

Council
Monday 23rd July 2007
Report of the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for
Partnerships & Improvement

The following portfolio holder reports have been structured around the themes and commitments articulated in our manifesto for the 2007 Borough elections. By presenting them in this way we expect to drive forward the commitments we made to voters in May 2007 and to demonstrate to the people of Northampton how we are meeting our broad objectives. Headings in italics, therefore, refer to themes and commitments contained in our manifesto.

A clear vision for Northampton

Recruitment of a new Chief Executive

The programme to recruit a new Chief Executive is well advanced. Long-listing took place today (12th July) and it appears that we have a very strong field of candidates. Short-listing is planned for 26th July with final interviews on 1st and 2nd August. A cross section of Councillors from all parties will have the opportunity to meet short-listed candidates during the final interview stage.

A special Full Council meeting is being arranged for 6th August to appoint the new Chief Executive. Depending on the notice period with their current employer we hope that they will be in post early in November.

Audit Commission Inspection

The Audit Commission last week completed interviews for the scheduled 'light touch' inspection. The inspection focused on the seven recommendations made in the Progress Assessment published in February 2007. In particular, the inspector showed particular interest in actions to improve to the political and managerial leadership of the Council. They were also interested in the robustness and deliverability of financial management and the new administration's commitment to delivering the 07/08 budget. We can expect to receive their report in approximately a month's time. The next Progress Assessment inspection is due at the end of the year. I will update the council in due course on the outcome of the July inspection as soon as possible.

At their meeting on 5th June Cabinet formally acknowledged the Audit Commission's Progress Assessment of February 2007. On 11th June Cabinet received the Audit Commission's Annual Audit and Inspection Letter. This letter made clear the task facing the new administration to improve the services offered to citizens by this Council, to raise the performance of the Council from its current very poor status and to get the Council out of the current regime of government intervention. A copy of the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter is attached as Appendix 1 to this report in order that all Councillors have a copy.

Communications

In June the interim Chief Executive and I led a number of 'Making it Matter' seminars in which we spoke to virtually all the council's staff about the new vision for the authority and where they will fit in. We have received lots of feedback from staff, most of it positive, and have been responding to specific questions raised.

On 7 June I wrote to Angela Smith MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) setting out our immediate priorities as a new administration and confirming our commitment to improving the performance of Northampton Borough Council. She replied on 26 June. Copies of the correspondence are attached in Appendix 2. Angela Smith was promoted in the recent reshuffle and, at the time of writing, it is not clear which minister we will be reporting to in DCLG.

Promoting Northampton

LGA Conference

I recently attended the Local Government Association conference in Birmingham. Representatives of both other parties had the opportunity to attend. I spent much of my time networking with other authorities and raising the profile of Northampton. Given the recent change of Prime Minister and the subsequent changes to the Cabinet it was a useful opportunity to hear, first hand, if at a very early stage, how changes in government may affect local councils.

Partnerships

Since becoming Leader of the Council I have spent a great deal of my time meeting with a wide range of external partners including public sector authorities, local businesses, stakeholders and community groups, to discuss how we can work together in the future to offer the best services and opportunities to the people of Northampton. These include Government Office – East Midlands, Northamptonshire County Council, the Northamptonshire District Councils, the Audit Commission, West Northants Development Corporation, Northamptonshire Enterprise Ltd, Royal & Derngate Theatres, Northamptonshire Police, members of the Somali community, the Northampton Racecourse Healthy Living Hub group, Northampton Town Football Club and Carlsberg.

My discussions with them have so far proven to be extremely beneficial and I anticipate a greater degree of support for the work of the Borough in future.

An open and efficient council

Changes to Committee Structure

A number of changes have been made to the committee structure, including the boosting of the Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) function from one to three committees: O&S1 Partnerships, Regeneration, Community Engagement & Safety; O&S2 Housing and Environment; and O&S3 Improvement, Performance and Finance. We have also introduced a new procedure for delegated decisions which will allow us to deal more quickly with issues of lesser significance more quickly whilst also ensuring the public has access to information about these decisions and elected members have a proper procedure for challenging them. This is of vital importance if we are to make the necessary improvement being sought by the Audit Commission within the next few months whilst also ensuring due process and accountability is maintained.

Tony Woods
12th July 2007