

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

Wednesday, 9 June 2010

PRESENT: Councillor B. Hoare (Chair); Councillor P. D. Varnserry (Deputy Chair);
Councillors Beardsworth, Church, Crake and B. Markham

1. APOLOGIES

An apology was received from Councillor Perkins.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 19 May 2010 were signed by the Chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

4. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Beverley Mennell in referring to item 5(B) Sheltered Housing Options commented that tenants all wanted the same thing ie the best service possible and that housing should be fit for purpose. She noted that the Portfolio Holder had indicated that it would not be possible to go back to having on-site wardens but she noted that other authorities did this including Milton Keynes. She asked that the Portfolio Holder reconsider her position. She stated that she believed that tenants wanted wardens.

Norman Adams referred to item 5(B) Sheltered Housing Options Report and also noted the Portfolio Holder's comments in respect of it not being possible to return to having on-site wardens. He believed that the Overview and Scrutiny report reflected the Portfolio Holder's views but at the same time said that tenants should have options. Mr Adams indicated that tenants had told him that the service had not been improved by the reductions in the wardens service. He believed that there should be scope for some schemes to have wardens and believed that schemes of over 45 units would make a warden viable. He accepted that there was a cost associated with this but there should be proper options and choices for people to decide upon. He also noted statements by Government that the public should be able to vote on choices; however vulnerable tenants tended to be outvoted by the majority who did not have the same needs. He believed that the Overview and Scrutiny report was faulty as it did not accept the possibility for on-site wardens.

Anna King the Chair of Eastfield Residents Association referred to item 6 the Change of Scene project and commented that shortlisting had taken place earlier in the day for a Project Co-ordinator. Interviews were planned for 22 June. She also referred to 50 young people who had spent the day at Grendon Hall and who had participated in a number of outdoor activities which had been well received. A variety of other events and visits were being planned.

(Note: Councillor Malpas declared a personal interest in this address as a County Councillor who had donated a proportion of his empowerment budget towards this project.)

Mr Roberts referred to item 5(B) Sheltered Housing and Housing Options and commented that when his mother and father had gone into sheltered housing part of the contract with the Council was the provision of a warden. He stated that the residential warden had been withdrawn which had meant that he had to spend more time supporting his mother. He

noted that combined with the withdrawal of facilities by the County Council his father had not had anywhere to go during the day and had given up and subsequently died.

County Councillor Alan Wright referred to item 8, Housing Strategy, and in particular the references within the strategy to the PFI project for Eastfield. He commented that the PFI project was welcomed by everyone however he had concerns that meetings between Housing Officers and the residents had become confrontational and seemed to work on a top down basis. This seemed to have come to a head at a meeting on 27 May 2010. He queried whether a further option might be put forward to refurbish the existing Housing stock to current standards as a majority of tenants would like refitted kitchens, bathrooms and improvements made to waste disposal and car parking. He commented that a majority of tenants did not want a rebuild and the consequential decanting, compulsory purchase, demolition etc that went with this. He hoped that a lower level approach could be adopted to the project.

Tony Mallard the Vice-Chair of Eastfield Residents Association referred to item 8, Housing Strategy, and in particular to the references to the PFI Project and commented that due to the national financial situation it would appear that the future of the PFI Project was fluid. He expressed concern at the lack of consultation with tenants and indicated that he had heard that three tenants representatives had been chosen. However, Eastfield Residents Association would like to elect its own representatives to the Steering Group. This process should be seen to be democratic. He also noted that most of the plans for Eastfield involved the demolition of the maisonettes although they had only been reroofed some two years previously. He commented that there should be some comparison of cost to refurbish the maisonettes vis a vis their demolition and construction of new housing.

Shayley Watson the Chair of Eastfield Residents Association referred to item 8, Housing Strategy, and to the reference within the report to the PFI Project and commented that she was pleased to learn that the setting up of the Steering Group was being progressed and that a meeting had been arranged for 15 June 2010. She asked that the refurbishment of the maisonettes and flats should be an option as this was a view expressed by many of the tenants. She also countered some claims that the Residents Association did not represent residents in that the association leafleted people and recent meetings had been attended by 60 local people.

The Chair commented that clearly the PFI funding could not be guaranteed as the process was about applying for funding. He noted that the Housing Strategy was concerned about Housing throughout the whole of the Borough.

