

COUNCIL MEETING – 14 JANUARY 2014

REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 December 2013

Present: Councillor Pursglove (Chairman), Councillors Carr (Vice Chairman), Elliott, Emerson, Gough, Hawkes, G Lawman, M Patel, Simmons, and V Waters.

Also present: Mrs B Lawrence (Head of Resources), Mr N Robinson (Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager), and Mrs P Whitworth (Democratic Services Officer).

(Councillor Bell attended as an observer.)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

RESOLVED to note that apologies for absence were received from Councillors Maguire and Timms.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor	Minute number	Subject	Reason
Simmons.	5.	Presentation – Central and East Northamptonshire Citizens Advice Bureau.	Other interest – council's representative on the board of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

3. **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2013 be confirmed and signed.

4. PRESENTATION – HOPE PROJECT

The chairman welcomed Simon Trundle, chief executive of the Hope Project, and invited him to begin his presentation.

Mr Trundle began by explaining the history of the Hope Project, which had its origins in the New Life Church on the Hemmingwell Estate, and was founded in 1997. He explained the aims of the project were:

- To serve families and individuals living on the Hemmingwell estate.
- To work in partnership with agencies to deliver critical support services to families, young people and individuals in a deprived community.
- To develop community training programmes to improve stability in families and improved employment opportunities.

He then went on to detail a number of services the project delivered to the community, which included:

- A family support service.
- Cygnets pre-school.
- A community café.
- Youth drop-in centre.

- Adult learning centre.
- Hobby groups.
- Music studio.

Mr Trundle showed members of the committee a number of photographs to illustrate the transformation of two buildings used by the project. The first showed the former Swallow Pub, which was derelict and had a history of criminal activity, and now housed the modern community café, pre-school, adult and youth training facilities, drop-in centre, a community meeting room and administration offices.

He explained that the transformation project cost £320,000, including £150,000 to purchase the lease, and that funding had come from the borough council, the county council, the East Midlands Development Agency, the lottery, and £112,000 from the New Life Church Trust. The building was renamed The Well and opened in June 2007.

The second project was the redevelopment of the estate's run-down community centre, which had suffered from vandalism and was underused. It was now a multi-purpose facility, offering skills training and a community hall. Mr Trundle explained that the centre could now import basic skills training to allow people to take the first steps on the road to further training and employment.

He detailed the costs of the community centre conversion, which totalled £326,000, and the annual running costs, which were £68,000. He explained that income from the centre was £44,000, and that even with a grant from the borough council of £12,000, the centre ran at a loss of £12,000 a year. This shortfall was currently being met by the project's reserves and fundraising.

Mr Trundle concluded his presentation by describing the results of the project in the sixteen years it had been running, and explaining some of the risks faced in the future. The results included:

- An increase in community pride.
- Adults and young people accessing training on their doorstep.
- Community ownership of the project.
- Footfall of 25,000.
- 386 individuals supported in 2013.

The risks included:

- Withdrawal of funding, which would lead to the closure of the community and skills centre.
- Increasing needs and demand.
- Staying focussed on the original vision of serving the Hemmingwell estate.
- Needing to bring in new volunteers and a new chief executive as Mr Trundle was stepping down in the near future.

The chairman thanked Mr Trundle for his presentation. He said that he appreciated the personal effort Mr Trundle had made and that the results of

the project were a testament to his leadership. He wished him well in the future.

The chairman then invited members to ask questions.

Members asked about services for people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and enquired about the lottery-funded Talent Match, which supports young people into work, and whether they operated from the Hope Project's premises or could be approached for a grant. Mr Trundle replied that they were in discussions with Talent Match but they funded new initiatives rather than established ones. He added that Apprentice Supermarket had begun work with local NEETs at the Hope Project.

Members also asked about the project's plans for the future and whether they were likely to expand or increase their income. Mr Trundle replied that they were looking to expand the pre-school, as demand was increasing and it was a source of income. He also mentioned that the project was trying to secure funding for a sports hall, which could be a further source of income.

