

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

Wednesday, 4 November 2009

PRESENT: Councillor B Hoare (Chair); Councillor PD Varnsberry (Deputy Chair);
Councillors Beardsworth, Church, Crake, B Markham and Perkins

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES

Councillor Clark addressed Cabinet pointing out the importance and historic value of minutes as a record of the decisions made at a meeting. Whilst he appreciated that the final document was a précis of the extensive notes taken at the meeting, he queried the omission of a number of details relating to financial decisions.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet asking why the recent Call-In relating to the new tenants' participation structure did not appear on the agenda. He was reminded that his address should relate only to the matter of the accuracy of the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes of the meeting on 14 October 2009 were then agreed and signed as a true record.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

The Chair, Councillor B Hoare, having received expert legal advice, explained that addresses would be accepted on all business items on the agenda but not on items listed that related to the process of the meeting, such as apologies and deputations. Following discussion, Councillor Clarke requested that the Solicitor write to him with full details of his constitutional rights and outlining the definition of 'business' on statutory agendas.

RESOLVED

- (1) That Beverley Mennell be granted leave to address Cabinet on Items 7, 'Market Square Lighting', and 11C 'General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring'.
- (2) That Mr M J Baker be granted leave to address Cabinet on Items 7, 'Market Square Lighting', and 11C 'General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring'.
- (3) That Robert Marriott be granted leave to address Cabinet on Item 7, 'Market Square Lighting'.
- (4) That Lorraine Crook be granted leave to address Cabinet on Item 7, 'Market Square Lighting'.
- (5) That Sinead Loftus and Hayley Hall be granted leave to address Cabinet on Item 10, 'Community Forums Report'.
- (6) That Chris Grethe be granted leave to address Cabinet on Item 10, 'Community Forums Report'.
- (7) That Councillor Clarke and Councillor Mildren be granted leave to address cabinet on Items 2, 'Minutes', 6, 'WNJSPC Minutes', 7, 'Market Square Lighting', 9, 'CAAP Emerging Strategy Consultation Feedback and Next Steps', 10, 'Community Forums Report', 11A, 'Performance Monthly Report', 11B, 'Capital Programme Monitoring', 11C, 'General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring' and 11D, 'HRA Monitoring'.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Church declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in Item 7, 'Market Square LED Lighting Project' as a member of WNDC Board.

5. ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

There were none.

6. APPROVAL OF WNJSPC MINUTES 04.08.09

It was pointed out that the issue was to 'note' the minutes rather than 'approve' them, as listed on the Agenda.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet highlighting the large number of declarations of interest recorded in the minutes and explaining his problem with accepting so many representatives from different local authorities undertaking joint arrangements. He felt the minutes did not give an impression of consensus amongst the representative bodies over the consultation for the emergent Joint Core Strategy and it was with regret that he noted the minutes.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and commented that the minutes did not give details of the location or starting time of the meeting, so there was no clear indication of how long it took for the decisions to have been made. He was also concerned that the minutes did not record the officer presence.

RESOLVED

That the minutes be noted.

7. MARKET SQUARE LED LIGHTING PROJECT

Beverley Mennell addressed Cabinet informing them that there was public concern about the amount of money being spent on the proposed new lighting system. She then referred to an item in the General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring Report, which showed that a charge was to be introduced for pest control. She asked cabinet to take on board her serious concerns about rat infestation in the Borough and the potential health and safety risks in the event that people could not afford to pay for private infestation control.

Mr Baker addressed Cabinet giving his opinion that the regeneration of the Market Square had only been of benefit for events and not for stallholders. He felt that too much money was being spent on the Market Square and, referring to the report on General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring, he pointed out the decline of rental income. He saw a need to reduce rental charges to encourage new stallholders to the Market.

As a representative of the Campaign for Dark Skies, Mr Robert Marriott felt that lighting should only be used where absolutely necessary and not wasted on spotlighting buildings. He referred to the cost and environmental impact of decorative lighting, including the risk to birds who became disorientated by lighting. He pointed out the nuisance of unnecessary lighting and stated that even low-energy lights still obliterated the beauty of the night sky. He did not see any need for floodlighting on the Market Square.

