

Council
Monday 18th January 2010

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Portfolio Holder Report for Partnerships & Improvement

Northampton Borough Council

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The Year Ahead

The Council enters 2010 in a much better position having received confirmation that government monitoring is over. The Council's 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment report was a low watermark for the authority and having shaken off the Council's 'Poor' reputation, the authority can really go from strength to strength.

In 2009, the Council received positive reports from its inspectors, all of whom recognised the considerable improvements since 2007.

In October 2008, the Council's IDEA Peer Review reported that:

"... after a number of previous false dawns for the council the right leadership and structure is in place to continue the strong improvement that has already been delivered, evidenced by the number of higher quartile services and services that are no longer classified as poor."

In April 2009, the Audit Commission commented in its annual audit and inspection letter that:

"Significant progress has been made by the Council over the last year... There are pressures on the Authority's financial resources in light of an unfavourable settlement from central government and adverse trends in car parking income and concessionary travel expenditure... The Authority needs to build on improvements made this year..."

In June 2009, the Audit Commission stated in its Access to Services report that:

"The Council has 'excellent' prospects for improvement. There are detailed plans adopted for delivering improved access to services... Councillor and senior manager leadership is now strong and demonstrates a commitment to the delivery of a more customer focused access to services."

In December 2009, the Council's Organisational Assessment said that:

"The Council has transformed how it works. It used to be poor and it recognises there is still much to do. Local people are not yet satisfied with the Council or the town as a place to live. The Council has the leadership and capability to continue to improve."

The Local Government Chronicle too has recognised the Council's progress in shortlisting the authority for this year's 'Most Improved Council of the Year' and Regeneration awards. The latter is further evidence of Council's strides in planning and regeneration, following hot on the heels of the Council's Royal Town and Planning Institute (RTPI) award for its Bridge Street, St John's and Angel Street plans.

Whilst the Council can be pleased with its progress, it is not yet where it needs to be. Delivering frontline services in a climate of tighter government spending requires the Council to push ahead more quickly with its change agenda.

'Change' is an overused word in politics. But further change is necessary in this authority to protect frontline services. The Council must push ahead with joint ventures that improve services or reduce costs to the public purse, working with partners in the voluntary, public or private sectors.

Despite the challenges ahead, the Council is determined to achieve its corporate ambition of being 'recognised as one of the best Councils, in terms of public service by 2013'.

Budget Consultation

This Council, along with other local authorities and public services in Northamptonshire, face uncertain levels of government support after the General election. Whatever the political composition of the government, the United Kingdom will need to address its structural deficit. This will impact central government support for Northampton.

The administration believes it is important to explain the prospects for public spending to local taxpayers and engage them in an open and honest dialogue about the future impact on local services. The Council has therefore arranged to put its draft budget proposals before seven public meetings across the town. I hope that members of all parties and none will encourage their constituents to attend.

West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC)

Northamptonians are still waiting on the government's conclusions following the quinquennial (five-yearly) review of WNDC. The Council continues to press for the return of planning powers to the Guildhall so that decisions are taken by elected Councillors. The administration's view is that the WNDC should be transformed into a democratically accountable regeneration vehicle, whose primary focus is Northampton.

Preparation for the General Election

The Council's Electoral Services team is working hard to ensure that as many people as possible are able to vote at this year's General Election. Project plans, risk register work and community impact assessments are nearing completion. Detailed postal vote and count plans have been completed.

While 6th May seems to be the favoured date of the election, it can be called at only 18 working days' notice. Accordingly, the Council's plans must be ready ahead of time.

The number of postal vote applications in Northampton continues to rise. At 10th November 2009, the town's post vote register stood at 28,456, with 5000 requests for application forms pending.

The final phase of the Council's annual canvass is also under way, with some 60 canvassers out door knocking homes that have not yet responded to the first wave of communication. Electoral registration is 4% down on last year, unsurprising given the political furore of the last twelve months. Early indications, however, are that this will be caught up by the canvassers' good work.

