

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 24 January 2011

PRESENT: Councillor Christopher Malpas (Chair); Councillor John Yates (Deputy Chair); Councillors Ifty Choudary, Penelope Flavell, David Garlick, Brendan Glynane, Lee Mason, Dennis Meredith, Kevin Reeve, Pam Varnsberry, Tony Woods and Jean Hawkins

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Sally Beardsworth –(Portfolio Holder Housing Items 4 and 5)
Councillor Paul Varnsberry- (Portfolio Holder Community Engagement Item 7)
Councillor Trini Crake- (Portfolio Holder Environment- Observing)
Gordon Stewart – County Commissioner for Youth Services Northamptonshire County Council Item 7)

Lesley Wearing	- Director of Housing
David Bailey	- Director of Planning and Regeneration
Isabell Procter	- Director of Finance and Support
Ian Redfern	- Head of Leisure and Culture
Ian Swift	- Housing Solutions Manager
Christine Ansell	- Head of Landlord Services
Thomas Hall	- Head of Policy and Community Engagement
Rebecca Smith	- Assistant Head of Finance
Mark Plant	- Asset Strategy Manger
Deborah Duncan	- Communciations Manager
Tim Ansell	- Housing Services Manager
Tracy Tiff	- Scrutiny Officer
Joanne Birkin	- Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jane Hollis (Councillor Tony Woods substituting),Judith Lill (Councillor Jean Hawkins substituting) and Irene Markham.

2. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

Councillor Christopher Malpas declared a personal, non prejudicial interest as a Trustee of Service Six in agenda item 7 Response to the Overview and Scrutiny Report: More Facilities for Older Children.

Councillor Christopher Malpas declared a personal, non prejudicial interest having made a donation to Service Six in his capacity as a County Councillor in agenda item 7 Response to the Overview and Scrutiny Report: More Facilities for Older Children.

Councillor Tony Woods declared a personal, non prejudicial interest as a Trustee of the Royal and Derngate in agenda item 7 Response to the Overview and Scrutiny Report: More Facilities for Older Children.

Councillor Lee Mason declared a personal, non prejudicial interest as a Trustee of Blackthorn Community Centre in agenda item 8 Council wide draft Budget 2011/12-2013/14.

4. AWARD OF DECENT HOMES CONTRACT

The Committee considered a report on the awarding of the contract for the Decent Homes Phase 2.

Councillor Sally Beardsworth Portfolio Holder (Housing) also addressed the Committee regarding the contract process.

The Committee was advised that this was a two stage tendering process. This contract had been approved by Cabinet on 15th December 2010.

The Committee asked several questions concerning:-

How the Quality of the contractors was assessed?

Whether the tenants had been involved in the tendering process?

How the contract would be monitored?

Why some contractors that are currently working for NBC did not get shortlisted?

The Committee queried whether the successful contractors would be using sub contractors and if it was possible to restrict them to using local labour. They were advised that the use of sub contractors would be made in some areas and that it was not possible to place unreasonable restrictions on the successful contractor re the workforce that they used but that they were encouraged to use local labour and apprentices.

There were many different reasons why contractors were not short listed and it did not mean that they were not performing in other areas.

AGREED That monitoring reports be brought back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee after every 500 homes completed or every six months.

5. EXTENSION OF CARETAKING AND CLEANING IN FLATS

The Committee considered a briefing note on the Caretaking service, this included a response to a questionnaire that had been sent to tenants regarding cleaning services in Communal areas.

There was a query over proposed costs and it was confirmed that the costs to the tenants would be £10 per month.

Members of the Committee raised the following concerns;-

- What provisions were made for tenants who had language or reading difficulties to be able to respond to the questionnaire?
- What happens if additional caretaking charges take tenants over housing benefit cap levels?
- Were enforcement measures in place regarding tenancy agreements?
- How could more tenants be encouraged to take care of communal areas?
- The number of tenants who said that they did not want the service was disappointing.

In response Members were advised that:-

It was confirmed that there were measures in place to ensure that those tenants who had difficulty reading the questionnaire could receive it in a different language.

Individual leases do not include responsibility for cleaning communal areas such as staircases and windows.

There was some discussion as to whether creating awards might encourage tenants to take care of communal areas.

It was noted that new Government Guidelines on HRA pooling were still awaited and until these were available then no further work could be done on this.

6. PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Committee considered the Performance Report for November 2010.

The main topics for concern were:-

The largest variance were for those areas which were over performing.
In such cases it may be that the targets need to be reviewed.

(A) PERFORMANCE MONITORING - NI156 - NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Committee considered a report on the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation.

