

Northampton Town Council

Executive Committee

19th January 2021

Report of the Acting Town Clerk

4. Transfer of Property and Services

Purpose of Report: To update Members on current discussions on the possible transfer of property and services to the Town Council

Recommended: That the Town Council at its meeting on 27th January 2021 be recommended to:

- i) To agree in principle, subject to the concurrence of the Shadow West Northants Council, to the transfer on 1st April of those properties and services set out in paragraph 1b) of the report of the Acting Town Clerk (including a long lease of the historic part of the Guildhall) and, subject to the approval of the draft budget for 2021/22, further reports on the financial and staffing implications of these transfers be presented to this Committee**
- ii) To explore with the Shadow West Northants Council a possible funded transfer of the further services set out in paragraph 1c) of the report on 1st April 2021**

Over a period of time a wide range of properties and services have been suggested for possible transfer from the Borough Council to the new Town Council. These fall into three general categories: those which have already been agreed; those which the Borough has agreed to transfer in principle subject to further reports; and those in respect of which the Town Council has requested further information on the financial and staffing implications of transfer before considering further.

a) Transfers already agreed

The Statutory Order creating the Town Council transferred the following allotment sites on 1st April 2021: Billing Road East, Broadmead Avenue, Glebeland Road, Graspin Lane, Harlestone Road, Parklands, Rothersthorpe Road and Southfields.

The Order also transferred the Mayoralty and accordingly the full current budget for mayoral support services is being included in the draft budget. A long list of other civic items including regalia, robes, muniments and other artifacts is being compiled and will be reported in due course.

Following the creation of the Town Council the Borough Council's previous responsibility for maintaining closed churchyards also passes automatically to the Town Council. I have not yet been advised the precise areas of land involved or the maintenance costs for them.

b) Transfers agreed in principle by the Borough Council

At its meeting on 2nd November the Borough Council agreed in principle to transfer the following property and services subject to further reports to the Cross Party Working Group and full Council:

Markets, Events and Entertainments, Festive Lighting, Street Furniture, Hanging baskets and Planting Displays, Town Twinning, Community Grants, and Town Centre Management Activities.

The Cross Party Working Group is also recommending to the Borough Council meeting on 18th January that the Town Council be offered, subject to the concurrence of the Shadow West Northants Council, a long lease of the historic part of the Guildhall on an internal repairing basis only. At the last meeting of this Committee it was noted that the principal council would retain the freehold and responsibility for structural repairs including the roof and the external statues. As the Guildhall was currently managed and serviced as a single unit with the modern office extension and could not be readily be divided it was likely that the landlord would continue to be responsible for heating, lighting and other services, cleaning, security and other overheads such as insurance and business rates. The Town Council would then be required to pay a service charge for its proportion of those costs.

This Committee agreed that the Town Council is willing to continue to explore a long lease of the historic part of the Guildhall as indicated, subject to the receipt of further details of all income and expenditure related to this part of the premises.

Detailed income and expenditure figures for these services are not yet available but Borough Council officers have kindly given some estimated information of current service costs to enable appropriate contingency provision to be included in the draft budget presented in the next item.

c) Property and Services for which the Committee has requested more information

In addition to the services set out in sections a) and b) above, the Committee asked the Borough Council for advice as to the financial and staffing implications of further potentially local services being transferred to it. These were: Local Open Spaces and Play Ares (but excluding premier parks and land held under the Housing Revenue Account), Community Centres, War Memorial and statues, Council representatives on outside bodies and charities, Neighbourhood Wardens, Park Rangers.

Members will naturally wish to receive further information on all the above property and services in due course to enable them to consider which services it wishes to continue to explore at this stage. However, as many services are currently managed as part of much wider contracts or in a “package” with other services, disaggregating the precise income and expenditure details which Councillors would expect to see as part of usual budget preparation is complex and will take some time to achieve, final figures may not be available in time for this meeting or indeed the Council meeting on 27th January.

d) Possible way forward

Given the circumstances set out in the paragraphs above, the Committee may wish to consider the following approach to service transfers.

With regard to the services at paragraph b) above, the Committee could recommend that the Town Council agrees in principle to accept these services (which includes the historic part of the Guildhall) and includes contingency provision in the draft budget based upon the best available estimates having regard to current Borough Council gross budgets and so meet the 27th January deadline for setting a precept. Further more detailed reports on the financial and staffing implications can then be presented to the Committee and Council before 31st March to enable Councillors to make an informed final decision. In event the Committee may also like to instruct the new Town Clerk, during the Council’s first full year, to undertake a full review of the operation of every individual service so the Council can consider any desired modifications and improvements.

With regard to the matters at paragraph c), which the Borough Council has yet to consider, as explained above, providing more detailed income and expenditure estimates is particularly challenging. For example, it would be necessary to commission detailed building surveys for each of the 18 community centres in order to establish likely future landlord responsibilities/ liabilities, even if the principal council is willing to consider their transfer. Further, with regard to open spaces and play areas, Neighbourhood Wardens and Park Rangers, some of these are included in the much wider contract and a detailed analysis will need to be undertaken to reveal how readily these can be separated and what the potential benefits would be of the Town Council accepting future responsibility for these services. However, the shadow West Northants Council is presumably currently including those services in its own draft budget so that might be the opportunity, should the Council wish to continue to explore the possible transfer of them, of exploring with WSN a possible service level agreement for the Town Council to deliver them on a funded basis in year one but with a sliding scale contribution towards the cost of such transferred services over a further short period of years.