Brian Hoare

Leader of the Council

Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvements



Portfolio Holder Report for Community Engagement

Northampton Borough Council

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Trilogy Leisure Centres

Online direct debit sales for the Council's Trilogy leisure centres continue to grow, with figures for the first six months of the financial year equalling last year's – an increase of 100%. The Council's Christmas-New Year membership deal will now run to the end of January, sales for which are currently up 40% on last year. Northamptonians can now also pay for swimming lessons via direct debit as a result of the Trilogy Swim School initiative.

Northampton Sports and Play Development Team

The Council's team has been commissioned by Kingsthorpe Sure Start centre to write and deliver a training programme for parents of children aged 2-4. The course educates parents and guardians about the importance of play in children's development and aims to improve their observation skills to allow children in their care to play more freely.

After the Northampton Sports Awards in October, 10 of the town's 13 winners were shortlisted for the Northamptonshire Sports Awards. 5 of our winners went on to win, with 4 subsequently put forward for the BBC East Sports Awards shortlist.

Museums & Arts

Anglia TV filmed a piece at the Northampton Museum & Art Gallery highlighting its work with young people with hearing impairments, in conjunction with the charity, Talking Heads.

Equalities

The Council has now received the final report of its Equalities Peer Challenge, which confirms the Borough as having reached Level 3 of the government's outgoing standard and as being on track to reach the same level under the incoming Equalities Framework for Local Government. The Council will take on board the report's comments as it moves towards its goal of reaching an 'excellent' standard in the medium-term.

As one of the town's largest employers, it is vital that the Council takes its equalities responsibilities seriously so that both officers and Councillors demonstrably reflect the backgrounds and beliefs of the citizenry they serve.

Community Centres

The Council has developed proposals to run the town's Community Centres more efficiently, supported by an Overview and Scrutiny Task & Finish Group, which has been visiting and taking evidence on existing community facilities. This work will inform the administration's policy.

I would like at this stage to quash irresponsible rumours that the administration is setting out to close existing centres. Any changes made to the way in which centres are run will be carried out with the twin aims of extending community access and safeguarding taxpayers' money.

Partnership Fund Grants

Applications to the Council's Partnership Fund 2010-11 have closed and are being evaluated. The Council's advisory panel will make recommendations as to which voluntary groups are funded next month. These grants will be paid from 1st July 2010.

Paul Varnserry

Deputy Leader of the Council

Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement



Portfolio Holder Report for Housing

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 18th January 2010

Decent Homes

Since my last report, contractor Thomas Vale Ltd has successfully completed improvements to 26 Council homes as part of Phase 1 of the authority's Decent Homes programme.

Housing Strategy and Housing Asset Management Strategy

The Council's joint launch event took place on 16th December. The Council's 12-week consultation period is now open and closes on 24th February. The Housing Strategy can be downloaded from the Council's website right now. I hope that Councillors of all parties will encourage tenants in their wards to get involved and tell us what they think. Further events are being arranged to allow local residents to let us know what they think before the end of the consultation window.

Rent Income

The Council's housing team is now able to offer four separate direct debit dates for rent payments. Previously, payments could only be processed on the 8th and 28th of the month. After improvements to the Council's collection system, direct debits can now be collected on the 1st, 11th, 21st, and 28th of each month, allowing tenants to pay their rent when it is right for them, not the Council.

Housing Services

After a successful trial run in November, officers are completing an intensive programme of tenancy audit visits (averaging 50 a week) as part of the Council's fraud crackdown. The team are focussing on illegal subletting of Council properties – an unacceptable practice that takes homes away from people who really need them.

Last month, the Council took part in a Police initiative, 'Not in my Neighbourhood', to tackle anti-social behaviour in Spencer. The initiative will allow Council and Police resources to be better targeted and will feed into the local Joint Action Group Meeting (JAG). The Police have been very pleased with the Council's input, so well done to those involved.

Cold Weather

The Council's Sheltered Housing and Call Care teams responded well to vulnerable residents' needs over the recent cold snap. Despite the snow, the ice

and the cold, the Council's Sheltered Housing team was fully staffed and our most vulnerable residents received home visits. Some were also telephoned to double-check their needs were being met.

Duty supervisors were on-call at all times and were able to provide emergency cover, if needed. The Council's Call Care service was working 24/7 over Christmas, as usual. Due to the slippery roads, paths and pavements around the town, we advised residents to stay indoors until they were able to get out and about. Although the Council recognises that isolation is a real issue for many older people but felt, in this instance, the most important thing was safety first.