Lorraine Crook, a resident of the town for 30 years, wondered why Cabinet should think that a European style of market place would be appropriate for Northampton. She was of the opinion that the working people of the town wanted good value market stalls and not money spent on lights and a fountain. In response to a question from Councillor Beardsworth, Ms Crook felt that people wishing to look at the architecture of the buildings in the Square would be better to come in the daylight and that in any case, there was sufficient light from shop fronts without the need for additional lighting schemes.

Councillor Clarke referred to pictures of the proposed lighting that were being displayed at the meeting. He sensed that the public would fail to understand the various funding sources that would enable the lighting to go ahead but cut back the pest control service. He questioned the allocation of £250K from WNDC on such a project when there was a need for improved infrastructure to cope with the proposed town growth. He then compared the project with the rejected proposal for a needle sculpture near the station and hoped that it would be put aside in the light of the Council's financial situation.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and questioned the prioritisation of the funding. He understood that if Northampton was to introduce a café society to encourage people to spend money in town in the evenings, there would have to be attractive enhancements. However, he felt that the money could be better spent than on lighting and fountains.

As Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration, Councillor Church presented the report to Cabinet. He was confident that the proposal was key for the regeneration of the town centre and would bring more people into town in the evening. The proposed lighting was energy-efficient and, with no residents in the Market Square, it was unlikely to cause nuisance but would enhance the beauty of the buildings. He felt that there was already a café society in the town and the Market Square was an ideal place to expand on this. Other notable buildings in the town were already floodlit with no apparent problems. He then explained that WNDC did not provide funding for pest control or street cleaning and that the £30K LABGI money was already earmarked for regeneration projects. He wanted to bring more people and jobs to the town and felt that, in these times of recession, this project was a good way to achieve this.

As Portfolio Holder for the Environment, Councillor Crake pointed out that, although the Market Square was currently lit, it still appeared dark. The current lighting was powerful but expensive. She was disappointed to hear people's negative comments about the town and explained that anyone in particular hardship needing the pest control services would be helped. She denied that there was an infestation of rats in the town centre. She saw the Market Square as a place where families could go in the evenings and assured Cabinet that the money for the lighting was additional funding and not being taken from other sources.

Councillor PD Varnsberry, Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement felt that in the past, Northampton had been short changed in comparison with the provisions in other towns. He felt that the lighting would transform the Market Square and that the funding opportunity from the WNDC should not be turned down. Northampton was being viewed as the key economic driver for the County and this initiative was only one part of the whole jigsaw.

Councillor Beardsworth approved the project stating that lights would show the beauty of the square, were eco-friendly and would save pollution. The town, she felt, was special in the day and needed to be made special at night as well.

Councillor Perkins asked for assurance that when the project was delegated to Portfolio Holders and the Director of Planning and Regeneration, full consideration be given to the impact of any light pollution.

RESOLVED

1. That Cabinet support the proposals, in principle, for a LED lighting scheme in the Market Square.
2. That a full application be submitted to WNDC for the £250,000 funding necessary for this project at its Board meeting on 1st December 2009, and a further report be received should funding be approved.

3. That it be noted that the Director of Planning and Regeneration and Director of Finance and Support in consultation with the relevant portfolio holders have authorised £30,000 of expenditure from LABGI funds to progress project design thus ensuring WNDC funding, if approved, can be spent this financial year.
4. That cabinet agree to the delegation of the final design of the LED lighting scheme to the Director of Planning and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Holders in Planning and Regeneration and Environment and Culture and that full consideration be given to the issue of light pollution.

8. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT: WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE JOINT STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

The item was withdrawn.

