



People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton NN1 1DE on Wednesday 3 May 2023 at 6.00pm.

Present:

Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair)
Councillor Harry Barrett
Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
Councillor Raymond Connolly
Councillor Greg Lunn
Councillor Emma Roberts
Councillor Janice Duffy
Councillor Sue Sharps
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
Councillor Mike Warren

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Rufia Ashraf
Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

Officers:

Jo Barrett, Assistant Director Housing and Communities
Stuart Lackenby, Executive Director People Services
Dawn Eckersley, Interim Head of Housing Strategy and Partnerships
Neil Morland, Consultant, Neil Morland & Co. Housing Consultants
Rebecca Wilshire, Deputy Director of Children's Services
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Diana Davies, Democratic Services Officer

One member of the public was also in attendance.

100. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ashraf and from the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Barrett.

101. Declarations of Interest

The Chair declared in relation to the agenda item on the West Northamptonshire Anti-Poverty Strategy that she was appointed by West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) as a board member of the South Northants Volunteer Bureau.

Councillor Roberts declared in relation to the agenda item on the West Northamptonshire Anti-Poverty Strategy that she was:

- Chair of Food Aid Far Cotton
- A board member of Food Aid Alliance West
- Due to become a board member for the Community Training Partnership contract to be delivered by the Community Law Service.

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

A request to address the meeting on the agenda item on Fostering Services in West Northamptonshire had been received from Mrs Jean Lineker.

At the Chair's invitation Mrs Lineker addressed the meeting and made the following points:

- She was speaking both as a former looked after child who had been abused by a family member and as a former foster carer.
- Children who had been taken into care should not be returned to their birth parents if they were abusive.
- Foster parents needed to be given appropriate access to a child's health records.
- There needed to be enough social workers to support children in foster care. Their care was also affected if the social worker supporting a child changed repeatedly.

The Chair noted that Mrs Lineker had highlighted some important issues. WNC was committed to ensuring that services were informed by the voice of the child and was also working to address matters such as continuity of social worker support and access to health records.

103. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting on 21 February 2023 as an accurate record.

104. Chair's Announcements

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

- Committee members were thanked for accommodating the change of meeting date from 24 April 2023, when the Chair would not have been able to attend.
- This was the final meeting of the current Committee after two years that seemed to have passed very quickly. Committee members were thanked for all their hard work during this period.
- The report of the scrutiny review on child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm had been presented to the Cabinet meeting on 7 March 2023. The Cabinet had welcomed the recommendations and undertook to review them and respond with proposals at a future meeting. The Chair hoped that the new Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee would ensure that work on this issue was progressed.

105. **West Northamptonshire Council Housing Allocations Policy**

The Assistant Director Housing and Communities advised that WNC was currently working to develop a single Housing Allocations Policy to replace those of the predecessor authorities. The Consultant supporting this work then presented an overview of the legal requirements and local considerations, highlighting the following points:

- The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 defined social rented housing as homes for rent, sale and shared ownership at sub market rates for people whose needs could not be met by the commercial housing market.
- All local authorities were required to operate a scheme for the allocation of social rented housing regardless of whether they still owned and managed housing stock. WNC was in the position of having transferred stock in some parts of the authority but not in others.
- Social rented housing could only be allocated to people who had a permanent right to reside in the UK. Local authorities were also required to give priority to specified circumstances, including people who were homeless or who needed to move on medical or welfare grounds.
- Beyond the specified requirements local authorities had the flexibility to determine qualification criteria and arrangements for allocating housing that best suited the area. Arrangements should reflect the priorities of local homelessness and tenancy policies and also provide a seamless service covering both the local authority and social landlords.
- WNC still owned around 11,500 social rented homes, which were managed by Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH). NPH had previously administered housing allocation functions in the former Northampton Borough area, whereas they had been administered in-house in Daventry and South Northamptonshire. South Northamptonshire Council had used a direct matching model whereas the other two predecessor authorities had used a choice-based lettings approach.
- WNC now needed to develop and implement a common authority-wide model that used common processes and IT systems.
- Demand for social rented housing from 1987 to 2022 showed peaks and troughs reflecting changes in national requirements. There was a steady upward trend over recent years but still below the peak level reached in 2008.
- There were around 26,000 social rented homes in West Northamptonshire of which 56 per cent were owned by housing associations. Two providers owned the majority of these.
- There were around 5,000 applicants on the housing register. Just under 50 per cent of these waited under a year to be allocated social rented housing.
- WNC needed to have new Housing Allocations Policy in place by 1 April 2024. Current work should result in the production of a draft scheme that could be scrutinised in June 2023 before seeking Cabinet approval in July for public consultation ahead of a final decision in November 2023.

