



People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Council Chamber, Lodge Road, Daventry NN11 4FP on Tuesday 25 January 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present	Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair) Councillor Azizur Rahman Councillor Harry Barrett Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM Councillor Raymond Connolly Councillor Nigel Hinch Councillor Bob Purser Councillor Wendy Randall Councillor Emma Roberts Councillor Sue Sharps Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex Councillor Mike Warren
Also Present:	Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education Councillor Danielle Stone, Chair, Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Apologies for Absence:	Councillor Karen Cooper
Officers	Chris Kiernan, Interim Director of Children's Services Colin Foster, Chief Executive, Northamptonshire Children's Trust Olivia Ives, Assistant Director, Corporate Parent Services, Northamptonshire Children's Trust Louise Mackender, Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Commissioning, Northamptonshire Children's Trust James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer

32. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Karen Cooper.

33. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Emma Roberts declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 7 (School Improvement) as the Regional Schools Lead for her employer, although she did not cover Northamptonshire.

34. **Notification of requests from Members of the Public to address the Meeting**

There were no requests from members of the public to address the meeting.

35. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that: the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the minutes of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 16 November 2021.

36. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair made the following points:

- The first evidence-gathering meeting of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Scrutiny Panel took place on 13 January 2022 and good input was received from Sharon Robson, Assistant Director Children and Young People at Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, and Jo Fletcher, Clinical Lead, Children and Young People Transformation Programme;
- The first meeting of the iCAN Scrutiny Panel was due to take place on 26 January 2022;
- She had been appointed by Full council on 2 December 2021 as the West Northamptonshire Council member of the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the development of the Horton Hospital in Banbury.

37. **Children's Services Performance**

The Chief Executive of Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT), together with the Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Commissioning and the Assistant Director, Corporate Parent Services introduced the report updating the Committee on progress with achieving consistently good quality practice, the outcomes of Ofsted monitoring visits and measures to further improve recruitment and retention of social workers.

The Chief Executive emphasised that West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) had provided outstanding support for NCT during its continuing evolution. Performance was improving, which was recognised. The current Department of Education commissioner was stepping down in February 2022 and would not be replaced. Ofsted had advised that following the November 2021 monitoring visit there would be no further monitoring visits but a full inspection with grading would take place in summer 2022. This would be a two week process with preparation in the three weeks beforehand. Although work to support improvement in priority areas was continuing it was likely that the best Ofsted grade that could be expected at this point would be 'requires improvement'. This reflected that Ofsted would consider the position in Northamptonshire back to 2019 and would need to be convinced that recent improvements could be sustained.

The Assistant Director, Corporate Parent Services highlighted action being taken to improve the quality and consistency of professional practice and to ensure that services were informed by the voice of the child. A skilled workforce was needed to achieve this. The majority of posts in NCT from team leader level upwards were now filled by permanent staff members. More tailored continuous professional development helped to maintain focus and show what was good practice. The NCT

Improvement Plan was monitored monthly by an Improvement Board. NCT continued to implement and embed a strengths-based, child-focussed practice model intended to achieve sustained outcomes for children. The Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Commissioning further advised that NCT had implemented revised procedures and practice standards that gave managers and practitioners greater clarity about expectations and support. The Quality Assurance Framework was now seen as a collaborative process, not a punitive one.

In relation to recruitment and retention of social workers, the Chief Executive and Assistant Director, Corporate Parent Services advised that Northamptonshire's position relative to other areas had improved compared to pressures experienced in 2020. NCT's vacancy rate for social workers was 22.5% and the rate of agency social workers was 16.6% in December 2021. There had been more starters than leavers in the last year and NCT managers were being contacted by people looking to work in Northamptonshire. A further 10 international social workers were due to join NCT in May 2022 with a good package of support. The NCT Workforce Strategy set a clear vision and priorities that provided a framework for action to support recruitment and retention. It reflected that NCT was still on an improvement journey but there was an absolute commitment to act when issues needed to be addressed.

The Committee considered the report and members raised the following points:

- The overall numbers of social workers joining and leaving NCT in the year to October 2021 included in the report represented a net loss. How could this be described as a positive trend?
- The report referred to 47 existing social workers moving to new roles within NCT. This meant that the recruitment of 48 new social workers in the past year did not address the overall shortage. How did retention rates for social workers compare with those in other areas and were other areas at full capacity? What was the situation regarding non-social work vacancies within NCT?
- Was there any correlation between agency social worker numbers and areas with a higher cost of living? Were any steps being taken to assist those who wanted to work as social workers in Northamptonshire but for whom the cost of living was too high?
- Although current children's services performance improvement work was more focussed on outcomes than in the past in Northamptonshire many young people still did not feel safe and experienced mental health issues. It could be helpful for NCT to build connections with the local community to help to identify vulnerable young people, for example, by engaging with the Youth Summit run by a network of youth groups in Northampton, which aimed to produce a Youth Manifesto.
- Concern was expressed about wider issues raised by serious case reviews in Northamptonshire concerning the risk of professionals becoming desensitised to the effect of poverty, the confusion that could result from public sector organisations using different definitions of disability, and the effectiveness of work with fathers compared to that in other areas.
- Did NCT social workers receive any clinical supervision to support their social and emotional wellbeing? This was very positive and could help staff retention.
- In recent tragic cases involving the deaths of children there had been many warning signs that had been missed. Could NCT assure members that it had appropriate arrangements to enable staff members to raise concerns and to ensure that these would be addressed?