9. CENTRAL AREA ACTION PLAN - EMERGING STRATEGY CONSULTATION FEEDBACK AND NEXT STEPS

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet highlighting a lack of evidence in the report in relation to the future transportation, flood risks and car parking needs of the town. He was incensed that the delivery of the CAAP was being delayed because of the delay in the Joint Core Strategy and frustrated at the Borough Council's lack of planning control. He further commented that WNDC money was being squandered on such schemes as Market Square lighting instead of being directed towards the necessary infrastructure.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and enquired as to whether there were any target dates for the completion of the work. He felt that there were problems in the consultation process and not a broad enough base of replies to enable an informed decision. He pointed out that the CAAP affected the whole of Northampton, not just the wards specified in the report and he expressed his hope that there would not be a repeat of the 1970s areas.

A correction was noted on the report to make clear that Far Cotton was not a ward in itself, but formed part of Delapre ward.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration, Councillor Church, presented the report to Cabinet with the intention that they would note the result of the consultation exercise, which showed some positive feedback and overwhelming support for the key principles of the CAAP. He confirmed the negative response to the suggestion of bringing buses back into Abington Street. He accepted that, in line with Councillor Clarke's concerns, there was still more work to do in conjunction with the County Council. He asked Cabinet to note the delay and pointed out that there needed to be a sound document for submission. Ongoing discussions were robust and maintaining momentum, with the flood risk and transportation issues being given high importance.

Councillor B Hoare pointed out that, in terms of the whole infrastructure requirement, the WNDC's £250K, that needed to be spent by March 2010, would not have helped.

RESOLVED

1. That the responses to the consultation outlined on the Central Area Action Plan Emerging Strategy be noted.
2. That a delay in the timing of issuing the Central Area Action Plan Pre-Submission Draft document for consultation from that identified in the current Local Development Scheme be approved.

3. That agreement be given to work with West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit and Government Office for the East Midlands to agree a realistic timetable for the production of the Central Area Action Plan and for this to be incorporated into a revised Local Development Scheme for West Northamptonshire.

10. COMMUNITY FORUMS REPORT

Hayley Hall and Sinead Loftus, as members of the Council's Youth Forum, then addressed Cabinet. They described some of the activities of the Forum, including a two-day residential training session and work with the J-Trails element of the Council's recent Heritage weekend. They had also been involved with the Money 4 Youth project, which had engaged over 3,000 local young people. They were planning to have facebook groups to update the public on heritage and other events that the Youth Forum was involved in.

Councillor Perkins congratulated the Youth Forum on the high quality of the J-Trails leaflet they had produced and Councillor Beardsworth thanked them, expressing her hope that some of them would go on to work in public office.

Chris Grethe addressed Cabinet as a member and past co-chair of the Disabled People's Forum. He praised the Neighbourhood Partnerships and Community Forums Co-ordinator for her hard work and asked that her funding could be maintained. He then referred to the concessionary bus pass scheme for disabled and elderly people, asking for it to be widened to cover carers and journeys before 9.30am. He requested that forum meetings be spread out more evenly throughout the year without such a large summer gap.

Councillor B Hoare reported on documents received from central Government indicating that there would not be any additional funding for concessionary fares. The Council would be responding in due course.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and praised the successes of the forums and the officers who supported them. He supported the report's call to encourage further engagement with departments and to use the forums more constructively. He saw the importance of taking on board the views of forum members and urged the Council to take the recommendations seriously so that the work of the forums could be taken to the next level.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet, declaring his interest in the forums as a disabled person and pensioner. He felt it was important to give forum members the opportunity to have a voice. On the assumption that Councillors were entitled to attend any forum meeting, Councillor Mildren expressed surprise that there was not more interaction so that Councillors could become more aware of community concerns

Councillor PD Varnsvery, as the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, was delighted to present the report to Cabinet. He stated that the forums were vital as a means for the views of hard to reach groups to be recognised. The work of the forums had helped towards the Council's Level 3 Equalities Standard and its successful bid for a Customer Excellence award. Other Councils had recognised the work as an example of excellent practice. He pointed out that Councillors became involved as co-chairs, although the forums were self-run under Lindsey Ambrose's guidance. Councillor PD Varnsvery then drew Cabinet's attention to the recommendations, particularly in the encouragement of more interaction and team working between forum members and council departments in the areas of volunteering and mystery shopping.

