



Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton, NN1 1DE on Monday 19 June 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Andrew Grant (Chair)
Councillor Stephen Hibbert (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Harry Barrett
Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Louisa Fowler
Councillor Zoe Smith
Councillor Mike Warren

Also Present:

Councillor Adam Brown, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture and Leisure
Councillor Wendy Randall

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
Councillor Cheryl Hawes
Councillor Azizur Rahman
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex

Officers:

James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer
Stuart Lackenby, Executive Director People Services and Deputy Chief Executive
Ben Pearson, Assistant Director Education
Rebecca Wilshire, Director of Children's Services
Jacqueline Brooks, Housing Services Manager
Dawn Eckersley, Interim Head of Housing Strategy and Partnerships

1. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aziz, Chowdhury, Hawes and Sturges-Alex. Apologies for absence were also received from Councillor Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Fowler declared that she was a trustee of New Leaf Learning, a charity that could receive funding to provide support for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND).

3. Notification of requests from Members of the Public to address the Meeting

There were none.

4. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting and highlighted the following points:

- The changes to the Overview and Scrutiny function introduced for 2023/24 had now been operating for a month. This had been a busy period and it was recognised that new approaches could be challenging for some.
- He had attended the recent Centre for Governance and Scrutiny annual conference.
- Training would be key to working effectively. The Democracy and Standards Committee had agreed a series of Overview and Scrutiny training sessions for councillors, which were likely to start in July.

5. West Northamptonshire Council Housing Allocation Scheme

The Housing Services Manager presented an overview of the development of a new Housing Allocation Scheme for West Northamptonshire. The Committee was advised that West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) needed to adopt a new Scheme by 1 April 2024 to replace those inherited from predecessor authorities. The draft Scheme proposed to use a choice-based lettings model, as currently used in the former Northampton borough and Daventry district areas, as this represented the most effective approach. The Committee was invited to consider the proposed qualifying criteria for applications for social rented housing and the proposed approach to assessing and prioritising housing need, involving four bands A-D. This was a draft Scheme and input from Overview and Scrutiny was important in shaping the final decision.

The Committee considered the development of the Scheme and councillors made the following comments:

- Concern was raised that people on the housing register who were placed in the lower bands were not likely to get a home. Under the choice-based lettings scheme used in Northampton it had been possible for people to wait for years.
- Were people being helped to downsize to release larger homes?
- Would those with debt or a history of unreasonable behaviour be excluded from applying for social rented housing? People who irresponsibly damaged a property should be treated robustly. However, the Scheme should also not exclude people who might most need help. How would people excluded from applying be able to secure accommodation?
- The proposed threshold of £60K gross household income and £16K savings could be unfair for a single parent family. Could the assessment be based on disposable income?
- Victims of domestic abuse who were homeless would be placed in Band A. Why should they move whilst the perpetrator remained in the home? Did WNC have a policy for this?

- Could future circumstances be taken into account? For example, where a person was not currently a priority, but their situation was due to change.
- Applicants with a dependent child living in accommodation that required the child to share facilities with adults should be given a higher priority than Band C.
- What would be the priority for a family with a boy and a girl moving from a 2 bed to a 3 bed property?
- Allowances needed to be made in exceptional circumstances, such as when children were subject to a Child Protection Plan. Flexibility could support better outcomes for children and reduce the risk of them needing to come into local authority care.
- Was there a process for dealing with hard-to-let properties?
- Was any mental health training provided for the housing and customer services teams who needed to respond to complex issues?
- What support would be provided to avoid applicants being put at a disadvantage if they did not speak English well, had no access to the Internet, or were not confident dealing with forms and processes?
- Could screening be carried out at an earlier stage to ensure that those bidding on properties could afford them? It was not helpful for applicants to bid successfully for a property and then need to be advised that it was not affordable.
- What plans were in place to harmonise IT systems needed to support the operation of the new Scheme?
- A go-live date of 1 April 2024 for the new Scheme should be avoided to avoid a clash with the issue of Council Tax bills. Launching the new Scheme on the same date could create additional risk, particularly if there were teething problems with IT systems or other processes supporting it.
- Would numbers of applicants in Northampton increase with the income threshold being raised to £60K?