On top of this, the Council ran an emergency shopping service (bread, milk and essentials) for residents who ran out of food in the cold weather. The Council's Housing Solutions team also recently launched a severe weather shelter to house 28 rough sleepers from outside the Borough over Christmas and the New Year. It is a great shame that help for the homeless across Northamptonshire's rural districts is so scant.

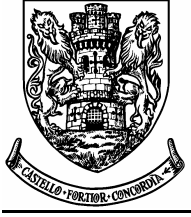
Disabled Facilities Grant pilot scheme

I am pleased to report that the Council's Housing Solutions service was chosen by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Audit Commission, and the Department of Health (DH) to undertake a groundbreaking Disabled Facilities Grant pilot.

The pilot involves a complete overhaul of the way the government delivers home adaptations for disabled people and this Council is the only authority in the country to be taking part. The successes of the scheme will be monitored by DH each week. It is excellent news and demonstrates how well the Council's social housing services have improved since they were subject to government inspection.

Sally Beardsworth

Portfolio Holder for Housing



Portfolio Holder Report for Planning & Regeneration

Northampton Borough Council

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Market square

The Council's improvement plans for the Market Square continue apace. Work to the fountain and gateway area began promptly on the first working day of the New Year. Planning applications have also been submitted for lighting to the square's listed buildings.

The Council held successful lighting consultation before Christmas with owners and occupiers around the square. Local traders showed considerable support and enthusiasm for the project. The final design of the lighting will, of course, reflect the views of local traders.

Members of all parties and none will be pleased to know that the Market Square improvement project has been shortlisted for the 2009 Local Government Chronicle Regeneration Award. The winner will be announced at the end of March. To be shortlisted is welcome recognition of the project's contribution to business, jobs and community life in our historic Market Square.

Marina

The Environment Agency is resolving planning conditions and lease arrangements with the Council. Once these issues are resolved, the tender will be let. A tree condition survey is being carried out. Work to reshape the boating lake will begin next month.

The Local Development Scheme

The West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee have agreed a revised Local Development Scheme and submitted it to the Government Office of the East Midlands. The new scheme will see a pre-submission 'draft core strategy' presented to the committee over the summer, with further public consultation before it is submitted for inspection. I am also advised that the Central Area Action Plan (CAAP) will be prepared to the same timetable, with a report to Cabinet to approve a pre-submission draft for consultation over the summer.

Business in Northampton

A number of announcements over Christmas will mean considerable inward investment for our town centre, protecting and creating jobs and business opportunities to Northampton.

Carlsberg has announced that its UK production will be concentrated in Northampton, following the closure of its Leeds brewery. The move means a greater investment and increased capacity in its brewery here in Northampton.

Travel Lodge has announced a £2 million investment programme for the Grand Hotel in Gold Street, restoring one of Northampton's finest buildings.

House of Fraser has announced a £1 million investment plan to refurbish its Beatties store in the Grosvenor Centre – a welcome show of support in the town's main shopping mall.

The moves amount to three national and global firms demonstrating confidence in Northampton as a dynamic, well-located town in which to work, shop and stay.

Richard Church

Portfolio Holder for Planning & Regeneration



Portfolio Holder Report for the Environment

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 18th January 2010

Cemeteries

The Council is making use of new software to make the running of Northampton's cemeteries more efficient. Once installed, the unoriginally named 'Burial And Cremation Administration System' will allow Northamptonians to access information about their ancestry online.

Waste Services

The Council has introduced a new office-recycling scheme in its three main buildings. The new scheme replaces waste paper bins with recycling points, comprising three bins for paper and card, plastic and cans and a third for general waste.

The more we recycle, the less we send to landfill. This helps keep what we pay to County Hall (£993.34) and the Guildhall (£204.60) down and ensure it is used for local services Northamptonians need. Recycling from the Council's buildings is taken into account in delivering its Carbon Management Programme.

The Borough's recycling rate for November 2009 was 42.17%, up 2.87% on the previous month. This keeps the Council on target to achieve its 40% target by the end of the financial year.