David Huffadine-Smith referred to item 5(A), The Cost of Consultants, Overview and Scrutiny Report, and item 7 The Parish Partnerships, and noted the possibility of community asset transfers to Parish Councils and suggested that community centres, allotments and small parks could be considered for this. He noted that the Northamptonshire Council's Charter proposed nine workstreams which included encouraging local people to get involved with their local communities. He also suggested that the Markets operation could be transferred to the Market traders. Mr Huffadine-Smith commented that he had submitted motions to Duston Parish Council to encourage partnership working however none of these had been adopted.

Chris Swinn referred to item 5(B) Sheltered Housing and Housing Options, and commented that resident wardens and on-site wardens should be included as possible options and costed. He commented that other local authorities still provided wardens and some authorities who had ceased this provision were going back to providing them. He indicated that in some places tenants paid for the wardens. In respect of item 8 Housing Strategy he noted recent Government announcements that there would be no money available for social

housing construction and in respect of item 11 Voids Lettable Standard that Appendix B appear to be non-specific and not a standard as such.

Eleanor Collins referred to item 5(A) The Cost of Consultants Overview and Scrutiny Report, and commented upon her background of teaching young people to be independent. She noted that in the Housing Strategy the statement in respect of £70m shortfall to reroof properties to the Decent Homes Standard and queried why the PFI Project was seeking funding of £100m if only £70m was required. She queried on how the Council measured the value for money it got from the consultants who had contributed to the Housing Strategy.

5. ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

5.1 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COST OF CONSULTANTS TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT.

Councillor Garlick commented that the report had been well received by Overview and Scrutiny and commended it to Cabinet. Councillor Clarke presented the report and commented that it was non-political in that it provided a snapshot over a long period of time. He commented that there was still some confusion as to what was meant by “agency staff” used to cover for periods of sickness and holiday and “consultants” who were engaged for a specific purpose for their professional expertise. Overview and Scrutiny were concerned that there was no central record of how many agency staff or consultants were engaged at any one time and for what purpose. It was noted that the Council would appear to have contradictory policies to reduce the numbers of agency staff to save money. However, in the manual worker situation, agency staff were engaged to save money over the cost of full time employees. Councillor Clarke commented that he did not support situations where agency arrangements were in effect sub-contracted which led to people queuing for work at Westbridge Depot and then being turned away when the opportunities had been filled. He believed this was not good for the Council’s reputation and took away the scope for the Council to provide apprenticeships and other types of training schemes; and also for the Council to help bring people away from unemployment. He also believed that the Council was not making sufficient use of student expertise from the university and he referred to the recommendations set out in the report.

The breadth of Overview and Scrutiny’s review was welcomed and comment was made in respect of misleading press coverage about money being wasted on agency staff and consultants. It was clear from the report that these people had largely been doing the same work as the Council’s own employees and therefore this was valuable and not a waste.

Councillor Clarke commented that the review had uncovered some occasions when consultants had been engaged but the reasons for their engagement were unclear. Sometimes the handover when their work had been completed was also unclear leading to it not being progressed. He queried the need for the Joint Planning Unit when the Council had its own planners and noted that two consultants had been engaged on one particular topic and had come to two different sets of conclusions. He also acknowledged that in terms of having a floating pool of staff that some areas such as lifeguards required specialist qualification but also noted that in the case of picking up leaves on either highways, leisure or housing land that it made sense for the Council to have a “hit squad” that could deal with issues immediately and the land ownership issues could be resolved later.

The Chair thanked Overview and Scrutiny for their work and their recommendations and commented that the Director of Planning and Regeneration would clarify to Councillor Clarke the use of consultants in the circumstance that he described. He also noted the Council’s existing work and support for NEL and observed that the Council currently had 29 individuals on Jobseeker’s Allowance working for it.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations be received and a response made in due course.

5.2 SHELTERED HOUSING AND HOUSING OPTIONS FOR OLDER PEOPLE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet commenting that he had been a member of the Task and Finish Group but had been concerned when it was drawing up its conclusions that options for resident or on-site wardens were not to be included. He did not support the supposition that the re-introduction of wardens would not improve service to the public. He commented that many people moving into sheltered housing expect wardened assistance and that if this was to be removed then the tenants' should be closely liaised with. He understood that Cabinet on 28 July would be considering a report of the future of sheltered housing and queried what other work was going on and who would be consulted.

Councillor Hawkins addressed Cabinet and supported the comments made by Councillor Mildren.