Councillor Church commented on his involvement as co-chair of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People's Forum, stating that the forum was well supported by the local LGB community. He regretted the demise of County Council funding following the folding of the

Northampton LGB Association and expressed concern that some of the work previously undertaken might be lost.

Councillor B Hoare urged Councillors to actively encourage the work of the forums and undertook to visit each one to hear suggestions for improvements in the council's customer services.

RESOLVED

1. That the work and achievements of the Forums and the Council's engagement with them be welcomed and recognised.
2. That NBC services be encouraged to look to provide more opportunities for volunteers from the Forum networks (and otherwise) to liaise with them, work on projects etc. day to day to help work up design for services, policy etc. through involving service users.
3. That NBC services be encouraged to allow members of Forums networks the chance to be involved in training staff in customer service, mystery shopping etc, being able to give feedback on how they've been dealt with as service users and enabling staff to understand more about their needs.
4. That the long-term development of the Disabled Go access guide be supported.

11. PERFORMANCE

11.1 PERFORMANCE MONTHLY REPORT - SEPTEMBER 2009

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet stating that he was not a fan of the 'traffic light' system of monitoring performance success targets, as it was not clear enough to highlight quarterly or monthly trends. He was particularly concerned about a downward trend in the performance of Neighbourhood Environmental services, which he presumed were as a result of the pressures of a reduced budget. He urged Cabinet to bear in mind the impact on the ability to perform when future budgets were set. He had further concerns about the high level of sickness absence.

Councillor B Markham invited Councillor Clark to attend the forthcoming training session on 'Performance Plus', which would assist him in the deciphering of the performance figures.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet commenting on the figures relating to performance to date. He pointed out that all local government offices were under financial pressure to meet bottom line targets. He suggested that when budgeting for the forthcoming year, performance targets should be set relative to the available resources.

As Portfolio Holder for Performance and Support, Councillor B Markham presented the report to Cabinet confirming that there were both monthly and quarterly figures attached to the report. He explained that some of the responsibility for the performance in public protection was with the Safer Stronger Partnership and described some of the strategies being employed to help alleviate the issues. He further pointed out that garden waste collection had reduced owing to the change of season.

Councillor PD Varnsberry elaborated on some of the public protection issues, predicting a fall in crime in Thorplands, Lumbertubs and Lings, where an effective police operation had recently taken place. He also spoke of the intention to close Bridge Street to vehicles in the evenings and at night over weekends from now until the New Year in a bid to diminish anti social behaviour.

Councillor Church referred to the performance figures that Councillor Clark had spoken of and pointed out that an excellent service was being delivered. He further highlighted the outstanding achievement of the homeless team in meeting and exceeding their target in relation to the provision of bed and breakfast accommodation.

Councillor B Hoare was pleased to see that 2/3 of indicators were in the positive area in both short and long term targets.

RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted.

11.2 CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2009-10 PERIOD 5: PROJECT APPRAISALS AND VARIATIONS

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet expressing concern at the £250K overspend on bringing private landlord properties up to standard. However he was pleased to see the overspend for disabled adaptations, as this showed that vulnerable people were getting their needs addressed. He did suggest that there was something very wrong with budget forecasting to have misjudged the spending to this extent.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet, commenting on the expenditure outlined in Annex B of the report and enquiring if the £300K capitalisation directive related to potential employee costs as set out in Annex D.

Councillor Perkins, as Portfolio Holder for Finance, presented the report to cabinet and took members through the details of the proposed variations as laid out in the appendices to the report.

Councillor PD Varnsvery and Councillor Beardsworth stressed the importance of ensuring that housing adaptations for vulnerable people were carried out at the earliest opportunity. Councillor B Hoare added that a large proportion of the work had been necessary to cover a backlog left by previous administrations in spite of insufficient funding coming from central Government.