The NCT representatives provided additional information during the course of discussion as follows:

- The report aimed to be open about NCT's overall position on recruitment and retention: further improvements had been seen since October 2021. The majority of the 47 social workers who had moved to new roles within NCT had become senior social workers and therefore still had a caseload. NCT currently had 528 social worker posts with 380 social workers in-post. It would need to consider what was the right headcount to have in future. No local authority had all of its social work posts filled all of the time. Staff turnover was still a challenge for Northamptonshire and NCT had an overall turnover rate of 15% compared with the national average of 12.9%. Demand for social workers outstripped supply nationally and added to the need to attract and retain staff. Non-social work vacancies at NCT were very low.
- Average caseloads at NCT were broadly in-line with targets.
- NCT provided a retention payment and relocation expenses to new social workers. The employment offer from Northamptonshire was now comparable to that in other areas. Trust was also a key factor in attracting applicants: whether prospective employers trusted that they would be paid fairly, would not have an excessive caseload and would be able to do their best for young people. Changing organisational culture took time but NCT was seeing positive effects.
- The Chief Executive was confident that issues raised by serious case reviews in Northamptonshire were being addressed. Better professional practice should prevent the risk of social work being carried out in a functional way that could cause issues to be overlooked.
- There continued to be different definitions of disability within the public sector. NCT had clear eligibility criteria for services. The key issue was to understand which young people were eligible for support, carry out a timely assessment and work with service users and families to identify how best to provide support.
- There was scope to improve work with fathers in Northamptonshire, although this was a national issue. It could take skill and tenacity to find and engage with absent fathers. NCT's practice model helped to address this issue by focussing on the whole family.
- Social workers currently received case supervision, personal supervision and group supervision in teams as well as learning and development relating to emotional support. It was intended that clinical supervision would be part of the new organisational culture of NCT but there was a significant amount of work to do to get to that point.
- Mitigations were in place to ensure that failings identified by serious case reviews in other areas were not replicated in Northamptonshire. However, even the best care services sadly could not always prevent the death of a child.

Committee members raised the need for the Committee to have access to more information on matters such as caseloads, staffing and decisions affecting service delivery to support effective scrutiny of the performance and development of children's services. It was highlighted to the Committee that the two Northamptonshire councils were responsible for deciding the budget and priorities for NCT. The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education also emphasised that NCT worked very closely and collaboratively with WNC. It was subsequently highlighted to the Committee that there was scope for it to give further consideration

to the focus for future scrutiny of children's services and what information would be needed to support this.

RESOLVED that: the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Requested to have access to information provided to the commissioning authority giving a greater level of detail about children's services performance against key targets and about the Children's Trust staffing establishment in time for the Committee meeting on 25 April 2022.
- b) Agreed that the Committee should take a continuing interest in the direction of travel for children's services and how children's services contributes with other services to dealing with cross-cutting issues in West Northamptonshire.
- c) Agreed to confirm at the Committee meeting on 25 April 2022 whether it would schedule further scrutiny with Children's Trust representatives at the Committee meetings on 21 June 2022 or 30 August 2022.

38. **School Improvement**

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education introduced the Interim Director of Children's Services, who would be covering this role until March 2022 to give WNC more flexibility regarding the timing of recruitment for a permanent appointment.

The Interim Director of Children's Services introduced the report setting out WNC's legal powers and duties relating to school effectiveness, arrangements to carry out this function and the Ofsted outcomes for local schools. It was highlighted that WNC monitored the performance of academy schools and would seek to work with them in cases where there were concerns. The Ofsted outcomes for maintained schools in the authority compared well to national and regional averages. The position for academy schools was less good, although this reflected that a significant number of these schools became academies in response to concerns about performance. Assessments in 2022/23 would provide the first validated school data since 2019, which meant that this would be an important year for school effectiveness.

The Committee considered the report and members raised the following points:

- Did WNC make use of potential complaints about a school when considering effectiveness, particularly when there was no current validated data?
- Concerns were expressed about children who were missing from education and the quality of education provided to some children who were home-schooled.
- Further information was requested on the number of academy schools in the area that had been required to become academies and when they had converted. An academy trust needed to take responsibility for poor performance by a sponsored academy if it had been running it for a reasonable time.
- The information presented reinforced the need for the Committee to meet with the Regional Schools Commissioner to discuss the performance of local academy schools.
- What action did WNC take to address different levels of effectiveness between schools in different parts of the authority?
- Over half of the 65 maintained primary schools in the authority were in south Northamptonshire. What were the reasons for this concentration and was it WNC policy to retain the remaining local maintained schools?