Councillor Glynnane addressed Cabinet and commented that Overview and Scrutiny had completed a good piece of work over a six month period. He noted the involvement of the County Council and the amount of evidence gathered, use of statistics, best practice, visits and the involvement of residents. He also noted the support for the service and the challenges that an ageing population posed for local authorities. He also commented on a recent Help the Aged report which stated that it was unrealistic for wardens to be provided as a general position.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and noted that the Housing Strategy included the review of sheltered housing and made comments about hard to let properties and their fitness for purpose. He also referred to the County Council's closure of day care facilities. He believed that in the evidence no one was suggesting that the service would not be improved by the provision of residential wardens. He believed it was a question of affordability. It seemed to him that the Council was closing its mind to residential or on-site wardens. He felt that the views of the Independent Councillors had been ignored and queried why a minority report could not be produced. He asked that the statement about the service not being improved by the provision of wardens be removed from the report.

The Chair commented that Cabinet was receiving a report and was not in a position to change its contents. He noted that the situation in respect of a minority report could be raised via the Constitution Working Party.

Councillor Malpas submitted a report and commented that neither Councillors Mildren or Hawkins had questioned the conclusions at the time that they had been drafted. He thanked everyone who had been involved and had contributed to the Task and Finish Group including the Portfolio Holder. He noted that her comments had been included because they were part of her evidence. Councillor Malpas observed that Milton Keynes did not provide wardens for all their schemes and were in fact considering whether to move to the system that the Council now had. Councillor Malpas commented that the recommendations were largely matters of detail which were important to tenants, for example, provision for accommodating mobility scooters and the wider use of community rooms or community centres. Councillor Malpas stated that the report had been presented to the County Council with a recommendation to their Cabinet for closer working between the two Councils.

In answer to a question Councillor Malpas commented that the issue in respect of Melbourne, Abbey and Devonshire Houses was over doctors being able to exit the flats without using a key fob if the resident they had been visiting was not well enough to see them out.

Comment was made that as the population was generally getting older that this provided a challenge to the Borough and County Councils to work more closely together. The comments made by Mr Adams and Mr Swinn about the possible provision of wardens if the size of the local scheme made this viable should be further considered.

The Chair thanked Overview and Scrutiny for the work which had been undertaken.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations be received and that a response would be given in due course.

5.3 COMMUNITY CENTRES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Councillor Yates introduced the report of the Task and Finish Group. Councillor Wilson commented that the work of the Task and Finish Group had commenced in July 2009 and it had been discovered that there was no single policy for community centres. In this case Overview and Scrutiny were helping to formulate future policy. The Task and Finish Group believed that assets should work for local communities. There appeared to be no standard contract in the case of self-management and one community centre had been discovered that no-one was aware of. A standard self-management contract should establish a common baseline and prevent the restriction on groups using the facilities so it would also encourage better community management and proper leases which in turn would allow the local community to bid for funding. Councillor Wilson thanked all those that had been involved with the Task and Finish Group.

Councillor P D Varnsvery thanked Councillor Wilson and the Task and Finish Group for a thorough piece of work on a long overdue area of activity. He also thanked the members of the public for the evidence they had provided.

The Chair commented that he was minded to suggest that a cross party Cabinet Advisory Group should be established to examine the recommendations and their implementation.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations be received and that a response would be reported in due course.

6. CHANGE OF SCENE PROJECT

Councillor Hill as a member of a local Rotary Club welcomed the report but expressed slight disappointment that the Rotary commitment and support had been downplayed. He stated that many Rotarians had contributed money and/or expertise which would have made the project much harder without their support. He noted that there were young people who represented the third generation of residents on the Eastern District who were in need of this support.

The Chair concurred that the contribution of the Rotary Clubs in Northampton should not be underestimated.

Councillor Hawkins addressed Cabinet noting that the project had been finalised at the time of purdah during the recent General Election campaign. She noted that although it was stated in the report that Ward Councillors were supportive of the project she had not been consulted in respect of Eastfield ward. She believed that all young people across the Borough should be able to benefit from the scheme. She hoped that from now on that all the Ward Councillors concerned would be involved.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and referred to an e-mail of approximately 8 April 2010 concerning discussions at the East Area Management Board and apparent confusion that

Thorplands seemed to have been originally included but now wasn't and Eastfield hadn't originally been included but now appeared to be. However he supported this positive project and welcomed the inclusion of the Eastfield estate as an area of acknowledged deprivation. He also noted that the Council's involvement would be largely in a monitoring role.