Members reiterated the chairman's comments about the contribution and achievements of Mr Trundle and his team, and said that the work of the project had been fundamental in the reduction in crime and that people were now happy to be housed on the estate. They commented that it was important the impetus wasn't lost once Mr Trundle stepped down as chief executive. Mr Trundle confirmed that when the project started in 1997 there was no community engagement but now there was significant ownership of the work of the project and very little vandalism. He explained the project was actively looking for a replacement chief executive, and was hoping that the role would be taken on a volunteer basis to save salary costs.

The chairman thanked Mr Trundle for his presentation. Members asked that it be reflected in the minutes that the importance of the work of the Hope Project, and in particular the work they were doing with NEETs, be given consideration by the Resources Committee when allocating community grants.

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

5. PRESENTATION – CENTRAL AND EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The chairman welcomed Martin Lord, chief executive of the Central and East Northamptonshire Citizens Advice Bureau, and invited him to begin his presentation.

Mr Lord began by explaining that the Central and East Northamptonshire Citizens Advice Bureau had been formed by the merger of Northampton and District CAB and Nene Valley CAB.

He explained the aims of the organisation were to provide the advice people need for the problems they face, and to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

He also explained the principles of the organisation were that it was free, independent, confidential and impartial.

Mr Lord then shared some statistics regarding the types of issues that people approached the organisation with, showing that problems around benefits had increased over the past year. Other problem areas of debt, housing and employment had stayed at a similar level to the previous year. Demographic data was also shared with the committee, illustrating the gender, ethnic origin, age and disability of those that accessed the organisation's services.

Mr Lord explained that the organisation had 32 volunteers, four paid staff, and one manager, shared across the organisation's two sites. Back office administration services were also shared.

Mr Lord concluded his presentation with a brief run down of the organisation's principal funders, which included the borough council, the Legal Aid Agency, Macmillan, Advice Services Transition Fund, the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. He also shared two case studies with the committee, to illustrate the type and amount of help the organisation offered to individuals.

The chairman thanked Mr Lord for his presentation and invited members to ask questions.

Members requested clarification around the role the organisation played in trading standards services. A member mentioned that when contacting trading standards at the county council, he was told that he needed to speak to the CAB.

Mr Lord explained that there was a difference between the national Citizens Advice Bureau and the local bureaux. The national organisation was a charity in its own right and provided the branding and name for the local bureaux, which were also individual charities. The national organisation was able to provide its own services and that included a consumer services contact centre, which provided general trading standards advice. Enforcement of trading standards would be the responsibility of the county council.

Members also asked about the accessibility of the organisation, as they had received comments it could be difficult to get an appointment. Mr Lord said that they had seen more clients in the last year than in previous years, which showed the service was more accessible, but he acknowledged there were still issues. He explained that 97% of the population know about the CAB and it was often the first port of call, meaning that they were hugely over subscribed. He said that the appointments tended to be booked no more than 2-3 weeks in advance.

Members then asked Mr Lord if clients were ever referred to the CAB directly from the council. Mr Lord replied that there was a mechanism for direct referrals, and they did receive some, but he would be happy to have more as a referral meant that the client's needs were already identified. He pointed out that councillors were also able to refer their constituents directly.

Members also asked what association and relationship the CAB had with Support Wellingborough. Mr Lord replied that they had a cordial relationship with Support Wellingborough, led by Wellingborough Homes, and that as Wellingborough Homes had a contractual relationship with Community Law Service they didn't refer to the CAB. He added that although there weren't direct referrals, he wouldn't know about whether or not Support Wellingborough signposted people to the CAB.

Members asked that the results of monitoring meetings with organisations in receipt of council funding be circulated to all members. The chairman confirmed that a members' briefing note would be circulated in due course.

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

6. COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION PERFORMANCE – 1 APRIL 2013 TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2013

The annexed circulated report of the Head of Resources was received to inform the committee of the council's performance, including Wellingborough Norse, during the first half of the year in handling customer feedback and requests for information. The report also included complaints that had been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Appended to the report was detailed information on compliments, comments and complaints received by the council, as well as the numbers of Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulation requests received.

The report showed that for the period 1 April 2013 to 30 September 2013, a total of 29 compliments and 27 comments had been received.

During the same period, the council had received 45 complaints, of which 96% were responded to in full within 12 days. Of the 45 complaints received, 26 (58%) were not upheld whereas others involved lessons being learned and appropriate action taken.

