

**Council
Monday 13th July 2009**

Portfolio Holder Presentations

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Portfolio Holder Report for Partnerships & Improvement

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Inspections & Audits

The Council's Access to Services inspection has been completed and the report published on 11th June. The council was judged to have a One Star – 'Fair' service with 'Excellent Prospects for Improvement'.

This is the most positive report that the council has received from the Audit Commission in years and confirms the momentum of improvement that has now been established.

This encouraging result is down to the dedication of council officers, who deliver improvements throughout the organisation – day in, day out – by the current administration and, particularly, of managers who have put in place plans for sustained improvement that have been judged as providing 'Excellent Prospects for Improvement'.

Government Disengagement

The Council continues to await a letter from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) confirming our collective disengagement from government monitoring. The government's Cabinet reshuffle will have caused some additional delay but it is now six months since the arrangements for close government monitoring were dismantled and a recommendation provided to the Minister that we be removed from supervision.

The council continues to remind DCLG of the need for a formal letter of disengagement. I hope members of the three main parties will join me in lobbying their colleagues in Westminster to expedite this much-needed, and well deserved, proof of improvement.

Customer Services & ICT

Staff workshops have been scheduled to set the groundwork for improvements to the council's One Stop Shop – a vital and valued front-facing service.

An order has been placed to procure an adaptor to integrate Revenues and Benefits software systems with the council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The new system will be in place by January 2010 and will further reduce the time Northamptonians wait for their benefits. In 2008/09 new claims are judged in 16.1 days (BV78A) compared with over 80 days in the 2003.

Partnerships & Improvement

It has been increasingly clear, over the last few months, that the capacity of this council to change and improve has taken a major step forward. This is evidenced by the large number of initiatives now coming forward to put right previous failures of this Council to engage with partners, to drive forward change and to deliver real and sustainable improvement for residents. This is evidenced by:-

- The publication on 29th June of the emergent Joint Core Strategy for West Northamptonshire. In two years, the current administration has taken the bull by the horns and worked with partners to progress the Local Development Framework after years of delay. The need for clearer local planning policy is evidenced by major appeals from developers in both Daventry and South Northants, where the absence of a strong, evidence-led planning policy has resulted in uncertainty for local people and businesses and a bigger bill to the taxpayer via a 'planning by appeal' culture. Only through a strong and unshakeable planning policy can the council hope to realise the new jobs and infrastructure are delivered to breathe new life into Northampton and stop the rot of urban sprawl and dormitory estates.
- The council's emergent Central Area Action Plan (to be considered by Cabinet on 15th July). It is clear that the most important piece of 'infrastructure' required for an expanding Northampton is a stronger, more vibrant centre. The Central Area Action Plan provides the 20-year policy framework to deliver a pleasant city with a beating heart.
- The publication for Cabinet to consider on 15th July of an Options Appraisal Review for the council's 12,500 homes. A previous review was botched when a deeply flawed Options Appraisal was brought forward. This administration is very clear that all options must now be considered based on a robust evidence base and that a range of solutions to the needs of different estates be brought forward. The welfare of council tenants remains a paramount concern of this administration.
- The publication for Cabinet to consider on 15th July of a revised Housing Asset Management Strategy to ensure the delivery of the Decent Homes Standard for council tenants.
- A programme of Strategic Business Reviews supported, where appropriate, by market-testing to drive forward tangible improvements in services and better value-for-money for local taxpayers.
- Plans for this authority to build up to 50 new Council homes – the first for nearly 20 years – predominantly 3 and 4 bedroom homes to address the very severe shortage of such homes.

Taken together, these proposals demonstrate a major acceleration in the pace of change and an administration dedicated to improving this council and our town.

LGA Conference

I attended the Local Government Association Conference last week with the Deputy Leader, the Leaders of the Opposition Parties and the Chief Executive. The overwhelming message from the conference was that local government finances are likely to be very heavily squeezed over the next few years as the effects of the current recession work through the system.

This council has made a good start in the last two years of bringing our costs under control and reducing our cost base but we will have to be more vigilant and more innovative if we are to continue to deliver better quality services for less.

The message from senior national politicians of all three major parties was that local government can expect greater freedoms but will have to do more with less.

Tony Woods

Leader of the Council

Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvement



Portfolio Holder Report for Engagement

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Place Survey

Government spending watchdog the Audit Commission recently issued its first 'Place Survey', which forms part of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) of public services in Northamptonshire. The results are based on residents' surveys asking for feedback on countywide public services.