Cold Weather

The cold weather has affected the Council's ability to collect residents' bins, especially in the Hunsbury's and Northampton East. The Council made every effort to revisit these areas in the week before and after Christmas, with crews putting in extra shifts. A huge thanks to everyone involved for making up the lost ground.

Bus Station

New signage has been installed to help safely direct customers in and out of the bus station. An order has been raised with Serco for the installation of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) equipment. The Council continues to meet with the bus companies to discuss safety issues.

Car Parks

New pay machines in The Ridings and Upper Mounts car parks are being installed this month. The administration ensured there was free parking on Sundays in all of the Council's car parks in the run-up to Christmas and after 17.00 on Thursdays in the Mayorhold, St John's and St. Michael's.

Market Square

Work on the design of new signage for the Market Square continues. I am advised that it will be in place by the end of March. Agreement has been reached with a fourth food concession to purchase a new unit to help up the square's catering offer.

Town Centre Partnership (TCP)

The Council's Christmas programme was a huge success and attracted many visitors to the town centre. A number of the Council's partners helped to make it happen, including the Deco and Royal & Derngate theatres, BBC and Heart radios, Ferrari, Harley Bikers, town centre choirs, the Grosvenor Centre, All Saints Church, the Moulton Mummers, Stage Coach, the Salvation Army, the Rotary Club and Northampton's Got Talent winners, Niamh Bennet and Demi White. My thanks to them all for bringing festive cheer to Northampton.

Trini Crake

Portfolio Holder for the Environment



Portfolio Holder Report for Performance & Support

Northampton Borough Council

18th January 2010

Customer Services

The Council's contribution to National Customer Service Week 2009 received welcome coverage in the January edition of 'Customer First', the National Institute of Customer Services' journal.

Regional Improvement and Efficiency Funding (RIEP) has been secured to redevelop the Guildhall's One Stop Shop. This moves the Council towards its goal of making more services available to customers online and in person. Discussions are taking place with Northamptonshire Police, the Fire Service and voluntary sector organisations to make their services accessible via the One Stop Shop.

After the introduction the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) kiosk to the One Stop Shop, the CAB will start twice-weekly surgeries in 2010, providing much needed, face-to-face advice for customers on legal, financial and personal matters.

At the same time, the Council is working to increase the number of services accessible online and via automated kiosks. Such changes will not only offer easier access to customers, but also provide savings to the Council at a time of tighter public expenditure. Crucially, bringing services in line with modern technology also allows frontline staff to focus their efforts on more vulnerable customers in need of one-to-one support.

Facilities

The Council's Facilities team helped and supported Northampton's civic Remembrance Sunday service. The service ran smoothly and proved a fitting tribute to our armed service men and women.

The Council's Print Unit has a new high-quality printer, which will allow documents to be reproduced more quickly and reliably and at better value-for-money, both to internal and external customers.

ICT

The Council received positive feedback for the Youth Forum's video kiosks at the Northampton Museum & Art Gallery. Internet kiosks in the One Stop Shop are also improving online access for customers needing to access Choice Based Lettings and other Council services.

I would also like to thank the Council's ICT, Customer Services and Facilities teams for the courteous and professional way in which they dealt with November's power outage at Cliftonville. In particular, I would like to thank staff for the way in which they

pulled together to ensure that emergency phone lines were promptly reinstated and ICT services put back online early the next working day.

Human Resources

The Council has worked up a strategy to develop its use of modern apprenticeships. The Council has also been successful, working with neighbouring authorities, in securing funding for the creation of several 16-18 year-old apprenticeships across Councils in Northamptonshire.

The Council is helping 16 employees achieve the Institute of Leadership Management qualification. Following a strong competition for places, the group was selected to complete the course over the next two years as part of the Council's leadership development initiative.

Funding has been secured for the creation of a web portal for public sector advertising on the Council's website, in conjunction with other authorities. The changes will help reduce Council recruitment costs and improve its ability to attract the brightest and the best in local government.

Council Priorities

The Council's Performance Management team is taking the lead in involving Northamptonians in its Corporate Plan (2010-13) and budget-setting (2010-11) exercises. Both use a mix of consultation techniques, including:

1. Seven public meetings across the town
2. Online public consultation via the Council's website
3. Paper questionnaires available at all Council premises
4. Focus groups with Council Forums and Residents' Associations

As soon as Council's corporate and budget priorities are passed by members, service plans and key performance indicators will be revised, helped by the introduction of Performance Plus software.