RESOLVED

1. That the following variations to schemes in the capital programme for 2009-10 be approved.

Scheme Reference, Description & Directorate	Narrative	2009-10 £	Future Years £	Funding Source
2007-08/PR0010 V01 Hot Property Housing GF	This project is funded by NBC, utility companies and private landlords. Contributions to the value of £5,351 have been received in 2009-10; therefore the budget for this project needs to be increased by this amount.	5,351	-	Third party contributions
2008-09/GF066 V01	Phase one of this project was completed in 2008-09 which	(13,121)	-	Section 106

Sport & Recreation in Becketts Park Planning & Regeneration	included installing children's play equipment that met DDA requirements, to improve access to play for children with disabilities, and a 5 a side football pitch. It was the intention that more works would take place improving the environment of Becketts Park, but it is now felt this would conflict with the strategic improvement of Becketts Park.			
2009-10/GF026 V02 GOEM Project Decent Homes Housing GF	The budget for this project was based on an estimate of the amount of external grant funding that would be received for works to decent homes in the private sector. The amount of funding received was £258,424 more than the estimate; therefore the budget needs to be increased by this amount.	258,424	-	GOEM Grant

Further details of these variations can be seen at Annex A of the report.

2. That the following be noted

- a. The capital programme monitoring position is noted as at end of August 2009, including forecast outturns and slippage into 2010-11, as set out at Annex B and C.
- b. The funding arrangements for the 2009-10 capital programme as set out at Annex E.

11.3 GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2009/10 - PERIOD 5

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and expressed concern that the overspend was quoted 'net of management action' and this gave a misleading impression. Referring to the £3¼ million overspend in Environment and Culture, he suggested that even with the proposed management action, there would not be a serious dent in this figure.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet, again referring to the overspend in Environment and Culture and making suggestions in relation to potential savings in grass cutting and grounds maintenance. He also asked about progress on the previously proposed Richmond Project, relating to the closure of public toilets.

Councillor Perkins, as Portfolio Holder for Finance, presented the report to Cabinet. He explained the recommendations and commented that the predicted overspend had been reduced from the previous month. A net figure was necessary so that it could be seen that solutions were being presented rather than problems. He pointed out that even with £8 million having been taken out of the budget, there had been no deterioration in service, as was borne out by the performance figures discussed earlier. He made an assurance of the Administration's determination to improve this Council's performance and offer better value for money for the taxpayers of the town. He appreciated the difficulties with Environment

and Culture and resolved that further solutions were being worked on. He then gave details of the over- and under- spends in the other directorates.

Councillor B Hoare acknowledged that officers were meeting the challenges to make the significant budget savings required and Councillor B Markham pointed out that the overspend figure was simply a prediction of the end of year figure. He further commented that the Richmond Project was irrelevant at the moment because no toilets had, in fact, been closed.

RESOLVED

That the report and the forecast over spend of £415k net of management action be noted.

11.4 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) MONITORING 2009-10 PERIOD 5

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet warning that officer action would need to be taken to avoid the predicted overspend against the set budget projections. He expressed concern about the council's continued inability to address the problems of rent income. He then mentioned that many of the council's tenants were already struggling to pay their entire rent owing to unemployment. He predicted that if the recession hit further, rent income would continue to be reduced.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and enquired as to the base budget after the change of the rental formula. He pointed out that a negative subsidy was charged on the rental billings and not on the cash received. This meant that in normal circumstances, if rent was unpaid, the council would still be paying a negative subsidy.

As the relevant Portfolio Holder, Councillor Perkins presented the report to Cabinet. He explained that even if the overspend was to continue, it would simply mean a reduction in reserves. He further explained that the apparent variance in rent income was as a result of a change in rents that was made after the budget had been set. Councillor Beardsworth clarified that the budget had been set on the assumption of a rental increase that was subsequently reduced by central Government directive. Councillor Perkins referred to Councillor Clark's comments and pointed out that rent collection was in fact at a high level and that the credit crunch did not appear to be affecting collection. He went on to express his confidence that, with ongoing work on the Repairs and Maintenance budget and continued input from officers, the overspend should be greatly reduced, if not eliminated.

Councillor Beardsworth commended officers for their team working and their constant monitoring of the issues. It was also made clear that the directorate was performing better than last year and staff were working hard to successfully collect rents, with collection currently on target.

RESOLVED

That the report and the forecast overspend of £1,323k on the Net Cost of Services be noted.

The meeting concluded at 21.04