Councillor P D Varnsberry as the appropriate Portfolio Holder submitted a report that informed Cabinet about the Change of Scene project and the decisions of the Chief Executive following consultation with all four Group Leaders to accept funding from the Access to Nature Programme of the Big Lottery Fund. He welcomed the initiative and also noted the Junior Wardens Scheme at Lings and Lumbertubs which was aimed at helping young people develop new life skills as well. He commended the Northampton East Partnership Co-ordinator for this initiative. Councillor P D Varnsberry accepted the comments made by Councillor Hill in respect of the support of the Rotary Clubs and also noted that the project had been complicated by the change in neighbourhood management arrangements and the purdah period leading up to the recent General Election. He also referenced the comments from Anna King in respect of progress towards appointing a co-ordinator and activities that had already taken place and were planned for the future.

RESOLVED: (1) That the decisions of the Chief Executive and the project's aims and objectives be noted.

(2) That the Council being accountable to Natural England on behalf of the Big Lottery Fund for the successful execution of the project including securing the required level of matched funding and employing the Project Co-ordinator be noted.

(3) That the nomination of the Northampton East Area Partnership Co-ordinator as the Council's Lead Officer for the project with full access to advice from Finance, HR, Legal, Procurement and other professional staff as required be noted.

7. PARISH PARTNERSHIPS - THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCILS' CHARTER

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and welcomed the report.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and commented that the Council should not sign up to the Charter. He noted that the Council had an existing policy of unitary Government for the Borough which appeared to be at odds with this proposal including the intention to parish the whole of the Borough. He queried the costs involved in holding further Parish Elections and creating three tiers of Government within the Borough, how the money would be found for it and how the proposal would fit in with the new Neighbourhood Management Areas.

Councillor P D Varnsberry as the appropriate Portfolio Holder submitted a report which considered the proposed Northamptonshire Council's Charter and whether the Council should sign up to it at the Local Councils' Conference on 16 June 2010. He further commented that the Charter had been developed over the previous year by Parish Councils, Town Councils, Districts, Boroughs and the County Council. He noted the Appendix which indicated that the Charter was not legally binding but would be key to joint working to achieve shared objectives at a time of financial restraint. He also noted the nine workstreams proposed and which were set out in the Appendix some of which were already Council policy.

The Chief Executive observed that the concept of unitary Government referred to the activities of principal authorities. Parish Councils were not classed as principal Councils. The Council was already committed to a community governance review of the parishes which would follow on from the final outcome of the Boundary Commission's recommendations and which would involve consultation with the public; the Council would be likely to support local people if they wanted further Parish Councils. The Chief Executive

also stated that it was NALC's aspiration for five new Parish Councils to be established across Northampton, Wellingborough, Corby and Kettering. He believed that the report was consistent with existing Council policies.

RESOLVED: That the Northamptonshire Council's Charter be endorsed.

8. HOUSING STRATEGY

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and welcomed the report and referred to page 73 of the strategy and the reference to Spring Boroughs and a "balanced housing market". He observed that residents might not wish a more balanced housing market, supporting social housing instead. Personally he supported social housing managed by the Council.

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and supported the comments made by Councillor Clarke. He suggested that there should be regular updates on the implementation of the strategy and noted that projects might be back loaded because of the current financial situation.

Councillor Beardsworth submitted a report that summarised the main priorities of the Housing Strategy for 2010-2015 and in particular referred to the priorities set out in paragraph 3.3 of the report. She noted that the previous strategy had concentrated on social housing whereas this new strategy dealt with all housing. She also observed that if there were changes nationally then the strategy might require amendment.

Councillor P D Varnsvery observed that the references on page 62 of the strategy met the concerns expressed by Councillor Clarke in respect of engagement with residents and businesses in Spring Boroughs.

The Chair welcomed the fact that the strategy now covered the whole of the Housing sector across Northampton and that there had been no adverse comments about the consultation undertaken in arriving at the strategy.

RESOLVED: That the Housing Strategy 2010-2015 be approved.

9. THE WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE STRATEGIC HOUSING MARKET ASSESSMENT AND THE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROVISION IN NORTHAMPTON

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and commented upon the map appended to the reports and that the definitions applied to describe some locations as "inner urban" or "southern fringe" appeared confusing.

The Chair commented that the map sat alongside Option 4 which was not being recommended for adoption.

Councillor Beardsworth, as the relevant Portfolio Holder submitted a report which set out the significant findings of the West Northamptonshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment, outlined the Affordable Housing Policy Implications for Northampton, and confirmed the Council's approach to affordable housing requirements. The Director of Planning and Regeneration commented that the report provided a robust evidence base on which policies could be developed to maximise housing supply and thereby reduce housing need.

Councillor Church observed that the areas identified by Councillor Clarke referred mainly to housing types with a low market value. The Council should continue to set the highest proportions of affordable housing as was possible to achieve. The Chair gave a resume of the options A to D.

