



**West  
Northamptonshire  
Council**

## **People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Minutes of a meeting of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, Northampton NN1 1DE on Monday 25 April 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present	Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair) Councillor Karen Cooper (Vice-Chair) Councillor Azizur Rahman Councillor Harry Barrett Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM Councillor Raymond Connolly Councillor Cheryl Hawes Councillor Nigel Hinch Councillor Greg Lunn Councillor Bob Purser Councillor Wendy Randall Councillor Sue Sharps Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex Councillor Mike Warren
Also Present:	Councillor Danielle Stone, Chair, Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee Councillor Jamal Alwahabi
Apologies for Absence:	Councillor Emma Roberts Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education Councillor Harry Barrett – Apologies for Lateness
Officers	Nicky McKenzie, Director of Housing, Northampton Partnership Homes Dale Robertson, Director of Corporate Services and IT, Northampton Partnership Homes James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer

### **49. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Hinch declared in relation to Agenda Item 6 (Northampton Partnership Homes) that he was a director of Northampton Partnership Homes.

Councillor Aziz declared in relation to Agenda Item 6 (Northampton Partnership Homes) that he owned a company that had a property that was a house in multiple occupation.

Councillor Hawes declared in relation to Agenda Item 6 (Northampton Partnership Homes) that she was a housing tenant on the Northampton Partnership Homes waiting list. This declaration was made retrospectively but Councillor Hawes did not contribute to discussion on the agenda item.

50. **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.

51. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the minutes of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 1 March 2022.

52. **Chair's Announcements**

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

- The Anti-Poverty Strategy Oversight Group was due to meet on 16 June 2022. The Chair could give feedback on the Strategy from the previous Committee meeting.
- Overview and Scrutiny training for councillors was due to take place on 5 May 2022 at 5.30pm.
- Consultation was currently taking place on the draft Housing Strategy for West Northamptonshire Council and individual councillors were encouraged to respond.

A Committee member questioned whether there was scope for the Committee as a whole to respond to the consultation on the draft Housing Strategy. The Chair noted that it was intended to carry out further scrutiny of the draft Strategy following public consultation.

53. **Northampton Partnership Homes**

The Chair noted that this item had not originally been scheduled for the current meeting. She had advised Committee members ahead of the meeting of the need to change the planned agenda. She had not wanted to lose the meeting completely, given the breadth of the Committee's remit. It would also be helpful for the Committee to consider the work of Northampton Partnership Homes.

The Chair then welcomed the Director of Housing and Director of Corporate Services and IT at Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH). They presented an overview of NPH's priorities and activity, highlighting the following points:

- Northampton Borough Council had set up NPH as an arms-length management organisation (ALMO) in 2015 after considering the best model to improve the performance of housing services. The involvement of tenants was a key element of this governance model.
- NPH was wholly owned by the local authority. It had been set-up with a 15-year management agreement with the option of a further 15 years. This had novated to West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in 2021. The management agreement included key performance indicators for NPH and service level agreements for the

services provided by the local authority. These were currently under discussion following local government reorganisation.

- NPH currently managed 11,369 properties. It built new properties but had lost existing ones as a result of the right to buy scheme.
- The provision of affordable rents was a challenge given increasing pressure on the cost of living. It was anticipated that there would be significant issues in the coming winter with some tenants unable to afford both heating and food.
- NPH managed the housing register for the former Northampton borough area of West Northamptonshire. There were 3,162 applicants on the housing register, which amounted to 6,665 people: 12% of these applicants were in an emergency band where WNC had a statutory duty to house them. An average of 20 properties became available each week, which was not sufficient to meet demand.
- NPH had a better understanding of the make-up of its tenant population now than had been the case in the past. 61% of tenants were female; 84% were in single tenancies; and the average age of tenants was 52 years. The largest age group was 50-59 year olds and NPH had to consider how best to use its overall housing stock to meet the needs of older people.
- 43% of NPH properties were houses, 43% were flats and 14% were bungalows. The greatest demand was for 1 and 2 bed properties.
- NPH was responsible for a range of functions, including allocations, lettings and managing the housing register; repairs and maintenance for its properties and associated community areas; a nationally-accredited tenancy support scheme; welfare support for older residents, which assisted them to continue to live independently; managing income from rents; managing the Ecton Lane traveller site; and making planned investment in the existing housing stock.
- NPH was now in the final year of its current five-year corporate plan. It would need to ensure that the next corporate plan aligned with WNC's new Housing Strategy.
- NPH had built 330 new homes since 2018 and had a target of 100 homes per year. It aimed to use brownfield sites as far as possible as well as using appealing design models for its properties. NPH took a range of actions to support sustainability based on the One Planet Living framework, which complemented WNC's approach to sustainability.
- NPH had developed its service model to enable tenants to help to shape its service offer and it had also improved the support it provided to those with different needs. This included a pre-tenancy programme to support vulnerable applicants in making the transition to managing their own tenancy: 99% of the 341 tenants engaged were still managing successfully.
- NPH led community events in areas where its housing was located and also used a community bus to do outreach surgeries.
- NPH had created a community interest company (CIC) to provide additional support to tenants, which was able to make use of external funding sources.
- NPH had attracted £2.3m investment to date to support house building opportunities and related projects.
- NPH worked actively with WNC Adult Social Care and Northamptonshire Clinical Commissioning Group on supported housing. Its development at Oak Tree Rise,

