



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

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 October 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present: Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair)
Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
Councillor Raymond Connolly
Councillor Sue Sharps

Apologies for
Absence: Councillor Karen Cooper
Councillor Azizur Rahman

Councillor Rufia Ashraf
Councillor Emma Roberts
Councillor Janice Duffy
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
Councillor Mike Warren
Councillor Adam Brown, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture and Leisure
Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education
Councillor Matt Golby, Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Wellbeing and Health Integration
Stuart Lackenby, Executive Director People Services
Ben Pearson, Assistant Director Education

Officers: Katie Brown, Assistant Director Safeguarding and Wellbeing
Ashley Leduc, Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance
Jo Barrett, Assistant Director Housing and Communities
Gillian Spencer, Transformation Delivery Manager
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer

The Chair noted that the meeting was quorate and so could proceed. Lower attendance was to be anticipated due to half term but some Committee members not present had not sent apologies in advance.

68. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

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

There were none.

70. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the minutes of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 21 June 2022.

71. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair made the following points:

- The recommendations identified by the Committee at its last meeting on children's services performance and on the renal services dialysis unit at Riverside House, Northampton were presented to the Cabinet meeting on 13 September 2022 and were agreed.
- The conclusions resulting from the workshop session on the draft Housing Strategy held by the Committee on 9 August 2022 were presented to the Cabinet meeting on 23 September 2022 and were partly agreed.
- It was proposed to hold an additional Committee meeting on 21 November 2022 to scrutinise Special Educational Needs and Disability provision. This would take into account that the Committee had lost a meeting in September 2022.
- Committee members had been contacted about contributing to corporate work on the Council's future approach to commissioning voluntary sector organisations. Four members ideally representing a spread of geographic areas were invited to join a group that would help to formulate policy proposals. Councillors Sharps, Duffy and Herring were willing to participate. Councillor Chowdhury also expressed an interest in doing so.
- The tour of Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH) properties requested by the Committee took place on 16 September 2022 but was not well attended, which was disappointing as the tour had been very informative. Discussion during the tour had identified a potential area for scrutiny relating to customer contact arrangements for housing repairs.

72. **Adult Social Care social worker recruitment and retention**

The Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance introduced the report and gave an overview of the use of the Workforce Recruitment and Retention Funding (WRRF) Scheme by West Northamptonshire Council (WNC). The Committee was advised that in winter 2021/22 there had been significant pressures on staffing in the sector, including an average of 2,400 unmet home care hours, compared to 735 in October 2022. The WRRF Scheme had helped to address this situation in West Northamptonshire, had made staff feel valued, and had been recognised by Unison as best practice use of funding. WNC had sought to use WRRF in a meaningful way rather than just passing it on to providers.

The WRRF Scheme was only open to those who were delivering Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulated activity, as this was the key area of pressure, and staff members had to meet other qualifying criteria. Bonus payments were made on a pro rata basis linked to a staff member's average working hours over a 9 week period, to take into account employers using zero hours contracts. The WRRF Scheme generated 383 new recruits; 4,830 existing staff received the bonus payment; hard work had resulted in 88% of providers signing up; and £3m had been distributed to carers in West Northamptonshire.

Areas for improvement had been identified. The implementation of the Scheme caused upset for staff who worked for regulated care providers but who did not deliver CQC regulated activity: some settings such as day care centres do not deliver CQC regulated activity. Communication could have been better with providers and staff. Some providers were slow to complete payment applications, although WNC ensured that no staff lost out because of this. The Scheme had initially operated on a countywide basis but North Northamptonshire Council had changed its criteria mid-way through its duration. WNC had also ensured that this change did not adversely affect any staff. The WRRF Scheme was now closed and further government funding was not expected.

The Committee considered the overview and members raised the following points during the course of discussion:

- Did the number of late applications reflect that the administration of the WRRF Scheme was too onerous for some care providers?
- Did any other council find a way of increasing the percentage of providers who signed up for the Scheme above that achieved in Northamptonshire?
- The £600 bonus had made a real difference to staff. The Scheme was a good one.
- WNC had taken a diligent approach to the Scheme and credit was due for what had been achieved.
- Was it known if the 383 new recruits generated by the Scheme had been retained?

The Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance responded to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- Regulated care providers had to comply with extensive tracking and reporting requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic. The WRRF Scheme could have seemed like just an additional demand, particularly given the need to calculate the average hours for staff on zero hours contracts. However, WNC had sought to make the operation of the Scheme as straightforward as possible. Some of the 12% of providers who did not sign up to the Scheme were community-based organisations who thought it was unfair to reward some staff but not others. Some were national companies who did not want to engage with different systems in different areas.
- Many other councils just passported WRRF Scheme funding to care providers to use as they saw fit. WNC's experience with other COVID-19 grant funding was that this approach did not produce meaningful outcomes. However, there was no one perfect way to use the funding.
- It was not known whether all new recruits had been retained although unmet care hours had reduced significantly and the sector was approaching winter in a better position than in the previous year.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Wellbeing advised that WNC was now able to use the national Skills for Care data set to get a better picture of staffing capacity in the sector. There remained significant pressures heading into the next winter, although WNC was not in a worse position than other councils.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Wellbeing went on to give an overview of the position regarding WNC's internal recruitment of care staff. The Committee was advised that there were fewer vacancies in in-house provided care settings in September 2022 than there had been in June 2022. In preparation for winter there had been targeted recruitment campaigns with 8 Reablement Support Officers recently recruited. The £600 WRRF payment had reduced the number of leavers per month. There had been an increase in interest for care and support roles since the introduction of the £10 per hour pay rate, but it was still difficult to convert that to posts filled. The process of screening, interviews and job offers had been speeded up but there needed to be a continuing focus on this area. The national situation involved significant challenges that were likely to get worse before they got better.

The WNC recruitment offer sought to highlight the range of skills involved in care work and the opportunities for a professional career that it offered. There were perceptions of care work that needed to be overcome. The COVID-19 pandemic had also had a huge impact on care workers.

The recruitment team had used multiple approaches to raise awareness of job opportunities, including social media, job boards, posters, leaflets, adverts on the side of buses and Job Centre recruitment events. There was a full range of apprenticeship options available, which gave people the opportunity to be trained without going to university.

An out of hospital discharge scheme was being piloted this winter, which effectively operated like a good neighbour scheme. A carer would meet a patient in hospital and offer focussed help following discharge. This would help people to return to living independently in their own home and enable the reablement service to focus on people with more complex needs. Out of hospital delays had provided a massive challenge.

Recruitment needed to address wider issues such as social work students returning home after graduating because they could not afford to live independently. NPH was working on the provision of housing for key workers. This was a national issue. WNC would run a further recruitment campaign for social workers in Spring 2023. WNC offered one of the best pay rates for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) due to the introduction of the £10 per hour rate. However, there were challenges connected with offering NQSWs a career pathway that would encourage them to stay.

The Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance highlighted that adult social care commissioning was a rare skill that did not have a high profile, which made recruitment challenging and expensive. WNC therefore sought to grow its own capacity and 5 commissioners had been trained internally. WNC was now in a good position with regard to quality control, market management and managing relationships with providers. The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Wellbeing emphasised that this was still a challenging area and WNC needed to strike the right balance between its roles as a commissioner and a provider.

The Committee considered the overview and members raised the following points during the course of discussion:

- How could WNC raise awareness amongst young people of opportunities in care work, which could provide fulfilling roles that gave transferable skills? Could a youth event be organised?
- There was the potential for more activity focussed on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, in conjunction with relevant community groups.
- Did WNC operate a 'heroes' award scheme for care workers? If so, this could be included in recruitment publicity to help people to visualise what roles involved.
- Care work should include more flexible opportunities, such as enabling care workers to support people in a work setting.
- Previous economic downturns had led to increasing interest in opportunities in the care sector.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Wellbeing welcomed the ideas highlighted and emphasised that all options were considered. Economic returns were a key driver for people and the increased opportunities in retail in the lead up to Christmas did affect the care sector. The current economic downturn was not yet causing widespread business closures. WNC would be prepared if this situation was to change.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Requested to receive West Northamptonshire data from the Skills for Care data set.
- b) Recommended that West Northamptonshire Council consider the potential to include a hero scheme in the promotion of opportunities in social care.
- c) Recommended that West Northamptonshire Council consider the potential to do more promotion of opportunities in social care with BAME communities and young people, working with relevant community groups.

73. **Homelessness & Housing Solutions Transformation Project**

The Assistant Director Housing and Communities introduced the report and referred to the importance of good quality housing in supporting health and wellbeing. WNC sought to provide a housing options service based on the principles of prevention and early intervention. The service had previously been delivered by three different councils but now needed to be aggregated. A transformation project was therefore being progressed.

The Transformation Delivery Manager outlined the two year timeline for the transformation project and the transformation approach, including engagement with relevant staff members. There were 7 work packages focussing on key themes, which had been ranked in order of priority. Next steps at this point were focussed on staff workshops for the temporary accommodation work package. The full business case for the service transformation was due to be presented to the Transformation Board in December 2022 and a further staff survey to provide a sense check of the progress being made would be carried out in January 2023.

