

Overview & Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 3 March 2010

7.00pm in Council Chamber, Grosvenor House, Corby

Present: Councillors Bromhall (Chair), Addison, Beeby, Butcher, Massie, McGeown, Miller-Barton and Woolmer

Parish Representative: Dryden Phillipson

Business Group Rep: Gloria Ellenton

86. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Harley and Heggs.

87. Declarations of Interest

Members were asked to declare any personal interests they may have in the business to be discussed and/or indicate whether these were prejudicial or non-prejudicial, the nature of the interest, and whether they intended participating in the relevant agenda item.

No declarations were made.

88. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Members were requested to approve the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 3 February 2010, copies of which had been circulated.

RESOLVED that:-

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 3 February 2010, copies of which had been circulated to Members be agreed as a correct record.

89. Lead Member/Head of Service Update

The Lead Member for Housing, Cllr Bob Eyles, and the Head of Neighbourhood Pride were present to update Members on their areas of activity. Cllr Eyles highlighted the following items:

- Void performance – currently consistently below 30 voids with turn-around time averaging just over 20 days;
- Housing register – the number of applications had increased but the active figures were lower. Total of applicants for March 2009 was 2,846 applicants of which 577 were active; the total for March 2010 was 3,028 with 546 being active. Transfer applications had increased by 6%;
- Donald Greaves House – a visit had been arranged for 12 noon on 9th March and the first tenants were expected to take up residence in April;
- The Council had applied for and obtained Neighbourhood Agreement Pathfinder status as one of 12 across the country. This was a pilot scheme relating to the development of Neighbourhood Agreements and further information would be brought forward as the initiative progressed.
- A visit had been undertaken to view the type of timber framed houses proposed for Arran Way. The houses took just five days to build and construction was due to start in the coming weeks.

The Head of Neighbourhood Pride had circulated a summary report in advance of the meeting. She highlighted the following areas:

- Choice Based Lettings – the scheme was nearing implementation;

- Customer Service – ‘It’s your call’ user group to be set up by end March to fulfil a variety of roles;
- Housing Strategy – grant approval had been received for 78 new build Council homes on various sites. Successful Kickstart projects were also listed;
- Landlord Services – the main success in this area was in arrears which had reduced by approx £139,000 from April to December 2009;
- Tenant & Resident Involvement – a new tenant liaison strategy was currently out for consultation and work was continuing on setting up Disabilities and Ethnic Minorities focus groups;
- Garage Voids – the number of voids had reduced from 1268 in April 2009 to 1147 in January 2010.
- Donald Greaves House Refurbishment – the works were complete and new tenants being identified.
- Neighbourhood Management – six Weeks of Action with various themes, including burglary and alcohol, had been undertaken. Additional funding had been acquired for the Family Intervention Project which would provide two workers to tackle lower level anti-social behaviour across Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough;
- Capital Programme – on target to achieve Decent Homes;
- Sheltered Schemes – a programme was underway to pick up outstanding repairs and re-decoration at various sheltered units.

Members asked for further details in respect of the implications for the occupiers of the timber framed houses. The Lead Member explained that a full instruction pack would be provided to occupiers, including how to operate the ground-source heating, how to hang items like pictures, shelving, etc.

Progress on Decent Homes was queried as Members had received complaints about kitchens and bathrooms which were not being refurbished. The Head of Service explained that not all properties had needed work under Decent Homes. Further surveys were being undertaken to identify future needs and develop maintenance programmes to upgrade facilities as needed but the capital resources for such work were decreasing.

Members asked if arrears were being raised with tenants at an early stage. The Head of Service confirmed that tenants were being contacted from the first week of missing payments through a range of methods, including email, texting, home visits, etc. The Chief Executive commented that performance in benefits and collection services remained good in spite of the recession. There had been an increase of 21% in benefit claims but performance on processing remained top quartile. Council Tax collection rates had increased and independent advice was also available through Corby Voluntary and Community Service.

The existence of a minimum standard for houses offered for letting was queried as Members still occasionally received complaints about the state of properties offered to prospective tenants. The Head of Service confirmed there was a published minimum standard and properties were judged against this standard prior to letting.

Progress on dealing with former tenant arrears was queried and it was confirmed that this was the next area to be tackled. Officers believed increased income could be generated from this area. Former tenant debts totalled around £1m but this had been built up over a long period. Only small amounts were written off and if tenants came back to the Council in the future they would not be re-housed unless debts were paid.