Billing, provided supported housing for young adults with autism and challenging behaviours, with 24/7 staffing. The development at Moray Lodge, Duston, provided housing for adults acquired brain injury and mental health problems. NPH was in discussion with WNC about providing a similar scheme in Daventry.

- NPH currently faced various key challenges. It needed to continue to build its relationship with WNC and was discussing future governance and performance monitoring arrangements. New national requirements relating to building safety and tenant satisfaction standards would have an impact and NPH would need to communicate its responsibilities effectively to tenants. The delivery of NPH's development programme was affected by the resources available at WNC to support the planning process. Both organisations could look at opportunities to improve the co-ordination of environmental services. There were not enough affordable homes in the authority to meet demand. WNC also needed to bring together predecessor authorities' different housing allocation policies.
- More generally, NPH would be affected by the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in the cost of living like all other service-providers. NPH had to compete with other organisations when sourcing trades people and building materials. It was anticipated that consumer price inflation would add 7% to the cost of all contracts.

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

- Was NPH given advance notice if a tenant was about to have their utility supply cut off?
- Was NPH encouraging tenants on universal credit to apply for free solar panels?
- What percentage of social housing was available locally? Concern was expressed that affordable housing seemed to be prioritised over social housing.
- NPH did much more than just acting as a landlord and the range of functions it carried out were funded from rent income. The Committee should write to thank NPH for its work for tenants.
- The Committee should consider how the NPH model compared to approaches used in other parts of West Northamptonshire and how the NPH model might be applied more widely.
- There was similar activity in the South Northamptonshire area including, for example, the provision of pre-tenancy support.
- What were the most pressing issues for NPH that Overview and Scrutiny might help to progress?
- Futures Housing, the housing provider for Daventry, was now part of a company based in Derby, which reduced its local knowledge and focus.
- How did NPH compare to its peers in relation to the number of people on the housing register compared to the number of properties available and in relation to levels of debt by tenants?
- An increasing number of commercial premises were being converted to residential accommodation in Northampton. Did NPH have compulsory purchase powers that it could use to assist in this?
- It would be helpful for the Committee to have an opportunity to visit examples of NPH properties and to have more information about the Oak Tree Rise and Moray Lodge schemes.

- NPH should ensure that it worked effectively with the Northamptonshire Children's Trust to provide 16-18 year olds leaving care with appropriate information about housing options available to them.
- The key age range for NPH tenants was close to the group that was the focus for the Integrated Care across Northamptonshire (iCAN) programme. NPH should make appropriate links with the iCAN programme.

The Director of Housing and Director of Corporate Services and IT responded to the points raised by members as follows:

- NPH was not informed if a tenant was likely to have their utility supply cut off.
- NPH had identified properties that were suitable to have solar panels installed, which were all bungalows.
- NPH only dealt with social housing, although it could set rent at affordable levels. However, this was a challenging area: NPH sought to do affordability checks for prospective tenants but an individual could then choose to go to another provider charging a lower rent. The availability of social housing varied and there could be none free at times.
- NPH was looking at opportunities to extend its model further in West Northamptonshire. It did have a good input into the new WNC Housing Strategy.
- Priority areas to move forward for NPH were to improve provision at the Ecton Lane traveller site; WNC planning services capacity; and the co-ordination of environmental services.
- The adoption of an ALMO model for NPH had partly resulted from tenants wanting to avoid a situation where the provider subsequently became part of a larger group that was more distant.
- Demand on the housing register was significantly higher in Northampton than in Daventry and South Northamptonshire, although work on the new WNC Housing Strategy would help to clarify the picture. Trends on issues such as homelessness were monitored, including across different authorities. Bedford and Luton had significantly higher demand than West Northamptonshire.
- The position on rent collection had been surprisingly good in the first year of the pandemic. The second year had been more challenging but still better than anticipated and a good collection rate had been achieved. NPH used analytical software to target interventions effectively.
- Compulsory purchase was a matter for WNC as the local authority. NPH was willing to consider proposals to convert commercial properties for residential purposes. It made sense to use brownfield sites where possible and NPH had shown it could deliver similar schemes.
- NPH was developing its working arrangements with the Children's Trust to ensure that young people were receiving support from the right agency to meet their needs.

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Stone addressed the Committee and made the following points:

- The Ecton Lane traveller site was not suitable and should be relocated in consultation with the residents. There was no space on the site for holding children's activities or adult education. The walk from the site to local schools

was along a poorly-lit route main road that involved a risk from traffic. WNC was developing a new strategy for meeting the needs of traveller communities and this would be a very important area of work.

