

Northampton Borough Council

Northampton Pensioners' Forum

Thursday, 13 September 2012

Officers at the meeting

1. WELCOMES AND INTRODUCTIONS

The co-chair Roger Rumsey welcomed everyone to the meeting .

Present were Councillor Brian Oldham – the co-chair of the Forum, Mike Hill, John Rawlings, Ann Timson, Liz Percival, Norman Sharp, Mary Dyer Atkinson, Harry Tuttle, Hazel Tuttle, Brian Nichols, Dave Hewitt, Tony Mallard, Joyce Smith, B Isaac, Dave Green, Norman Adams, C Owusu- AKuffo, Gloria Bartley, Brian Nicholls, Marcia Lewis.

Councillor Mary Markham.

Officers- Lindsey Ambrose, Joe Biskupski, Nicky McKenzie, Freya Bullen and Lauren Humber.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Mr Sam Owusu-Akuffo.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 May 2012 were approved.

Matters Arising

Bus Interchange

The Co-Chair confirmed that a letter had been sent to the Head of Planning expressing the concerns of The Pensioners Forum on the long term viability of the bus interchange as to its suitability for the needs of the elderly and vulnerable.

Community Governance Review

Members of the Forum felt that further updates were required on the next stages of considering whether to create new Parish Councils and agreed this should be on the agenda for the next meeting. Councillor Oldham commented that he would be leafleting all of his constituents. The consultation on the review would be ending on 19th October 2012.

4. CLLR MARY MARKHAM- HOUSING MATTERS (INCLUDING HOUSING IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION)

Councillor Mary Markham, Cabinet member for Housing explained to the forum that

there were currently several housing related consultations going on.

The current Council accommodation waiting list has more than 9,900 people on it, more than 500 of which were in emergency bands. Numbers were increasing and all avenues that might alleviate the problem had to be explored.

The changes to the Housing Allocation Policy would not affect current tenants. However future tenants may be offered shorter tenancies and there could be restrictions of length of tenancies.

There is no money available to build properties; the only anticipated new build would be in 2014 when 16 properties are being provided. Stock Options have to be examined as a method of realising funding for future projects. £2 million has been set aside for an appraisal on stock options which she considered would ensure that the best solution was found. Councillor Markham also stated that the money needed to be seen as an investment in providing the best solution and that the expenditure would all be published.

Concern was expressed that consultations did not lead to the views of the public being taken into consideration but that it raises expectations and leads to frustration when new measures are implemented anyway.

Houses in Multiple Occupation(HIMO)

Tony Mallard expressed concern that houses in multiple occupation are becoming a big problem and that he felt that the relaxation of the planning regulations might make things worse.

Cllr Markham stated that the problems caused by HIMO's had been the reason she had stood as a Councillor. She considered that it was possible that the changes to the welfare reforms would make things more difficult. The Council is working with the National Landlords Association. Whilst appreciating that the rogue landlords are less likely to be members of the Association she felt that working with the Association sent a positive message to the responsible landlords and encouraged them to report rogue activity.

She stated that at the present time there isn't a planning policy in place which sets out the saturation levels of HIMO's allowed in each area. Initially there was no register as to where these properties were but now the authorised HIMO's were logged and shown on the website. Also a specialist officer has been employed to deal with HIMO's and there will be further staff employed to undertake inspections of these properties.

Forum members gave examples of properties where problems had been experienced. They felt that many of these properties were unlikely to have planning permission for multiple occupation. Pressures on property lead to more houses going into multiple occupancy and private landlords can make large profits from a single property.

5. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS CONSULTATION

Nicky McKenzie, Housing Allocations Manager gave a presentation on the potential changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.

The main proposed changes were: -

- Reduction of bands from 5 to 3
- Additional priority for working households
- Additional priority for voluntary work
- Government has determined that there should be priority for armed forces personnel. Wider exclusions from the housing register
- Clearer local connections criteria
- Refusal of 3 properties excluded in the future.

In reality housing is an increasingly scarce resource and it has to be accepted that customers currently on band C and D will not have any chance of being housed. Therefore this needs to be made clear to the applicants, who can then be assisted to make proper alternative housing provision.

One of the effects of the potential changes will be to reduce the housing register from 9,900 to 4,5000. Part of this will be achieved by concentrating on the top two bands and also there will be the introduction of local connections, for example people who have lived in Northampton for 3 years out of the previous 5. Currently there are 5000 applications a month and only 70 lettings a month. Up to 200 requests are being received every week and this is not sustainable with current staff resources.

There are proposals for tenancy checks before being allowed to join the Housing Register and potential tenants may be excluded if they have caused damage to properties or have been convicted of committing hate crimes for example.

There is also a proposed reduction in the amount of time that a person will be housed in emergency accommodation.

The key point was that this scheme is currently out for consultation and every effort is being made to involve as many people as possible. Consultation packs have gone out to everyone currently on the Housing Register. Then the proposals will be considered by Cabinet in December.

Discussions were held around what powers of regulation related to privately tenanted properties. Work is on-going to try to ensure that private landlords comply with regulations and tenants will be referred to those landlords who have a good reputation, however increased pressure on housing will mean that there will be those landlords whose only interest is profit.

It was also pointed out that some of the people who were seen as “anti- social” neighbours were actually those who might be the most vulnerable. Councillor Markham agreed that the needs of these people must be kept in mind, and that

every effort needed to be made in order to ensure that they were given accommodation which was suitable for their needs.

6. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW

The Sheltered Housing Review consultation was presented by Freya Bullen

At the moment, support is only given to sheltered housing residents, so not all Northampton's residents who are potentially in need are able to access the support service. There are inflexible levels of support provided even though some people may have varying health and disability needs. People may just get a visit once a month, others 3 times a week, others every day with a very few getting a more intensive visiting regime. People in real need may not get as much help and quality of help as required, while other people get more help than they need – because the system is too inflexible.

There are increasing numbers of elderly and disabled people in Northampton. Although many people want to stay living in their own homes, the current sheltered housing service only helps those who have moved into the council's sheltered housing.

Things need to change and improve to help more people and to help people more appropriately.

There are community rooms across the Borough, many of those are under-used but could be a good space for people in the community to use and help toward tackling feelings of isolation.

The proposal is that everyone would have an assessment and support would be tailored to fit the needs of an individual. The service would be expanded to include other people not just those living in sheltered accommodation. This would be a benefit to those who wanted to stay in their own home. The service could also be flexible to cover periods where there may be more intense support required for example recovery after a hospital stay.

This would also interact with other services, so an assessment would look at any gaps in the provision of services or indeed any duplication.

Members of the forum commented that they felt this would lead to a dilution of the service, with budgets being stretched further. There were also concerns about the safety of residents in sheltered housing and some feeling that vulnerable residents would not access the services because they would not open doors to admit officers.

7. TENANCY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

There was insufficient time to discuss this item. However it was emphasised that there was consultation going on and urged any forum members who were Council tenants to make take part in that.

8. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE

There will be changes to the Council Tax and Council Tax Benefit systems and there will be an Open Day to publicise the changes. This will be held on 10th October and there will be two sessions between 3-4.30pm and 6 and 7.30pm.

Forum Members thanked Lindsey Ambrose for all of her work with the forum and wished her good luck in her new role when she left the Council at the end of September.

9. AGENDA ITEMS FOR NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The next Forum meeting to include an update to the Community Governance Review. A future meeting to include an item on consumer awareness.

10. DATE AND VENUES OF FUTURE FORUM MEETINGS

1st November 2012 at 2.00pm

The meeting concluded at 4:10 pm