RESOLVED: (1) That the outputs of the West Northamptonshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment May 2010 set out in the report be noted.

- (2) That the West Northamptonshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment May 2010 be agreed as a robust piece of evidence the Council should use to inform its decision making with regards to affordable housing, planning policies and the housing strategy.
- (3) That an affordable housing target of 35% in the Borough be agreed to be provided in new developments subject to viability considerations for developments of 15 dwellings or half a hectare in association with Northampton Local Plan Policy H32 in advance of any new policy being adopted within the revised West Northamptonshire Local Development Framework.
- (4) That an affordable housing tenure mix target of 70% social rent and 30% intermediate housing types (e.g. new build home buy, below market rent, fixed equity or other below market housing price products that may become available) be agreed within Northampton Borough.
- (5) That a target of no more than 50% of affordable dwellings as one bed homes with the Council placing more emphasis on the provision of two bed, three bed and four bed houses as part of any affordable housing negotiating be agreed.
- (6) That the above targets as set out in Option C of the report be adopted for the purposes of development control.

10. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS (CBL) ALLOCATIONS POLICY

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and noted the Government's intention to involve tenants in choosing where they lived. However he observed that the Council did not have enough property to meet demand and that it should be transparent about that with tenants. Supply was not sufficient to meet demand from A+ tenants never mind category B, C or D applicants. He also commented that the choice had a downside and referred to the experience of the CASPAR + project in Castle Ward where tenants who had been evicted with problems of drugs and/or prostitution were able, under Choice Based Lettings, to choose where they lived were coming back to the project area. In answer to a question Councillor Clarke confirmed that these instances had been reported to the Director of Housing.

Councillor Scott addressed Cabinet and noted that Overview and Scrutiny generally welcomed the improvements to the service that Choice Based Lettings had provided however there were concerns that the website seemed to crash frequently. In answer to a question Councillor Scott commented that the website had crashed as recently as three weeks previously.

Councillor Beardsworth as the relevant Portfolio Holder submitted a report which set out a review of the first two years of the Choice Based Lettings scheme and proposed improvements to it. She noted that on average each property had 55 enquiries and believed that that the process was important to encourage people to buy into the area in which they lived. She noted that comments made by Councillor Clarke and undertook to investigate the website issues raised by Councillor Scott noting that improvements to it were scheduled shortly.

The inclusion of other social landlords was welcomed. In answer to a question the Director of Housing noted that the newsletter format would be in addition to the notices placed in the One Stop Shop and on the website.

The Chair welcomed the report and the partnership working with Daventry District Council and expressed the hope that other Councils would join the scheme.

- RESOLVED:** (1) That the outcome of the review of the Choice Based Lettings scheme be noted.
- (2) That the operational changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme and the changes to the housing allocations policy contained in Appendix F of the report be agreed.

11. VOIDS LETTABLE STANDARD

Councillor Beardsworth submitted a report as the appropriate Portfolio Holder which set out changes to the existing lettable standard and sought agreement to a revised standard set out in Appendix B of the report.

RESOLVED: That the lettable standard set out in Appendix B of the report be approved.

12. RENT ARREARS RECOVERY STRATEGY

Councillor Mildren addressed Cabinet and commented that paragraph 3.1.1 did not appear to make sense. He also expressed surprise that some of the analysis differentiated customers by age.

Councillor Clarke addressed Cabinet and commented that there was a need for comparative data not only on grounds of ethnicity or age for example what was the overall percentage of tenants who were aged between 35 and 50 etc. He believed that the strategy should be further developed to clarify the situation. He observed that the strategy should concentrate on the reasons for why people defaulted on payments rather than on individuals.

The Chief Executive commented that ethnicity and monitoring by age was required by Best Practice so as to ensure that there was not disproportionate representation of some groups, people in particular circumstances.

Councillor Beardsworth submitted a report as the appropriate Portfolio Holder that sought approval to an income recovery strategy. She noted that there had been some successes with income recovery but more work was needed including support to tenants in respect of debt management. Some tenants may need help to make payments on time and she commended the work of the Gateway Team for their work with them. She also observed that in the current economic situation anyone could find themselves affected in terms of having difficulty in paying bills. Improvements had been made to allow four different payment dates over a month.

The Chair commented that it was important to understand the drivers and impact of situations that individuals found themselves in.

RESOLVED: That the strategy set out in the Appendix to the report be approved.

The meeting concluded at 21.05 hours.