The main points of debate were: -

- More people have become homeless due to the worsening of economic conditions.
- In comparison with other Councils then the average time in temporary housing for Northampton Borough Council is 44 days rather than an average of 11 months outside London.
- There is a lot of work being done to prevent homelessness and over a thousand households have been prevented from becoming homeless.
- According to calculations used by the Audit Commission then Northampton Borough Council was performing 7.6 times better than the national average in this area.
- What type of accommodation was used for homeless families and whether it was suitable?
- Whether changes in housing benefit regulations would mean that it will be more difficult to find private landlords that will take tenants.
- Reductions in the availability of affordable housing will mean that the problem will worsen.
- Empty homes provision is being used as effectively as possible.
- It was accepted that the service is performing to a very high level in difficult circumstances.

AGREED:

(1) That the Committee supported the recommendations contained within the briefing note

- That Northampton Borough Council explores alternatives to using Bed and Breakfast accommodation as temporary accommodation for homeless households
- That Northampton Borough Council explores the possibility of establishing a Social Lettings Agency to ensure there is a constant provision of Private Rented Accommodation for households in Northampton.
- That Northampton and Leicester City Council conduct a Peer Review during 2011 to assess and inspect each other's service to ensure further improvements are made.
- That the partnership work between Northampton Credit Union and Housing Solutions is strengthened further in light of the success of the Department of Works and Pensions Growth Fund to improve financial inclusion in Northampton.

(2) That the Overview and Scrutiny committee considers a further report during 2011 showing performance in this area.

7. RESPONSE TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT: MORE FACILITIES FOR OLDER CHILDREN

The Committee received a report on the Northampton County Council's (NCC) response to the Overview and Scrutiny Report More facilities for Older Children.

The Portfolio Holder Councillor Paul Varnsberry and Gordon Stewart County Commissioner for Youth Services, from NCC addressed the Committee.

The main points of the debate were: -

- Resources are very limited and the main provision is targeted in areas where there is considered to be the most need. This is likely to be in the more deprived areas. A key target group are those at risk of Anti Social behaviour and efforts are made to involve the whole family.
- The use of Facebook has proved a very useful tool particularly to generate activity at play events.
- Activities such as street football/kick boxing and dance are examples of activities taking place in areas such as Lumbertubs, St David's Kingsthorpe, Kings Heath, Castle and the Racecourse areas.
- Investigations are taking place with other authorities to develop proposals for a skateboard park.
- An Equality Impact Assessment was drafted after at the commencement of the review and will be published on the Overview and Scrutiny webpage by the end of March 2011
- Northampton FM and Inspiration radio have both participated in the promotion of youth facilities.
- There was a feeling that there were a lot of activities available but that they focused on those young people who were more likely to already be engaged. There is a NCC contract, which is specifically designed for engagement with young people and getting them to identify what they want to do.
- The NCC contract is run by Service Six. There was some discussion from members who were unsure how the service could be accessed
- Contracts are monitored via monthly management meetings and although the contacts with the young people were being made it was accepted that there needed to be an improvement in the depth and quality of those contacts.
- Concern was expressed that activities were largely sports related and needed to be widened, also there could be more efforts made to include theatre groups, religious groups and uniform groups such as scouts.
- County models have encouraged sizeable growth in community provision. This may mean that some organisations can access funding via charitable status.

AGREED that the Chair contacts the Director of Service Six and requests that he sends a reminder to all Councillors on how Service six can be accessed.

8. COUNCIL-WIDE DRAFT BUDGET 2011/12 - 2013/14

At its meeting on 12 January 2011 the Overview and Scrutiny Reporting and Monitoring Inquisitive Inquiry met to review the 2011 to 2014 draft budget proposals with a view to recommending that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider some specific items and make recommendations to Cabinet on these if there are any points the Committee wishes to raise.

The following questions were referred to this committee in relation to the draft general fund budget:

1. Please provide clarification of the returns on the Performance and Change Fund.
2. Why is there nothing visible in the budget papers for community centres?

Performance and Change Fund

The Committee was informed that this fund would be used to implement and find any savings that may emerge out of on going service reviews.

Main points of discussion were: -

It was not only restructuring services that would generate savings but also new methods of working etc.

There were now several areas that were subject to partnership working and concern was expressed as to the potential impact on the Borough Councils budget if partners such as the County Council withdraw funding. In response it was noted that there are many potential factors, which may affect the budget, and if that occurred then a review would need to be held.

Community Centres

Concern was expressed as to what would happen if the Community Centres did not take up current proposals to run their own facilities whether there would still be sufficient budget to maintain the services.