The Housing Services Manager and the Interim Head of Housing Strategy and Partnerships responded as follows:

- Advice would be given to prospective tenants on priority, available properties, turnover rate and waiting times in their area. Offers would be advertised on the WNC website and in the housing bulletin. Direct lettings or an automatic bidding process could be undertaken for those who found it difficult to access the system.
- In order to make best use of housing stock, tenants who were under-occupying properties and wanted to move to a smaller property and those releasing adapted properties would be placed in priority Band A.
- Some people artificially created need in order to boost their priority. The Scheme needed to discourage this. However, WNC would take a person-centred approach to applying the qualifying criteria: a person with housing-related debt would not be eligible to apply if there was no evidence that they were trying to pay it off.
- The Housing team worked with people who were excluded from the Scheme to try to find accommodation for them in the private rented sector.
- The £60K gross household income threshold was considered to be a fair level and was linked to evidence and best practice. Basing thresholds on disposable income would be very intrusive and require analysis of bank statements and other financial records. There would also be a band for hardship based on

affordability. Emergencies and events such as discharge from hospital would be considered on a case by case basis.

- This issue of perpetrators of domestic abuse remaining in the home was outside the scope of the Scheme. The Committee might seek to discuss this further with the relevant portfolio holder.
- Those experiencing domestic abuse would be placed in the highest band.
- Consideration could be given to increasing the priority for applicants with a dependent child living in accommodation that required the child to share facilities with adults outside their household.
- A family with a boy and a girl would qualify for an additional bedroom when the older child was 11 years old. They would be placed in Band C. A self-contained downstairs room could be used as a bedroom.
- The bidding system would highlight hard-to-let properties. Direct offers could be made if required.
- Team members already received training on handling members of the public with complex issues but could also undertake mental health first aid training.
- Guidelines on maximum affordable rent were difficult to provide because this varied between registered providers.
- Work was being carried out with the ICT providers to ensure the deadline for the implementation of the new Scheme could be met. The Scheme had to be adopted by 1 April 2024 but might not go live on that date.
- A significant increase in the number of applicants relating to the household income threshold would not be anticipated as all applicants would need to reapply, keeping their original application date, and some would drop off the housing register. An annual review was recommended as good practice to ensure the right people were on the register.
- Each applicant had the right to request a review of decisions made about their applicant, with set timescales.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture and Leisure commented during discussion as follows:

- WNC needed to adopt a common approach across the local authority area. He believed that the choice-based letting model was the best option.
- It was practically necessary to have a hierarchy of need for housing allocations even if this involved challenges for people who were placed in the lower bands.
- WNC sought to identify and deal with cases where an individual had worsened their situation to try to get a higher priority for housing. People with legitimate need would be supported.
- An online affordability calculator would be a useful tool for applicants that could form part of implementing the new Scheme.

At the conclusion of discussion the Committee considered and identified recommendations on the new Housing Allocation Scheme that it wished to present to the Cabinet on 11 July 2023 when the draft Scheme was due to be approved for public consultation.

Resolved

That the Committee recommends:

- 1) That the Cabinet agrees that the proposed non-qualifying criteria for the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme should not bar persons who have housing related debt but who are making reasonable efforts to pay it back.
- 2) That the Cabinet agrees that the proposed non-qualifying criteria for the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme should deal robustly with persons who have damaged social rented housing let to them in the past.
- 3) That the Cabinet agrees that an applicant who has at least one dependent child and is living in accommodation where the facilities are shared with others outside their own household should be placed in Band B not Band C of the proposed bands for assessing housing need within the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme.
- 4) That the Cabinet agrees that the proposed bands for assessing housing need within the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme should include provision for an applicant who has a dependent child under 16 years old who is subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- 5) That the Cabinet agrees that clear information regarding the affordability of properties should be made available to applicants at an early stage in the bidding process within the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme, ideally including an affordability calculator tool.
- 6) That the Cabinet agrees that the go-live date for the new West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme should be scheduled for after 1 April 2024 to mitigate risks that could result from coinciding with the date when Council Tax bills are issued.