- Concern was raised about the lack of a supported lodgings scheme in West Northamptonshire that could better meet the needs of 16-18 year olds than supported housing. The Cabinet could be recommended to consider using NPH to provide support for these young people instead of private sector landlords.
- There were a large number of households in Northampton consisting of couples but in which one person held the tenancy. This could cause significant issues in cases of domestic abuse.
- Could NPH provide any support for older tenants who were no longer able to look after their gardens, given that gardening could contribute to their wellbeing and ability to live independently?
- There was a need for more larger houses in the authority to reduce overcrowding and provide inter-generational family homes.
- There was a need for better accommodation for NPH than was provided at its current location. The Cabinet could be recommended to consider addressing this.
- The provision of temporary accommodation for young people was currently split between different organisations. The Cabinet could be recommended to consider using NPH to manage temporary accommodation with the Children's Trust providing care.

The Chair referred to the onus on Overview and Scrutiny to ensure that any recommendations it made were appropriately informed and considered. Members also highlighted that pursuing the point made NPH's accommodation would involve revisiting related matters that had been the subject of previous work by WNC resulting in an agreed plan.

The Director of Housing and Director of Corporate Services and IT subsequently made the following additional points:

- NPH did not have sufficient resources to take proactive action on the issue of single tenancies. However, it would seek to help an individual affected by domestic violence who did not hold their tenancy and would not award sole tenancy to the perpetrator.
- NPH was launching a new gardening service through the CIC, which could help to support older tenants.
- There were pressures on the number of larger homes available in Northampton as in other areas. The Avenue Campus, Northampton, development included some larger units. NPH did seek creative solutions to this issue, such as housing adult children separately from the rest of a family to relieve overcrowding.
- NPH was settled at its current site after the decision had been taken to continue there. The current site also offered the benefit of being able to accommodate NPH's operational and administrative staff at the same location, whereas they had been based separately in the past.

The Committee considered potential areas for further attention arising from the discussion and possible options for addressing these.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Requested that Northampton Partnership Homes provide additional information about Oak Tree Rise, Northampton;
- b) Requested that a visit for Committee members to Northampton Partnership Homes properties be arranged to provide further insight into its work;
- c) Agreed to write to Northampton Partnership Homes to thank staff for their work for tenants;
- d) Agreed that the Chair would raise the following issues with the relevant portfolio holders:
  - The effect on the Northampton Partnership Homes development programme of a current backlog in the planning process
  - The condition of the Ecton Lane traveller site
  - Opportunities for West Northamptonshire Council to bring empty homes back into use and to develop commercial properties for residential use
- e) Agreed that the Chair would highlight the issue of co-ordinating local environmental services carried out by different agencies to the Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a potential topic for scrutiny.

54. **Child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm task and finish scrutiny review**

The Chair updated the Committee on progress with the scrutiny review, advising that the scrutiny panel had held four meetings so far and was pursuing lines of enquiry concerning gaps between services and the waiting time to access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. The scrutiny panel had agreed to request the Committee to extend the time allowed for the scrutiny review slightly in order to complete it effectively.

The Chair invited members to raise any points on this matter that they wished the Committee to consider.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to amend the scope of the task and finish scrutiny review on child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm to include agreement of the final report in August / September 2022 rather than May / June 2022.

55. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Chair introduced the report setting out the latest version of the Work Programme, highlighting the following points:

- The chairs of the three Overview and Scrutiny (OS) committees had recently met with the Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader to discuss how OS and the Cabinet worked together. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny was now due to carry out a review of the Council's OS Function after it had been operating for a year.
- The Chair aimed to meet regularly with the portfolio holders relevant to the Committee's remit to help to inform its work programme.

The Committee was invited to consider whether to change the date of its next scheduled meeting from 30 August 2022 so as to avoid the end of the summer

period, which could affect attendance. Potential alternative dates that would avoid clashes with other Council meetings were 15, 19 or 20 September.

Committee members expressed disappointment that it had not been possible for the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) to attend the current meeting to discuss school performance in relation to academy schools in West Northamptonshire, highlighting the importance of scrutinising this issue.

The Committee was advised that the RSC had not been available for the current meeting. The RSC's office had also suggested that this topic might best be scheduled in autumn 2022 to take account of a structural reorganisation in the Department for Education in the summer that would result in Northamptonshire moving to the East Midlands region. Committee members subsequently emphasised that this topic should be dealt with as soon as possible and that it would be helpful for the Committee to meet with the RSC who had been responsible for West Northamptonshire up to now, rather than just with their successor.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Agreed to reschedule the Committee meeting on 30 August 2022 to 15 September 2022.
- b) Agreed to invite the Regional Schools Commissioner to attend the next meeting of the Committee on 21 June 2022.

56. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_