For the same period in 2012-13, 82 complaints had been received, of which 95% were responded to within target. The report suggested reasons for the significant decrease between 2012-13 and 2013-14, which included the better weather during the summer compared to that of 2012 which particularly impacted on grounds maintenance and the level of complaints in relation to that. Other considerations included the fact that 2012 saw a number of national events celebrated locally, such as the Olympic Torch relay and Golden Jubilee, which in turn generated more customer feedback.

During the period covered by the report, the council received six cases from the Ombudsman. Two of those were premature complaints, whereby the Ombudsman considered the council had not been given reasonable opportunity to investigate and reply to the complainant. The remaining four were not investigated by the Ombudsman for the reasons set out in the report.

The report also detailed requests for information, and showed that during the first half of the year the council received 233 requests for information under

the Freedom of Information Act, 30 requests for information under Section 29 of the Data Protection Act, and 185 requests under the Environmental Information Regulations, making a total of 448. There was one Data Subject Access request. Of the 448 requests received, 443 (99%) were completed within the statutory 20 day working deadline.

For the same period in 2012-13, 359 requests for information had been received. The report explained that in response to the continuing increase in requests, officers were now beginning to publish information on the council's website, particularly where there are routine requests of the same or a similar nature.

The chairman commented that he was impressed with the content of the report, and in particular how few cases were referred to the Ombudsman, and asked that his comments be passed back to officers.

Members then raised the issue of complaints that had been received about personal paperwork going astray after being returned by the council, and asked how it was sent back. The Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager replied that personal paperwork needed for benefit claims was sent back by second class post, and not recorded delivery. He added that because there was a small risk that paperwork could go astray in the postal system, people were encouraged to drop paperwork off in person and wait for it to be copied and returned.

RESOLVED that report be noted.

7. REVIEW OF COUNCIL TAX AND HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS COLLECTION POLICY

The annexed circulated report of the Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager was received to inform members of the collection policy in relation to council tax, with regard to those in receipt of council tax support (CTS), and also collection of housing benefit overpayments.

The Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager explained that members had requested details of the revenue collection policy and the procedures in operation for the recovery of debt, including the policy for those in receipt of CTS, and the report was in response to that request.

Appended to the report were details of the council tax recovery policy, including the timings employed to full charge payers and alternative timings for CTS recipients paying 8.5% of their council tax charge for the first time, as well as details of the housing benefit recovery policy.

The report explained that the collection of council tax is a statutory service and the options available to the council for recovery are defined in regulation. The government had changed the way council tax benefit was funded in the 2012-13 financial year, which meant that for the first time working-age people previously in receipt of full council tax benefit were expected to contribute 8.5% towards their council tax charge.

The report went on to explain that council tax collection procedures were modified from April 2013 to allow for the extra financial pressure placed on these cases, and additional time was built into the recovery process to allow first time council tax payers to contact the council and understand the changes. The effect of this was that the majority of CTS cases to receive a summons were delayed until 24 October. On that date, 250 CTS cases received a summons, which equated to 6.87% of CTS cases, compared to 7.52% of non-CTS cases who also received a summons.

The report concluded by explaining that when CTS cases presented with particular financial pressures, the council tax team would advise them to seek debt advice and the report gave details of how this was provided.

Members asked about the recovery of money after a prosecution, as recovery was pursued in benefit fraud cases but not in non-payment of council tax cases. The Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that it was covered by different legislation.

Members then raised the issue of bailiffs and asked how often they were used. The Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager said that the aim was always to seek a repayment arrangement, and before further recovery action could be taken a liability order would be applied for at a magistrates court authorising either the use of bailiffs, attachment of earnings, or attachment of benefits. He confirmed that that attachment of earnings or attachment of benefits was the preferred option as use of bailiffs incurred an additional cost. He also explained that he was not anticipating the use of bailiffs in CTS cases.

Members asked if reminders and summons were sent by recorded delivery, and the Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that they were not required to do so. He said that evidence such as proof of posting was kept. Members queried if the same evidence was kept when sending back personal paperwork as mentioned when the previous report was discussed, and the Principal Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed it was.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The chairman wished all members of the committee a happy Christmas and all the best for 2014.

Chairman

The meeting closed at 8.30pm.