Queries were raised in respect of Choice Based Lettings and it was confirmed that the scheme would go live in November. A restructure had taken place about 18 months previously, creating generic housing officers. Capital investment was the main area of concern but the Head of Service believed this was manageable. The Chief Executive

explained that the benefit team was separate from housing and was keeping up with claims in spite of increased numbers and fewer staff which showed real efficiency gains. The team worked closely with CAB/Welfare Rights and Housing officers would have forms and information with them when out on home visits. The level of dependency on benefits in the town was high even in good economic times.

The Chair thanked the Lead Member and Head of Service for their input.

90. Third Sector Support from Local Infrastructure Organisations

The Panel had called-in a report which had been considered by One Corby Policy Committee on 16 February 2010. The draft minutes of the One Corby Policy Committee were appended to the report. The Committee's decision had been that

- i) The Council support the contract in principle, subject to the availability of financial resources on a year by year basis;
- ii) The Lead Member, Community, be involved in the tendering and procurement exercise being proposed within the report.

Amended financial information was circulated. The Head of Culture & Leisure explained the difficulties caused by only committing to funding on a year by year basis. This would cause stability and sustainability issues for the projects involved, particularly in terms of staffing. Also, Kettering and the County Council had agreed the full three year package and Corby would, therefore, not be able to participate in joint commissioning.

Chair was aware of the financial pressures on the Council and, although the sums involved in this instance were quite small, adding up all the small costs made them significant. The Head of Financial Services had provided information detailing a potential £2m shortfall next year. On the other hand, organisations would find it very difficult to plan on a 1 year basis. The Chief Executive also outlined potential additional sources of income which should offset the £2m shortfall to some degree.

The Chair also felt that a full review of support to the third sector should be carried out to identify areas of duplication, etc.

The legal position in respect of the resolution was queried and the Head of Legal & Democratic Services explained that the Council could enter into a 3 year contract with break clauses with the agreement of all parties. The Principal Regeneration Officer stated that NCC would not enter into a one year agreement and Corby would have to tender separately. Corby would still receive £25,000 from NCC annually.

Comment was made that it was unreasonable to set performance targets/service level agreements and then increase the difficulty for organisations to meet these by providing such a short term commitment.

It was **MOVED** and **SECONDED** that the decision be referred back to One Corby Policy Committee with a recommendation from the Panel to enter into an unconditional three year agreement. Members also supported the suggestion for a full review of support to the third sector.

RESOLVED that:

- i) One Corby Policy Committee be asked to reconsider its decision of 16 February 2010 and be recommended to support an unconditional three year agreement;
- ii) A full review of support to the third sector be undertaken in due course.

91. Northamptonshire Council's Charter – A Consultation

This item was deferred to an all Member briefing to be arranged, followed by submission to Council.

92. Treasury Management Strategy

The Accountancy Manager presented the Treasury Management Strategy 2010/11 for Member's consideration.

The Council continued to pursue a policy of prudent investment of its balances with the aim of achieving the optimum return on its investments in line with proper levels of security and liquidity. Details of this strategy were set out in Appendix A to the report. As part of reviewing the proper level of security, Appendix B provided an updated Counterparty list.

Investment and borrowing strategies sought to minimise interest paid and maximise interest income to the Council.

Current economic conditions had resulted in the Council moving from a position of net investor to net borrower. Appendix C, Prudential Indicators, detailed the Council's borrowing strategy. Most of the borrowing related to short-term requirements which would be paid back when anticipated capital receipts were received. Borrowing for the Kickstart scheme would be paid back from rental income. Long term borrowing would be required to meet the costs of the litigation case relating to land reclamation schemes.

The Council was required to prepare a statement of its policy on making Minimum Revenue Provision at the start of each financial year. The policy statement for 2010/11 was set out at Appendix D.

Members raised queries in respect of the delays in receiving income from capital receipts and the Accountancy Manager explained that the strategy outlined was considered prudent and it was expected that the capital receipts would be realised, although later than originally planned. The Chief Executive also explained that the capital value of land had fallen but efforts to maximise income were continuing.

Members asked if any external support was likely to come forward on the Litigation case. Officers explained that discussions with insurers and the LGA were ongoing and other parties, eg Corus, would also be approached. The outcome of these discussions was uncertain. Pressure from the likelihood of a successful appeal would hopefully persuade the claimants to agree a reasonable settlement through mediation.

The Chair asked if the O&S Panel should keep a watch over budget issues in the coming year? The Chief Executive explained that a rolling approach to budgeting was being followed with changes in the external picture being fed in as they occurred. He felt that all Member briefings would be a better approach in the early days and these would be arranged as needed.

RESOLVED that:

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel supports the approval of:

- i) The Treasury Management Strategy 2010/11;
- ii) The updated counterparty list;
- iii) Prudential Indicators; and
- iv) MRP Policy Statement 2010/11.

