Royal Theatre. The council approved funding to support two phases of roof works earlier this financial year. The first phase of work, to renew the roof over the Dergate stage, was completed in 2008. As usual, the council is working with the Theatre Trust to minimise disruption to its programme.

Procurement

The Northamptonshire Area Procurement Service (NAPS) has been established. The first NAPS board meeting was held on 22 December 2008, which approved the NAPS 2009/10 Business Plan. The business plan focuses on delivery of seven efficiency improvement projects, previously approved by the East Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and the Public Services Board. Additionally, it includes four major procurement projects for the NAPS partners and two contract management improvement projects.

Council Tax

Collection rates for January are slowing. As a consequence, the council has issued an increased number of reminders for non-payment. The council has also received an increased number of direct debit cancellations. Given the time of year, many families will still be juggling competing pressures following

the big Christmas spend. The council therefore hopes to make arrangements with these families to clear their accounts at the earliest possible date.

The council is also writing to customers likely to be affected by changes to discounts in long-term empty properties to ensure that landlords are not caught out.

Business Rates

Collection rates are also slowing and this is expected to be reflected in January's out-turn figures. Whilst the council has the best collection rate in the county, the year-on-year comparison is not as strong, reflecting problems in the wider economy.

Malcolm Mildren

Portfolio Holder for Finance