I was pleased that 9 out of 10 residents said they were 'satisfied' with Northampton. Cabinet and officers are reviewing the results that impinge upon this council and will take steps to improve services where residents say so.

Crucially, residents expressed concerns about this and other councils' value-for-money, an issue that the administration is addressing as part of its business-led strategic review of all services.

Any changes to the management of council services will be made with a view to protecting council services and improving their value-for-money. Only this way will we get a better deal for Northampton's hard-working taxpayers.

I sincerely hope that councillors of all parties and none will support our drive to move to smarter ways of working and, where they disagree, offer constructive solutions and alternative sources of funding to retain services in-house.

Council Performance

The 2008/09 outturn report was considered by Cabinet on the 29th June. The results show that:

- 51% of comparable performance indicators are up since 2007/8;
- 38% of comparable performance indicators are down since 2007/8;
- 51% of indicators reported, met or exceeded the target set;
- 49% of indicators, where targets had been set, were below target.

Further analysis of council performance between 2003/04 and 2008/09 has been completed to measure the council's improvement over this time.

Results show that:

- 70% of comparable indicators improved their performance, compared to 2008/09, 5% maintained performance and 25% deteriorated;

- 35% of indicators have improved their ranking (how well the council performs next to other authorities).

These reports show that Northampton Borough Council is undergoing change and is beginning to deliver the services that Northamptonians deserve.

This change was acknowledged in the council's annual audit inspection by the Audit Commission, which reported that:

'Significant progress has been made by the Council over the last year. The rate of progress is now consistent with other councils... The two remaining services that were subject to government intervention – housing and planning – have now improved sufficiently to be released from monitoring'.

Community Centres

At the time of writing, Cabinet will consider a report about the Council's 21 community centres on 8th July.

Community centres have an important role to play in building strong communities that stick together. This administration is determined to ensure that despite the government's effective pay-cut to this authority and other financial shortfalls brought about by the recession, Northamptonians have easily-accessible facilities, actively managed for their local communities.

A review of community centres is long overdue and the Council needs to consider not only the performance of its centres, but how it can work with Northamptonshire County Council, Northamptonshire Primary Care Trust and Northamptonshire Police to develop facilities that support community needs and those that emerge as the town grows to a city of 300,000.

Equalities

The council has made rapid progress in its work on equality and diversity. In September, the council will undergo a 'peer challenge' by representatives of other authorities to assess whether we are an 'achieving authority' under the government's national framework and to look at new ways of improving.

All services have assessed their current positions and are working to improve where there are gaps. Equality Impact Assessments are now a routine part of managing services and are being actively used to make improvements.

Neighbourhood Management

New approaches to neighbourhood and area management are being considered, which will build on achievements over the last three years. The current arrangements do not provide a uniform approach across Northampton and the Council must consider how it moves to delivering more area-based services and more effective engagement and consultation with residents.

The objective will be to make closer links between engaging the community and delivering the services they need, while setting up ways of ensuring that local people have a clear say in what happens in their area. Ward councillors, of all parties and none, will be key to achieving this.

Overview & Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny has been going through an improvement programme with a self-assessment leading to plans designed to strengthen the council's scrutiny function. Whatever the colour of this council, it is right that scrutiny committees are given the tools to hold the administration to account. Proposals from Overview and Scrutiny Management Board are anticipated in the Autumn.

Legal Services

Legal Services recently obtained an injunction against an individual who was carrying out works on cars and other mechanical goods on council car parks, thereby causing a nuisance to residents.

The injunction prohibits this individual from carrying out such acts in the Duston/Ryehill area. I would like to thank the opposition councillor who brought the matter to the attention of officers for action.

The litigation team also dealt successfully with cases in respect of possession, benefit fraud and four taxi prosecutions.

Electoral Services

1. The Local Returning Officer, the Elections Team, and a large team of other officers in support, successfully delivered the joint elections of 4th June for the 23 county divisions in Northampton Borough and as part of the Regional European Parliamentary election arrangements. The polls, verifications and counts were all carried out in the usual high standard that candidates have come to expect from the team. For the first time ever a central count was held at Kettering Conference Centre for the whole of the County Council.
2. The combined County Council and European Election arrangements were well over a year in the planning involving every Council in the County and Region. Northampton Borough Council's Local Returning Officer and Elections Team worked closely with the Returning Officer at the County Council. I hope members of this chamber will join me in congratulating our team on their work in ensuring its success.