The Committee considered the presentation. The Consultant provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- Members of HM Forces and veterans were given specific additional priority regarding housing allocations by law, whilst local authorities could also choose to

add to this. In practice, this involved a relatively small percentage of people on the housing register.

- The full draft pre-consultation Housing Allocations Policy should be available for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny in June 2023.
- Modern social rent housing consisted of general needs housing and supported housing for specific clients such as older people. There were two rates of rent, which were set by a national regulator: social rent at approximately 50 per cent of the market rate and affordable rent at approximately 80 per cent of the market rate. The new WNC Housing Allocations Policy would set out these differences clearly.
- The role of councillors in relation to housing allocations was to set the overall policy and to advocate for their constituents. Councillors were legally prohibited from having a more direct role in decisions or reviews relating to individual allocations. The process was subject to various oversight and complaints processes that should help to support its effectiveness.
- WNC would need to make arrangements for service officers to have access to professional advice on health conditions that could affect priority for housing allocations.

The Assistant Director Housing and Communities provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- WNC was using external expertise to provide an independent third-party view about how best to deliver the housing allocations function in future. The Consultant had been engaged through a formal procurement process and offered the best value option.
- When new social housing was built the rent rate was generally set at a level that would pay back the capital cost over a certain period of time. It could be very challenging to change the rate at a later time. West Northamptonshire could benefit from having more properties available at social rent rates but this was challenging to achieve. WNC could consider these kind of issues as part of prospective work on its future tenancy strategy.
- Work on the development of the Housing Allocations Policy would include modelling the impact of different local choices and scenarios.
- WNC was currently operating two different legacy IT systems supporting housing allocation functions. Pragmatically, it was likely that the current work would result in one of these being adopted as the common system. WNC could then consider the best system to meet its overall needs in the longer term.
- The current work by WNC was informed by a good knowledge base, including knowledge of the experience of other local authorities that had made similar changes in the past.
- Service officers would liaise with Democratic Services concerning potential arrangements for scrutiny of the draft Policy ahead of the Cabinet meeting in July. The Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture and Leisure had also proposed that workshop sessions for all councillors on the development of the new Policy could be useful.

Members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The development of the new Housing Allocations Policy represented a complex piece of work to a relatively tight timescale.

- Overview and Scrutiny should have the opportunity to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the full draft Policy before it was agreed for public consultation.
- There was a significant issue in Northampton with homes that were occupied at a level that represented overcrowding in practice but was below the statutory definition of overcrowding. The Committee should recommend that work to develop the new Policy should explore the opportunity for WNC to apply a broader definition of overcrowding.
- WNC should adopt systems that would meet both its short- and long term needs as far as possible, to minimise the amount of change experienced by service-users. It was important to recognise that this was a function involving people.
- Councillors would benefit from having clear information about how the new Policy operated to use when helping constituents as part of the communications strategy supporting its implementation.

The Committee considered any recommendations regarding the development of the new Housing Allocations Policy that it wished to make at this point. The Committee was also invited to consider the opportunity to recommend to its successor that it agreed to carry out further scrutiny of this topic.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Recommended that work to develop the new Housing Allocations Policy explores the potential for West Northamptonshire Council to apply a broader definition of overcrowding than the statutory definition.
- b) Recommended that the relevant successor Overview and Scrutiny committee agrees to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the draft Housing Allocations Policy.

106. **Fostering services in West Northamptonshire**

The Executive Director People Services advised that the agenda item was intended to set out the latest position on fostering services from WNC's perspective following the recent Ofsted inspection. Ofsted had done further work since that had not yet been published, although the item would give a sense of it.