The Interim Director of Children's Services provided additional information during the course of discussion as follows:

- Complaints about a school should be directed to the school and then to the Department for Education: WNC did not have a role in this process, although it did provide information about how to make a complaint. WNC did consider soft intelligence as part of its overall approach to school effectiveness.
- WNC had a statutory duty to know about young people missing from schools and monitored the position carefully. This would be assisted by a forthcoming cleanse of data to ensure that it was up to date. WNC also had good data on young people who were on-roll but not attending school full-time.
- All parents could choose to educate their children at home and local authorities were not able to check the standard of education provided: a local authority could only take action if there was a safeguarding concern. The statutory duty on local authorities to promote high standards of education and the fulfilment of potential did not cover elective home education.
- The location of the remaining maintained primary schools in West Northamptonshire was likely to be the result of schools becoming academies in response to concerns about performance and a small number of cases where schools had chosen to convert. WNC had the capacity to support all of the remaining maintained schools. It did not have a policy to seek to retain existing maintained schools or to encourage them to convert. Government policy between 2010-16 had been for all schools to become academies but this was no longer being pursued.

RESOLVED that: the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Requested to be provided with an analysis of the number of academy schools in West Northamptonshire required to become sponsored academies, the length of time since those schools converted and their current Ofsted outcomes.
- b) Requested to be provided with confirmation of the current number of children missing from education in West Northamptonshire.
- c) Requested to be provided with confirmation of the recent direction of travel concerning permanent exclusions in West Northamptonshire.
- d) Agreed to invite the Regional Schools Commissioner to attend a future Committee meeting to discuss matters relating to the performance of academy schools in West Northamptonshire.

39. **Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Support and Alternative Provision**

The Interim Director of Children's Services introduced the report providing an overview of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support and Alternative Provision in the local authority area and key current issues. It was highlighted that there was currently a significant shortfall of specialist places, which had an impact on the cost and quality of provision. A business plan was being put in place to provide 500 additional SEND places over the next 3 years with an ambition to provide a new special school in 2023/24. Reliance on independent school places for SEND had contributed significantly to the budget being overspent. The proposed 500 places would be made up of resourced places in mainstream schools, the

expansion of existing special schools and the creation of 220-250 places at a new school.

The Interim Director of Children's Services went on to outline the recovery plan for the high needs block of the Dedicated Schools grant (DSG), which had a £2.5m overspend that would increase to almost £8m by 2024/25 if not addressed. The provision of additional SEND places would form part of the recovery plan.

The Committee considered the report. Members sought further information about educational psychology provision in West Northamptonshire; the status of the proposed new special school; and WNC's current performance on the completion of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

The Interim Director of Children's Services provided additional information during the course of discussion as follows:

- There had been a shortage of educational psychologists (EPs) locally because the national EP pay scale had not been used. This situation had now been resolved, which would assist future recruitment.
- The proposed new special school was legally required to be an academy school unless there was no interest in operating it. In practice it would be an academy school commissioned by WNC. Securing a good trust would be crucial to the effectiveness of the school.
- WNC currently completed 20-25% of EHC plan assessments within the target of 20 weeks after a period in which performance had been much better. Work was being done to address shortages of case workers and other factors affecting performance but would need time to take effect.

RESOLVED that: the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested to receive an update on the development of SEND support in West Northamptonshire to the Committee meeting on 30 August 2022, to include performance against the timescale for completing Education, Health and Care Plan assessments.

40. **Review of Committee Work Programme 2021/22**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager introduced the report setting out the latest version of the Work Programme, highlighting the following points:

- The Committee had previously identified WNC's new interim Housing Strategy as a topic for scrutiny at its meeting on 1 March 2022. Information received about the timescale for the development of the draft Strategy indicated that this might be better scheduled in April or May 2022. Scrutiny might also be done through a workshop-type session rather than an item at a formal meeting.
- A briefing on the operation of the Healthwatch function in Northamptonshire had been circulated to Committee members ahead of the current meeting. The Committee should determine whether it wished to take any further action on this matter.

The Committee considered the report. Clarification was sought about whether the timescale for developing the interim Housing Strategy had changed. Members urged that the Committee should still seek to scrutinise it at the planned time, although this might best be done through a workshop session. It was suggested that such a

session could be held on 1 March 2022, as members were already available on that date, following a shorter formal Committee meeting.

RESOLVED that: the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Agreed that the Committee would still seek to scrutinise the West Northamptonshire Council interim Housing Strategy on 1 March 2022 as scheduled in the work programme.
- b) Agreed that the Committee meeting on 1 March 2022 should have a short agenda to enable a workshop-style meeting to scrutinise the interim Housing Strategy to be held immediately afterwards.
- c) Requested to receive further information on the following matters relating to the Healthwatch function in Northamptonshire:
 - The organisational relationship between the Connected Together Community Interest Company and Healthwatch Northamptonshire
 - The membership of the Healthwatch Northamptonshire board
 - The role of Healthwatch in the Northamptonshire Integrated Care System

41. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____