Brian Hoare

Deputy Leader of the Council
Portfolio Holder for Engagement



Portfolio Holder Report for Housing

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Housing Asset Management Strategy

A draft of the Council's Housing Asset Management Strategy (HAMS) is being prepared and will be discussed at Cabinet on 15th July. HAMS is like a business plan for the Council's social housing service and will set out the Council's options for improving Northampton's approximately 12,500 Council properties.

The strategy will be subject to detailed consultation with residents. Members can be assured that any changes the Council makes will be made with a view to improving tenants' homes, whilst also protecting taxpayers' money.

A briefing for members on this and related matters was held on 7th July.

Decent Homes Programme – Phase One

34 contractors responded to the Council's initial advert for the renovation of homes on two estates in Kingsley and Kingsthorpe. Tenders for five short-listed contractors have been received.

A Residents' Steering Group visited the five contractors on-site. Officers hope to be able to make an announcement as to the contractor in the next few days so that building can get under way in October.

Private Finance Initiative (PFI)

There is still no news on the council's Expression of Interest submitted to Government on 31st October. We have been advised that a report from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) is with Ministers but that the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is unclear as to when councils might hear back.

Rent Arrears

Earlier this month, I took part in the council's prize draw for tenants who pay their rent on time. Generally speaking, two thirds of the Council's tenants pay their rent on time. Up to a third of tenants, however, need extra help from the council in terms of debt advice and counselling.

The council continues to take a tough line with deliberate non-payers and is considering whether to extend a similar incentive scheme to tenants who pay their rent via direct debit.

Sheltered Housing

Concerns have been raised about the council's sheltered housing service. I would like to assure members that the council continually reviews its service, consults with residents and would have no qualms about making any changes, within the confines of sound financial management.

To be crystal clear, the current administration has not reduced the amount of support to its sheltered housing residents. I would keenly encourage members of this council, or any other, to avoid playing politics with some of our town's most vulnerable residents. Members of this council have a duty not only to raise issues, but also to offer sensible solutions to them as they arise.

Chartered Institute of Housing Annual Conference

The council was represented at last month's Chartered Institute of Housing conference in Harrogate. Officers attended useful sessions on future economic trends, ageing populations and Housing Revenue Account options among others. A group of local residents were also present.

Temporary Accommodation

There are currently 19 homeless families in temporary accommodation and none in Bed and Breakfast.

Rough Sleeping

The council has been appointed a regional 'rough sleeping champion' for its work to help rough sleepers.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has promised additional funding in return for the council's expertise in providing training, peer reviews and consultancy services to other councils.

This is important work, complemented by the council's 'Places of Change' project to help end rough sleeping in Northampton. The council is piloting personalised budgets for rough sleepers showing yet again that Northampton is leading the way nationally.

Voids

A 'Voids Strategy Group' has been set up, widening the terms of reference of the former Voids Monitoring Group, to compare how voids are dealt with in Northampton versus 2- and 3-star services in other authorities. I will report back to members once this work is complete.

Sally Beardsworth

Portfolio Holder for Housing



Portfolio Holder Report for Environment

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Street Care and Parks & Open Spaces

At the time of writing, bedding plants are in place throughout the town's parks and hanging baskets up in the town centre. Britain in Bloom judging was also due to take place on 10th July.

In response to the warm weather, Extra staff have been drafted in to collect litter in Abington Park, Becketts Park and on the Racecourse. I am making every effort to learn all the lessons from the unacceptable levels of rubbish in Abington Park over a recent bank holiday weekend.

At the time of writing this report the Memorial Rose Garden in Abington Park has yet again been vandalised. It was a wanton act of destruction and it affects the original residents that donated the roses, CHOICES, the disable volunteers that are helping to restore the garden to its original glory and our gardeners who have had the sad job of repairing the damage. It also will affect the Britain in Bloom. We will not be able to finish the gardens until the autumn, as replacement roses will not be available until then.

Waste Services

The monthly kerbside glass recycling service began on 1st June 2009. During the first round of collections 270 tonnes of glass was collected and not sent to landfill. During 2009 we aim to roll out the kerbside glass collections to 15,000 households on black bag collections. A promotion campaign is planned throughout the Summer and Autumn to further promote recycling across the town.