The Deputy Director of Children's Services then presented an overview of the outcomes of the inspection and subsequent action, highlighting the following points:

- Fostering was subject to a separate inspection in Northamptonshire as there was an independent fostering agency (IFA). In the past fostering was included in general Ofsted inspections.
- The inadequate judgements by Ofsted in the 2023 inspection were clearly concerning.
- Ofsted had identified some areas of strength, including the progress being made by some children, the commitment shown by foster carers and supervising social workers, and good initiatives such as carer celebration days and the introduction of virtual reality training. However, there were issues with variability and consistency overall.
- A key area for development identified by Ofsted concerned the need for the IFA to have a standalone information and recording system, such as CHARMS. This would support better oversight of its effectiveness. This was now being addressed.

- Practice within the IFA needed to be more child-led and to focus more on the needs and progress of children rather than on those of carers.
- Children were seen by social workers but not by supervising social workers at the same time as they saw foster carers. This was now being addressed.
- Other areas for development identified by Ofsted included the information about a child's medical needs provided to foster carers; better safeguarding training; and better management of caseloads.
- Two improvement plans had been developed since the inspection and would be subject to robust oversight by a new West Northamptonshire Corporate Parenting Board. Action had been taken to improve IFA performance monitoring, review key policies and practice guidance and implement an audit programme.
- All children had been seen by a supervising social worker and were all safe.
- Most social workers in the IFA had undertaken safeguarding training and this was in-place for foster carers. There would be better tracking of training for both groups.
- Staff recruitment was continuing, including for supervising social workers.
- Ofsted had carried out a monitoring visit in April 2023 to check actions taken since the inspection. The findings had not yet been published but Ofsted had indicated that it had seen some improvements. Compliance notices would remain in place until a further visit in July 2023, which was not unusual.
- The key focus now needed to be on maintaining the focus on child-led practice and on regular oversight and assurance of overall progress. As recruitment progressed there could be more focus on retention existing staff.

The Executive Director People Services made the following points:

- WNC, North Northamptonshire Council and Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) all agreed that it was not acceptable to have an IFA that was rated as inadequate. This was not a reflection of what social workers were doing on a daily basis but on the overall service.
- Fostering needed to be valued more in Northamptonshire than it had been previously, which would also contribute to reducing expenditure on out-of-county placements.
- The new West Northamptonshire Corporate Parenting Board would play a key role in overseeing the effectiveness of services and targeting improvement action.

The Committee considered the presentation. Members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The IFA needed to be able to offer foster carers a good experience or they would take up the option of moving to an agency.
- NCT did not operate a traditional IFA-style model.
- There had been a significant change in information-recording requirements for foster carers in Northamptonshire. This was unreasonable as it could affect their legal protection.
- NCT was focussing on the Signs of Safety model but no training on this focussed on foster carers was available.
- The size of caseloads was a key issue as this would affect capacity to deal effectively with individual cases.

- Other local authorities were able to provide foster carers with a more bespoke training package that helped to attract them and enabled training to be pitched differently for the recipient's particular situation.
- Councillors needed to be able to take more confidence that current actions would achieve necessary outcomes and to know more about the timescales and costs involved. There should be a clear 'you said; we did approach' to responding to the Ofsted inspection.
- It was questioned why NCT had not been in a better position at the time of the Ofsted inspection: whether it had not anticipated the negative conclusions or had but thought performance would be rated higher.
- Overview and Scrutiny should play a part in ensuring that areas for development were being addressed effectively. Processes needed to ensure, for example, that the issue of children not being seen by supervising social workers did not reoccur.
- Consideration should be given to using resources spent on out-of-county placements for more residential provision if this would be beneficial.
- It was very concerning that some looked after children saw residential care as preferable to being in a family environment. This needed to be rebalanced.
- The number of young people now coming into care under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, because their parents could not cope or the young person requested it, was a concern and added to overall demand on the care system. There should be more support to prevent a situation reaching this point.
- The presentation showed a good understanding of the current situation and commitment to improve that could give councillors confidence.