The Committee considered the future provision of the housing options service, whilst members also referred to more general matters relating to housing. Committee members raised the following points during the course of discussion:

- It was hoped that service integration would not take a levelling down approach. Housing options was a specialist function and it would also be important to retain local knowledge.
- How was the development of IT services needed to support the housing options service being managed?
- How many people were currently in temporary accommodation in West Northamptonshire, including refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine?
- Was funding for accommodating refugees adequate?
- Could action be taken to raise awareness of the StreetLink system amongst all councillors?
- Was there a plan to apply the 'Everyone In' approach to rough sleeping again this winter?
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) had not been discussed. Low quality HMOs had a big impact on health and wellbeing.

The Assistant Director Housing and Communities responded to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- The development of IT services was being phased. The first step would be to get all three locality teams operating on the same system. Further time was then needed to identify the most cost-effective system to adopt for the long term.
- There were currently just over 500 people in temporary accommodation in West Northamptonshire. This did not include people from Afghanistan and Ukraine. People from Afghanistan requiring resettlement were currently in two bridging hotels procured by the Home Office. WNC received funding to provide wrap-around support to them. WNC had agreed to provide permanent resettlement for 10 households. This had been secured for one so far. Flexibility around the use of funding would assist in this area.
- The resettlement scheme was well funded. There was not a concern about recruiting new sponsors for people from Ukraine. The resettlement team was aware of potential sponsors and WNC needed to check their properties before matching them up. There was a need for dedicated housing options officers who were native speakers. Further information about resettlement work could be presented to the Committee if required.
- WNC followed up all referrals to the StreetLink system. It was planned to provide more training on StreetLink to councillors in the New Year.
- The 'Everyone- In' plan was being reshaped in the short term, with an aspiration to avoid the need to step up accommodation in the winter and down in the summer. Options of using Council owned properties on a temporary basis for winter provision were being looked at.
- Regulation and enforcement relating to HMOs sat in a different service area to private sector housing provision. HMOs were not negative by definition and, for example, were popular with a young, mobile workforce.
- A sub group of the Planning Policy Committee was currently working on future WNC policy relating to HMOs, which could produce an outcome before the end of 2022.

Committee members emphasised the need to address issues caused by low quality HMOs and that the Committee could seek to scrutinise a new policy on HMOs produced by the Planning Policy Committee. The Committee was advised that this was a cross-cutting topic and the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Group may therefore need to take a view on how it should be approached. Committee members subsequently also suggested that the Committee should maintain an interest in the provision of housing support to people coming into West Northamptonshire as refugees.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Endorsed the direction being taken on the Homelessness and Housing Solutions Transformation Project.
- b) Agreed that the Chair would ask the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Group to consider arrangements for future scrutiny of the new Houses in Multiple Occupation Policy being developed by the Planning Policy Committee.
- c) Agreed to maintain oversight of the position in West Northamptonshire regarding the provision of housing support for people coming into the authority as refugees.

74. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Chair introduced the report and gave further information about the potential topic for scrutiny arising from the NPH property tour referred to earlier in the meeting. NPH tenants currently needed to contact the WNC Customer Contact Centre about property repairs rather than dealing with NPH directly. This could cause issues if it meant that problems were not understood and prioritised for repair well enough. The Chair had spoken to the portfolio holders responsible for housing and customer services about the potential for scrutiny of this area.

The Assistant Director Housing and Communities advised of planned work to refresh the governance arrangements for NPH and that proposals resulting from this were likely to be presented to the Cabinet in the New Year. The governance arrangements needed to reflect WNC's and NPH's respective roles as landlord and managing agent. This was a complex area and it was important that any changes made should not have unintended consequences. Committee members highlighted that it would be helpful to have further information on the forthcoming work so that this could be taken into account when considering the potential for scrutiny.

The Committee went on to consider the overall work programme and prospective business for the Committee meeting on 8 December 2022. The Committee was also advised of further communication with the office of the Department for Education Regional Director, which had resulted in a proposal that the Regional Director could attend the Committee meeting in February 2023 to discuss academy school performance in the authority.

RESOLVED: that the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Agreed to hold an additional meeting on 21 November 2022 to discuss Special Educational Needs and Disability provision in West Northamptonshire.
- b) Requested to receive further information on planned corporate work on the operating arrangements between West Northamptonshire Council and

Northamptonshire Partnership Homes, to inform consideration of possible scrutiny of how tenants report repairs.

- c) Agreed the following proposed items of business for the Committee meeting on 8 December 2022:
- Housing Allocation Policy
 - Sports and leisure needs assessment
 - Draft report of the scrutiny review of child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm
- d) Agreed that the Department for Education Regional Director be invited to attend the Committee meeting on 21 February 2023 to discuss academy school performance in West Northamptonshire

75. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.30 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____