Brian Markham

Portfolio Holder for Performance & Support



Portfolio Holder Report for Finance

Northampton Borough Council

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Budget Monitoring 2009/10

The financial position of in year budget monitoring is improving, with the initial forecast outturn estimates of a year end overspend now reversing, through robust budget management, to a forecast underspend.

Concessionary Fares

A consultation on the additional income for Concessionary Fares has been responded to. The Council lose out to over £1m per year on the concessionary fares scheme and the revised additional grant arrangements did not apportion any further monies to NBC. The Council's consultation response recommends that the current funding of the scheme should move to a claim basis where actual expenditure is recovered.

2010/11 Budget

The budgets for the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and the Capital Programme have been one of the main areas of focus for the Finance Team in recent months. The budgets were presented to Cabinet in December for consultation. Officers across all directorates put in a great effort to enable a balanced General Fund budget to be consulted on.

Business Continuity Plans

The recent power failure at Cliftonville put into practice the Business Continuity Plans that our Risk and Business Continuity Manager has assisted directorates in producing over the this year. A report has been presented to the Audit Committee reviewing this test of our business continuity plans.

Assets

Following the confirmation of major investment by HCA and CLG to support the innovative "Places of Change" scheme, the Council are working closely with Midland Heart Housing Association to complete a long term agreement for the delivery of this major project on council owned land in the Town Centre. This will represent a major improvement in supported homeless provision in the Town. The Council is using its property ownership to support this landmark scheme, whilst helping to reduce the impact on businesses who need to be relocated from the property.

Treasury Management

The internal auditors have issued their report on Treasury Management and given their opinion of High Assurance. This means that no control weaknesses were identified and they could conclude that the key controls had been adequately designed and were operating effectively to deliver the objectives of the system, function or process. This is another example of the progress the Council is making towards the status of “excellent” and is of great assurance during the current period of financial uncertainty.

Revenue and Benefits

Benefits - During November our benefits team have been busy re – assessing claims affected by the change in Legislation in respect of pensioner capital and child benefit disregards. Both of these changes have lead to another increase in our ever-growing benefit caseload. Since April 2009, we have seen an increase of 1,228 to a total of 20,479 benefit claimants. Our caseload in April 2008 was 17,267

Vision for Customer Services and Revenues and Benefits

Following the meetings that took place in July 2009 plans associated with how we will work with customer services have continued to take shape. This has led to the identification of some key projects to take forward that will both provide a better service to citizens alongside contributing to efficiency targets. These plans are built around the expectations of our customers and the Councils customer excellence strategy. The identified projects form part of the wider customer service programme for NBC.

Shared Services

Wellingborough have pulled out of the project to share Revenue and Benefits services. We are therefore in discussions with alternative partners on a range of services which could be shared. A revised bid to fund a project across Northamptonshire was completed in September 2009. This project is looking to engage all local neighbours in order to identify and move forward with shared / joint working initiatives. This bid has been successful and the first stage of the process will be to hold a workshop with neighbouring Councils to gauge interest in projects to take forward.

Revenues

A bid to The Northamptonshire Improvement and Efficiency Partnership to fund the review of our single person discounts was given the full support of the East Midland RIEP on the 27th November. Once commenced this review will provide an increase in the amount of tax we can collect. We expect between 3 and 6% of the current single person discount awards to be cancelled as a result of the review (based on success factors elsewhere). These cancellations are due to the identification nationally of citizens falsely claiming to be the sole occupant. The audit commission has identified such reviews as essential in ensuring we stamp our erroneous claims for discounts.

Northamptonshire Area Procurement Service (NAPS)

NAPS has been asked to contribute to a case study by the EMIEP focusing on our success in equalities and procurement resulting in the award of Level 3 of the Local Government Equality Standard to NBC.

NAPS savings delivered to the end of November of £180k for 2009/2010 outstrip the cost of the providing the service with 4 months still to run and some further savings are expected in energy costs.

David Perkins

Portfolio Holder for Finance