The Committee was advised that a decision to investigate Community Centre alternative management methods had already been taken by Cabinet. Money was taken from the core budget for future years but there was provision for 2011/12.

Monies in the budget for 2011/12 would include only reasonable repairs and maintenance.

There was considerable discussion concerning the importance of maintaining these community centres at the heart of areas and assisting local groups in funding centres and accessing funding.

In addition the following items were referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for closer scrutiny.

Reduction in Communications budget

Concern was expressed that in a time where there are so many changes occurring that it was crucial to make sure that they were communicated to the public. In the light of this was it advisable to reduce the communications budget. The Committee was advised that this budget was specifically for "paid " advertising and those other methods of communication were always sought first and that the overall budget of £30,000 had not been spent in previous years.

Restructuring of Human Resources

Restructure of Customer Services, ICT and Facilities

The Committee was advised that the creation of the Leisure Trust and potential outsourcing of Environmental Services would have an impact on the number of staff required in these areas.

Factors such as the disposal of the Cliftonville site will reduce a number of service requirements such as invoice payments related to the running of the building.

There were some vacant posts within these services.

Restructure of the Housing Solutions service Merger/Restructure of Regeneration & Development and Asset Management

The Committee was advised that six posts would be deleted from regeneration and assets when the transfer was completed in July. Three posts are currently vacant posts and the rest will of the savings will be achieved through redundancy.

Further review of 25% discounts for single property occupancy

This was part of an on going programme of investigating review of single household properties. It had proved very successful and the County Council had agreed to assist in the funding of further reviews.

Reduce the West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit Budget

The Committee expressed concern that the reduction in the Joint Planning Unit would have a detrimental effect on the delivery of the joint core strategy. The programme is tailored and currently focussed on producing the joint core strategy.

HRA

The main points of debate were

- There is a decrease in bad debt provision and fewer rental voids than previously.
- Generally there had been improvement in collection rates although benefit changes may have an adverse effect on that. There is work going on within the Borough Council to make sure that debts are linked so that there will be a whole picture of what an individual owes and repayment rates can be structured accordingly.

AGREED That members of the Committee e mail the Chair with details of any suggested recommendations that they wish to put forward regarding the proposed budget 2011/12-2013/14.

9. OFFICE MOVES UPDATE

The Committee received an update on the progress of the office moves.

The main points of discussion were: -

- There had been some problems in progress the works on the Ground Floor at the Guildhall.
- Council Tax and Performance teams had temporarily relocated to Cliftonville.
- The third floor should be completed by the weekend 29TH/30th January.
- By mid February work should be happening on the second floor and starting at Westbridge.
- The sale of Cliftonville had now been completed and monies banked.

It was commented that staff had been making a series of temporary moves in order to accommodate the works and were complimented on managing to keep services functioning with so little disruption.

At the request of Members it was

AGREED that an updated staff plan be issued to existing members once final moves had been completed and this plan be included in the Induction plan for new Members after the elections in May 2011.

10. SCRUTINY PANELS

(A) SCRUTINY PANEL E- COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK FOR THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

The Chair of the Panel Councillor David Garlick reported that Panel was reaching a conclusion and would be holding a meeting to hear from Osaf Ahmed the Commissioning Projects Manager of Birmingham City Council who was felt to be an example of best practice.

The Panel will hold its last meeting on 3rd March 2011.

(B) SCRUTINY PANEL H - LEASE BETWEEN NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL AND NORTHAMPTON TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB AND THE CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN NORTHAMPTON TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB AND THE RUGBY AND NORTHAMPTON ATHLETICS CLUB

The Chair of the Panel Councillor John Yates reported that the had met to agree key questions which will be put to witnesses at their next meeting on 7th February.

The panel had held at site visit at the athletics club and were also going to view the facilities at Bedford stadium.

The Panel will hold its last meeting on 17th March 2011.

(C) SCRUTINY PANEL R&P - NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT

The Chair of the Panel Councillor Christopher Malpas reported that the had met to agree key questions which will be put to witnesses at their next meeting on 16th February.

The Panel will hold its last meeting on 10th March 2011.

11. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY INQUISITIVE INQUIRIES

(A) REPORTING AND MONITORING

(B) COUNCIL OWNED GARAGES

The Committee were informed that the Review had been delayed due to a number of reasons and the Inquisitive Inquiry would now hold its meeting in February. The review report will be submitted to the next meeting of Committee.

12. FORWARD PLAN

AGREED That there were no issues on the Forward Plan that they wished to undertake any pre decision scrutiny on.

13. URGENT ITEMS

There were none.

The meeting concluded at 8:20 pm