The Executive Director People Services and the Deputy Director of Children's Services provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- There were no plans at this point to have separate fostering services in the west and the north: it was oversight of the service that was being separated.
- There were 480 children in in-house foster placements and 346 children in agency placements in Northamptonshire. The average weekly cost of these placements was £328 and £945 respectively, which demonstrated the importance of maximising in-house capacity.
- Foster carers often received similar recompense from an agency as from an in-house service. Agency overheads were what increased the cost.
- 16 fostering households was a typical average caseload for a supervising social worker. The IFA was currently above this but recruitment would help to address the situation.
- The organisation of the IFA was subject to the statutory direction that established NCT. The model could not be changed until services had achieved a 'good' rating from Ofsted. Even then, a decision to split up NCT would have a massive impact. It would be helpful to have a continuing dialogue with the Department for Education about the direction and long term vision for the children's trust model to reflect this.
- The way in which NCT had been created had tended to create barriers between it and the local authorities in the county. These were now being broken down again and there was a much stronger sense that the two local authorities needed to work with NCT to improve performance.

- Points raised concerning Signs of Safety training and information-recording for foster carers would be raised with NCT. The introduction of a CHARMS system would assist foster carers.
- Caseloads were sometimes lower for agencies than for in-house fostering as agencies covered a larger geographical area and so had to allow for more travel time.
- NCT had been anticipating a critical outcome from the 2023 Ofsted inspection but not to the degree that occurred. However, the need for better oversight of effectiveness had been addressed since the moment that Ofsted had left.
- WNC operated the Valuing Care project to look opportunities to step down care placements. It also worked actively with NCT on options for future residential care provision.
- There were currently approximately 1,200 children from Northamptonshire in residential care placements. The total had recently been at the lowest level seen for some time.
- NCT had a good education service that worked with young people to help them not to reach the point where they need to come into care. Decisions about taking a young person into care and when they could leave again should be subject to robust consideration. Young people remaining in care was more of an issue in Northamptonshire and was the focus of current work by NCT.
- Placements with wider family members were considered at an early stage. There could be more use of this approach in Northamptonshire but it was certainly used.

The Executive Director People Services highlighted the knowledge and influence that the Deputy Director of Children's Services had brought to WNC since taking up the role, which added to the oversight of children's services performance and development.

The Committee considered potential conclusions and further action on the item. The Committee was advised that any recommendations concerning future scrutiny of this topic could be made directly to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny committee. It was also highlighted that councillors who were not appointed to the new committee responsible for scrutinising children's services were still likely to have some opportunities to contribute to its work.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that the relevant successor Overview and Scrutiny committee should seek to consider the following matters relating to provision for children in care:

- The quality assurance framework and processes put in place to support effective operation of fostering services in future
- The outcomes delivered by the Valuing Care project on opportunities to step down care placements
- An overview of the operation of the multi-agency referral panel and of the decision-making panel for children entering local authority care, to include data on caseloads, decisions and the outcomes for young people
- Data on the number of children in care from West Northamptonshire, broken down by relevant factors

- An outline of any discussions between the Northamptonshire local authorities and the Department for Education about the long term future direction for the Northamptonshire Children's Trust organisational model.

107. **West Northamptonshire Anti-Poverty Strategy**

The Executive Director People Services presented an overview of progress with the delivery of the Anti-Poverty Strategy in the year following its adoption, highlighting the following points:

- The experience so far of implementing the Strategy validated the cross-party, multi-agency approach that had been used to develop it. However, there were further opportunities to broaden engagement that still needed to be taken.
- The Strategy identified three priorities: supporting people who were already in poverty; preventing people from falling into poverty; and influencing the government and national bodies to get a better deal for communities in West Northamptonshire. Performance so far against the first priority had been good but was not matched by that against the second. Work in the first year had been more reactive than proactive.
- The principle of establishing a true partnership between WNC, voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and other relevant bodies had been key to the progress made in the past year. So far the resources supporting the Strategy had come from the Household Support Fund, Public Health grant and VCS goodwill. This needed to be augmented in future to reduce reliance on WNC.
- Supporting people to get out of poverty was a long term process but work under the Strategy still needed to move to a more proactive approach. The provision of immigration support and advice would be one of the first areas of proactive work that should make a difference.
- The Household Support Fund (HSF) had worked well in West Northamptonshire, with good engagement in shaping schemes before decisions on implementation were taken. The relatively short previous schemes had been challenging and it was positive that the latest scheme HSF-4 allocated funding for a year.
- More work needed to be done to analysis previous HSF schemes to understand, for example, why people who had received food vouchers from VCS organisations under HSF-3 had needed them.
- The change to an annual funding allocation for HSF-4 would require a more sophisticated approach to communications and marketing, including to ensure that funding was not all used before the winter. This would be supported by the Community Training Partnership to provide training for frontline workers and volunteers on the key social welfare issues in West Northamptonshire.
- The 52,932 attendances at Warm Welcoming Spaces provided during January – March 2023 represented a massive number. This data needed to be properly understood and used to inform future work. However, it should also be recognised that this provision had enabled 3,371 people who might otherwise have been missed to be referred on to wrap around services.
- The implementation of an emergency debt and money advice service from early summer 2023 was another example of more proactive work under the Strategy.
- The development of immigration support and advice was a key area for the future, as people with no recourse to public funds were at higher risk of experiencing poverty. A hub and spoke delivery model would be used to