6. **Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2023/24**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report, which invited the Committee to consider and confirm its work programme for 2023/24. The following points were highlighted:

- The current Committee would be taking on part of the remit of the previous People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the report set out the former Committee's work programme for consideration.
- The report presented a draft work programme arising from discussion at the Committee pre-meeting on 25 May 2023. It was for the Committee in formal session to decide the work programme. The work programme was a living document and would be reported to each meeting for discussion and updating as required.
- The previous People Overview and Scrutiny Committee had begun a scrutiny review of support for children with SEND at the end of 2022/23. The current Committee needed to confirm whether it wished this work to continue, with some necessary changes to the membership of the task and finish panel and timescale.

The Committee considered the content of its work programme for 2023/24.

The Chair noted that discussion at the pre-meeting had supported continuing the SEND scrutiny review and he invited the Committee to confirm this.

The Chair advised that Councillor Fowler had produced a Scrutiny Review Proposal for work on support for foster carers in West Northamptonshire, reflecting discussion

at the pre-meeting, which was presented to the meeting. If the Committee agreed the topic for provisional inclusion in its work programme a full plan could be prepared for approval at the Committee meeting on 25 September 2023.

Councillors questioned whether scrutiny of fostering should focus only on recruitment and retention of foster carers, given the potential to act as a critical friend on other aspects of service performance. Councillor Fowler referred to the aim to take a constructive option. The Executive Director People Services commented that the proposed line of enquiry would be helpful in the context of action to move forward from the recent Ofsted inspection of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust independent fostering agency.

The Committee considered other potential topics that might be included in the work programme and councillors made the following comments:

- The provision of free broadband to young people leaving local authority care should be included in the work programme as the issue had originally been raised by a Council motion.
- The Committee could request a briefing note on the provision of free broadband to young people leaving local authority care to understand the existing position and what scrutiny might achieve.
- The issue of knife crime was linked to the topics of the early help offer, 0-19 services and school exclusions.
- The scrutiny review on child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm carried out by the previous People Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been presented to the Cabinet in March 2023 and was due to be reviewed in September 2023.

The Executive Director People Services made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The early help offer and 0-19 services could logically be considered together. Services were commissioned by Public Health and the contract had recently been extended on a 1+1 basis. There were challenges about how to join together services to produce the most effective overall offer.
- It was important to understand the rationale and data relating to exclusions and suspensions: only a small proportion of exclusions were due to knife crime despite the perception.
- He could work with the Integrated Care Board to produce an update on the recommendations from the scrutiny review on child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm.

The Chair advised that he had originally anticipated that the Committee would rotate its meetings between Northampton and Towcester. However, feedback from Committee members indicated that holding all of the meetings in Northampton was preferable. Future meetings had therefore been relocated, except for the one on 3 April 2024 when there was not a suitable room available at The Guildhall. The Committee was invited to consider how it wished to proceed for that meeting.

Resolved

- 1) That the Committee agreed the proposal for scrutiny of support for West Northamptonshire foster carers for provisional inclusion in its work programme 2023/24.
- 2) That the Committee agreed the updated plan for the scrutiny review of support for children with SEND.
- 3) That the Committee agreed the draft work programme 2023/24 as set out in the report subject to the following amendments:
 - The Committee to request a briefing note providing background information relating to the provision of free broadband to young people leaving local authority care
 - The Committee to consider the early help offer and 0-19 services as a single committee meeting item
- 4) That the Committee agreed its meeting on 3 April 2024 should be held at One Angel Square if possible and otherwise at The Forum.

7. **Urgent Business**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.20 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____