Market Testing

Following approval from Cabinet, we aim to market test the services of Waste Management, Street Care and Grounds Maintenance in order to continue the Council's drive for increased value for money, efficiency and effectiveness.

Regulatory Services

In May, the council's Environmental Crime team began an operation to reduce unauthorised car sales on our streets. Where possible, registered keepers were identified and contacted and stickers placed on cars.

Over the first ten days of the operation 55 vehicles were investigated, 29 of which were subsequently moved and 9 tracked to other parts of the town.

After the first ten days, the number of identified vehicles on Wellingborough Road was down from 14 to 3.

Litter from cars

From 6th July to 2nd August, the council's Regulatory Services team will be involved in a national campaign by Keep Britain Tidy to encourage residents to report littering from cars. Across the UK, members of the public will be able to report littering from vehicles online.

The aim of the campaign is to raise awareness of the problem of littering from cars as well as encouraging people to be the eyes of local councils in the battle to Keep Britain Tidy. Three sites in Northampton will be monitored before and after the campaign to measure the success of the campaign.

Keep Britain Tidy are sponsoring most of the promotional material including posters, car stickers, bin stickers, bill boards, bus rears and local radio. The council, meanwhile, will liaise with local media and put information on its website to encourage people to get involved.

Trini Crake

Portfolio Holder for the Environment



Portfolio Holder Report for Planning & Regeneration

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Draft Joint Core Strategy

The emerging Joint Core Strategy (JCS) for West Northamptonshire has been published and was discussed by the West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee on 6th July.

The JCS sets out plans for the development of Northampton and its surrounding areas to 2026 to meet the demand for housing and jobs. Northampton must see a step-change in investment if it is to accommodate growth on this scale and avoid adding to Northamptonshire's public service delivery problems, notably in schools, transport and jobs.

Over the coming weeks there will be an opportunity for public comment on the proposals, both during the summer consultation period on the emergent strategy and during the formal statutory consultation on the pre-submission document in November. This council also has an opportunity to respond, and I am sure councillors will want to take part in this debate.

Central Area Action Plan

Linked to the Joint Core Strategy, the council's Central Area Action Plan will be considered by Cabinet on 15th July.

Councillors have already had an opportunity to contribute to this through workshops and scheduled one-to-one meetings. Thank you to those councillors who attended.

A prospering town centre, offering quality jobs, retail and leisure opportunities, taking advantage of the town's fine heritage and focussed on the riverside is key to ensuring that the the town centre grows and develops as the thriving heart of the growing town.

Again, there will be public consultation on the emerging strategy over the summer, followed by a statutory consultation on the pre-submission document from November.

Market Square

Several events in recent weeks have demonstrated how our Market Square is being used in a more versatile way for the first time, in a long time. Events included a continental market, the British Grand Prix screening (which even

the Leader of Northamptonshire County Council praised but avoided giving credit to this council) and Armed Forces Day. Many favourable comments were received on these events. I am sure members will agree that it has been great to see more people making the most of our Market Square.

Public consultation has demonstrated that there is widespread support for a fountain in the southeast corner of the Market Square. There is no fountain in our town centre, and the council is working on plans for a group of water jets, with new seating to create an attractive and welcoming entrance to the square. The council will consult on the proposed feature as part of the planning application and would hope to install the fountain in the New Year.

The council is also testing large parasols for use at the Market Square's new catering facilities.

WNDC

The government has announced its 'five-year plan' for the West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC). The consultation paper can be viewed on their website.

The consultation period ends on the 18th September. It has been recommended that Cabinet broadly accept the recommendations of Overview and Scrutiny 1, particularly in relation to the transfer of planning powers back to this council. These proposals will be reflected in the council's own submission to the review process.

I am pleased to report that a new Chief Executive of WNDC has been appointed and look forward to strengthening the partnership with this council in the coming months.

Sustrans Connect 2 (SC2)

The SC2 project to create new cycle routes connecting Briar Hill, Upton and Hunsbury to the town centre has now completed its first phase and I was pleased to attend the launch on Saturday 4th July.

A total of four kilometres of traffic free greenway will have been laid upon its completion in 2011, with two bridges replaced and new seating, lighting and conservation planting. I am also pleased to report that the closed bridge over the river at Midsummer Meadow will be replaced in the next few weeks to re-establish the footpath and cycle route on the riverside to the East of the town.