enhance capacity. There would also be a focus on maximising resources available to the local area, for example, by addressing the situation that undocumented children did not receive the pupil premium.

- The Strategy now required a revised action plan setting out how partners could better deliver the priority to prevent people from falling into poverty. Overview and Scrutiny could contribute to this by providing constructive challenge about whether the collective resources of West Northamptonshire were being mobilised as fully as possible.

The Committee considered the presentation and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Executive Director was thanked for the honest picture given. WNC had so far been able to support the Strategy using significant funding received from the government, although the WNC staff and VCS partners involved deserved credit for the way this had been deployed.
- Consideration should be given to staggering the use of HSF-4 funding. This could also be the last scheme to provide holiday food support and WNC might need to build funding into the base budget in future.
- It would be useful to have more information breaking down the 52,932 attendances at Warm Welcoming Spaces and whether any of these Spaces had evolved from an emergency provision into more permanent community hubs or facilities.
- The size and purpose of the Anti-Poverty Strategy oversight group could be reviewed with a view to maximising its effectiveness.
- The work done so far under the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the approach taken by the WNC Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Wellbeing and Health Integration were generally welcome.

In response to a question the Executive Director People Services advised that the distribution of HSF-4 funding would be the subject of an individual decision by the Leader of the Council due to the cancellation of the Cabinet meeting in May. Members expressed concern at this approach, given that £5.19m funding was involved.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested a response to the question of why the distribution of Household Support Fund 4 funding needed to be determined by an individual decision by the Leader of the Council rather than by the Cabinet.

108. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Chair introduced the report setting out the Committee's current work programme and highlighted the following points:

- The Committee had already made various recommendations at the current meeting about potential topics for scrutiny by the new Overview and Scrutiny committees that WNC was establishing for 2023/24. The Committee could consider doing the same with any matters included in its work programme.
- Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (NHFT) had just sent its draft Quality Report 2022/23 for comment by the Committee. The Chair proposed that the draft be circulated to Committee members so that any

comments could be fed back and incorporated into a response from the Chair. The Chair intended to highlight issues about access to CAMHS services identified during the scrutiny review of child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm.

- The Chair had also been alerted to current consultation on local services providing short breaks for children and young people with disabilities as a potential area of interest for the Committee. In the current circumstances, councillors would need to respond to this individually.

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager provided further information about the purpose of Quality Reports, the opportunity for the local authority health Overview and Scrutiny functions to comment on them, and the timescale for doing this.

The Executive Director People Services advised that short break services were delivered by NHFT using quite a medical model that worked better for some service users than others. The current consultation was on the potential future approach to service delivery.

Councillor Roberts, as Chair of the Integrated Care across Northamptonshire (iCAN) Task and Finish Panel, advised that recent changes to the iCAN delivery model meant it was logical for the Panel to report back on its work so far. As part of this Councillor Roberts wished to comment on the information that had been made available to the Panel. It would be for the relevant successor Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider whether iCAN should be a topic for any further scrutiny.

The Chair invited the Committee to identify any specific topics included in its work programme that it wished to recommend for consideration by its successors. Alternatively, it was open to the Committee to recommend the work programme as a whole be considered by the relevant successor committees when setting their new work programmes.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Agreed that draft 2022/23 Quality Accounts received from local NHS organisations would be circulated to all Committee members to feed back any comments for inclusion in responses to be sent by the Chair.
- b) Recommended that successor Overview and Scrutiny committees should consider the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work programme when setting their work programmes for 2023/24.

109. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____