93. Corby East Midlands International Swimming Pool – Scrutiny Update

The Head of Culture & Leisure and the Head of Special Projects were present to update Members on the performance of the new swimming pool and progress on the issues raised at the Panel meeting on 4 November 2009.

The pool had been a tremendous success overall, both in the construction phase and on targets/attendance levels and this was continuing. Appendix 1 to the report detailed previous and current issues and set out actions and progress on addressing these.

The issue of glare in the gym had given rise to significant complaints over the winter months due to the low sun. Various solutions were being considered and an area of glass was to be tinted as test. The installation of blinds was also possible but would only be used as a last resort.

In respect of the rust staining, further investigations were still being carried out and the Contractor was working with the Council to resolve this.

The walkways were being constructed and access routes were having to change to accommodate this. The car park would be complete in May.

Additional information on income and usage was circulated and showed the facility had exceeded all of its targets with the exception of 60+ free swimming. On under 16 free swimming, Corby was 10th in the country despite its three month closure.

It was asked if there had been issues with injuries on the flume. Officers were only aware of one occasion when two children had gone down the flume together. The number of issues was very low for the level of usage.

Members asked if the over 60s free swimmers were put off because there was a perception that the pool was too busy? The Facilities Manager explained that all sectors of the community were encouraged to swim in various ways, included sessions aimed at specific user groups. The limited car parking may be an issue. New steps into the pool were also being installed to help those with mobility issues.

The use/performance of the lockers was queried and officers confirmed that the situation had improved. Video instructions had been introduced, together with additional signage. Only one complaint had been received in recent months which related to the loss of goods from a locker and this had been responded to. The lockers had also been tested with members and the main issue was users not closing them properly – there was no record of lockers being broken into. More staff were also deployed in the changing area to support customers.

Comments had been received that depth markings were not clear and this could put less confident swimmers off. It was confirmed that the whole of the 25m pool was 1.8m. Some over 60s sessions were being offered in the diving pool where the floor could be raised.

Members queried what type of car park was being constructed and the proposed charging policy. The Head of Special Projects confirmed it would be a flat level car park with landscaping and lighting. There would be 200 spaces for cars and also bike sheds. A pay and display system would be used with charges similar to Land Securities' car parks as there was no desire for or benefit from competition. The income generated could be used to support services and usage would be free in the evenings and on Sundays with low rates for short stay customers on weekdays and Saturdays.

It was recognised that the pool had been very successful and teething troubles were inevitable. The key issue was identifying responsibility, eg surely the glare issue should have been foreseen by the Architect? The Head of Special Projects confirmed that £247,000 retention was held and the problems were being discussed with the Architect and contractor. The difficulty was that there was no standard for glare and the glazing was good quality. The hooding would be effective in the summer months but the problem was low sun in the winter. Exchanges had been reasonable and intelligent so far and there was certainly no reluctance on the Council's part to raise issues and responsibilities. The Architect and contractor also had the matter of references and their reputation to consider.

Members asked if swimmers would get parking charges refunded. The Head of Culture & Leisure explained that a coloured band session system would be introduced shortly and two hours parking at 50p should be adequate for most users. Providing refunds would put more pressure on reception staff and add to queuing time. Customers were already used to paying 50p to park at Tresham or the Oasis car parks.

The Chief Executive commented that customers were getting a very good deal and this was reflected in usage figures. Membership was only £28/month and included free swimming,

studio classes, gym, etc. The Council also had commitments to reduce carbon emissions and a balanced approach was therefore necessary.

RESOLVED that:

The contents of the report and progress made on rectifying the initial problems with the new pool be noted.

94. Items from Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was updated and circulated with the agenda papers for each meeting to enable Members to select items they wished to see brought to the Panel, in addition to key policy items which were brought forward to the Panel automatically. No additional items were selected from the Forward Plan.

Members queried the reason for holding the Crime & Disorder Committee on a separate date. Officers explained that this was due to the weight of both the Overview & Scrutiny Panel and Crime & Disorder Committee agendas. The possibility of a separate meeting had been highlighted previously.

The intention to bring forward the Neighbourhood Renewal Pathfinder Area for the Panel's consideration was noted. It was also pointed out that Corby had retained Northants Police's prize for the top Safer Community Team with the North area taking the prize on this occasion.

In relation to the gritting issues raised previously, a letter had been sent to Members confirming arrangements for the meeting on 29 April. The meeting was open to all Members who wished to attend, including the Parish and Business Group representatives.

95. Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 9.03pm.