Richard Church

Portfolio Holder for Planning & Regeneration



Portfolio Holder Report for Communities

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 13th July 2009

Leisure Services

As at 31st May, 10,738 pensioners and young people had signed up for free swimming at the council's leisure centres. In May alone, 2,450 people swam for free. Swimming among over-60s was up 68% on a year ago, and among under-16s it was 56% up.

Trilogy Fitness Suites – Membership Update

Membership sales were also up in May, attracting 80 online sales and 24 corporate memberships with 76 student memberships.

Lings Forum Swimming Pool Changing Rooms

At the time of writing, work to refurbish the changing rooms at Lings Forum Leisure Centre was under way. The project cost is £65,000 funded with the help of grant aid from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Work will include general redecoration, improvements to toilet facilities and retiling to improve wheelchair access.

Northampton Sports and Play Development Team

The council's team successfully delivered half-term holiday activities in Blackthorn and Wootton.

Working in partnership with Blackthorn Children Centres over 200 children and young people enjoyed a variety of events at the Big Lottery funded Playday at Lings Wood Playing fields.

The council's team secured £10,000 of funding from 'Activity Grants for Youth' (joint partnership funding by Northampton Youth Forum and Northamptonshire County Council) to provide summer holiday activities for 13-19 years olds and support new Street Football activities in the Upton area.

The council received notification that last year's Sports Relief Mile event, coordinated by the council's Sports Development and Events teams, was rated in the top 10 events. As a result, the council has been invited to apply to organise a flagship mile event for 2010.

In partnership with Northamptonshire PCT, the council's team commenced two weight management '10% challenges', one community-based programme based at Lings Forum and one programme aimed at council employees. The

programmes are 12-weeks long and offer help to support participants who have a high Body Mass Index (BMI) to develop a healthier lifestyle.

Eastfield and Spencer Sport and Physical Activity Project

In partnership with Age Concern, the council arranged an Intergenerational Day at St Albans Church in Eastfield to break barriers in the community between older residents and younger residents.

The event was well attended with attractions such as a bungee run and several dance, arts and crafts activities. The event also gave the team an opportunity to meet the community and promote the Eastfield and Spencer Sport and Physical Activity Project.

The council continues to work with Age Concern on the Easy Rider project. The second led-ride from the Camrose Centre to Harlestone Firs took place on Saturday 30th May.

The team delivered a 12-week course on physical activity and 'cooking on a budget' for the over-50s at Cardigan Close Community Centre. The programme was well attended and feedback has been extremely positive with participants changing their eating and exercise habits as a result.

Market Square Events

Since the last report, and at the time of writing, the number of successful events held on our Market Square has been growing. It includes Spratton Folk Festival, May Day, Music on the Square, the Big Picture, a successful 2 day continental market and Hands on Science.

The Silverstone Formula One Grand Prix weekend event saw displays of Ferraris and Harley Davidson motor cycles, plus demonstrations of radio-controlled model cars on the market square. The 'big screen' coverage of both qualifying and the race was a resounding success. My thanks to BBC Radio Northampton for providing the screen.

The inaugural Armed Forces and Veterans Day Tea Dance event also drew an enthusiastic crowd. The Lord Lieutenant of Northamptonshire, Lady Juliet Townsend, gave an inspiring speech and everyone was treated to the spectacle of the Mayor leading off the first dance with the Chair of Northamptonshire County Council.

There are many events planned for weekends throughout July and August to include Heart FM and EDF Energy presenting the first ever Green Britain Day, a Day of Dance, Get involved....Sport, Skate Park, Royal Anglian Talavera Celebration - support our troops in this historic parade, Shoe Town Festival Parade, Music on the Square on 14 and 22nd August

Events in Northampton's Parks

Since the last report, and at the time of writing, 28 days' of events had taken place in Northampton's parks, including the John Scarrott Fun Fair and the Fight 4 Cancer Run.

The Bands in the Park season has been extended until 13th September 2009.

Northampton Museum & Art Gallery

Since the last report, and at the time of writing, there were two exhibitions in the Northampton Museum & Art Gallery by:

1. The Mayday Trust – artists included young people leaving care, victims of abuse, those with moderate learning difficulties and recurring mental health problems, ex-offenders and individuals with a history of drug abuse – and;
2. University of Northampton – an annual showcase of work by students working towards a BA (Hons) in Fashion. The exhibition forms an important part of the course and publicises the work of budding designers from Northampton.

The museum hosted the launch of the Shoe Town Festival on June 26th. This summer-long event celebrates Northampton's historical prominence and enduring associations with this industry. Our museum holds probably the finest shoe collection in the world and this, plus many Northamptonians' current and past association with the boot and shoe industry, will make the Shoe Town Festival a "must see" for both local residents and those travelling from further afield.

Abington Park Museum

The Fun Day event held on June 20th attracted 1314 visitors into Abington Park Museum; a huge increase on the standard Saturday footfall of around 200 visitors. Other events forming part of the day's attractions included a mediaeval village, archery demonstrations and falconry displays on the adjacent parkland and the opportunity for children to take part in ancient crafts.

Open Air Art

The Open Air exhibition at Abington Museum opened on 22nd May 2009. The annual event, which began over 50 years ago is open to artists of all varieties and is popular as ever, with around 200 works on show this year.

I will close by expressing my thanks all council staff who have worked hard on each and every one of the events and activities listed in this report. It is also important that all councillors play an active role by showing support for the

many leisure, culture and heritage activities that are taking place in Northampton.

Paul Varnserry

Portfolio Holder for Communities



Portfolio Holder Report for Finance

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 1st June 2009

Finance & Assets

The 2008/09 Annual Governance Statement and Statement of Accounts were reviewed by the Audit Committee on the 22nd June. Post-Cabinet and Council on the 29th June, our external auditors, KPMG, will commence their audit in late-July. The accounts will be back to the Audit Committee, Cabinet and Council in September following the audit.

As well as working on the 2008/09 accounts audit, work is needed on preparing for the introduction of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). The introduction of IFRS to local authorities will see a significant change in technical accounting. The Finance Team are commencing work on establishing how this will impact in the future and what steps need to be taken now, to ensure a smooth transition.

2008/09 Outturn Reports

The outturn positions for the Housing Revenue Account, Capital and General Fund outturn reports were reported to Cabinet on the 29th June.

Budget Monitoring 2009/10

The Finance Team are communicating with Heads of Service to establish if there are any risks that need addressing now, of not meeting any of the savings/efficiencies built into the 2009/10 budget. The period report to Cabinet will provide this update.

Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)

The Use of Resources self-assessment has been presented to our external auditors. The CAA is a much harder test, but we are striving to maintain the previous CPA score of 2, which our external auditors have confirmed would still represent an improvement. Interviews have taken place with some directors and the review continues.

Asset Management

The council has successfully completed a negotiated surrender of a lease in respect of the Silver Horse Public House at Goldings. No payment has been made by the council to achieve this. It has been a source of anti-social and criminal behaviour in the past and the council has responded to community

concerns about its continued use as a pub. The council now has full control of this property and can decide on the best use of it in the future

Revenues and Benefits – Overview

Management and governance arrangements within Revenues and Benefits have now been scheduled to fit new corporate arrangements. This will ensure that management teams and our portfolio holder can be fully briefed on performance matters.

Revenues

Collection during May was 9.01% – 0.29% below target. This means we are 0.51% below our target. We are looking to benchmark performance to see how we compare with our neighbours.

We continue to closely monitor the position on collection rates, in order that any performance issues are escalated at the earliest opportunity. The council's 'Coping through the Recession' open day was one opportunity for the council to offer support to residents struggling to meet their payments.

Benefits

Caseloads and the associated increase in work levels continue to challenge our capacity assessing cases. Teams have been working hard to clear excess levels of work and we are starting to see an improvement. Five new benefit assessments officers are coming to the end of a three-month training program and should therefore start to contribute to the completion of outstanding claims.

It is worth noting that comparative performance against last year has slipped but our performance is still favourable against performance elsewhere in the country. We do, however, expect performance to return to 2008/2009 levels and are working hard with this aim in mind.

Northamptonshire Area Procurement Service (NAPS)

The month of June has seen NAPS respond to the stakeholder engagement challenge by supporting local events offering advice to businesses during the recession in both Northampton and Daventry.

Three revised Project Initiation Documents (PIDs) have been submitted to the Northamptonshire Efficiency & Improvement Partnership resulting from the proposed changes to the programme in May and NAPS is confident these will then be supported by the Chief Executives Steering Group.

Progress with introducing an e-tendering system is good, with the first project going live in July. Several collaborative projects are now in the pipeline including Environmental Services and Bring Banks & Textiles Collection.

David Perkins

Portfolio Holder for Finance