



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in The Council Chamber at The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Wednesday 12 October 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present	Councillor Ian McCord (Chair) Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice-Chair) Councillor Jamal Alwahabi Councillor Paul Clark Councillor Keith Holland-Delamere Councillor Mark Hughes Councillor Ken Pritchard Councillor Azizur Rahman Councillor Danielle Stone
Substitute Members:	Councillor Wendy Randall (For Councillor Koulla Jolley)
Apologies for Absence:	Councillor Sally Beardsworth Councillor Maggie Clubley Councillor Rupert Frost Councillor Koulla Jolley Councillor Colin Morgan
Officers	Martin Henry, Executive Director - Finance (Section 151 Officer) Luiza Morris-Warren, Assistant Director - Customer Services Simon Bryant, Business Intelligence Manager Richard Corless, Corporate, Early Years & Education Lead Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager Richard Woods, Democratic Services Officer

12. Declarations of Interest

Minute Item 11 – Revenue Monitoring Report – Quarter 1 2022-23

Councillor Danielle Stone, Non-Statutory Disclosable Interest, as a member of a voluntary organisation based at Albion House, Northampton who's building was owned by the Council.

13. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 July 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

14. Chair's Announcements

The Chair made the following announcements:

1. The item relating to the Joint Scrutiny Review of the Highways Contract had been withdrawn from the agenda, owing the item needing to be considered by Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee beforehand. The Chair explained that the need for this postponement had arisen due to alterations to the calendar of meetings following the period of national mourning.
2. That substantive agenda items 7 and 10 would be taken first and second respectively, to allow the officers presenting these items to leave the meeting at the conclusion of the respective items.

15. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Review Letter 2021-2022

The Committee considered a report from the Complaints and Compliments Manager and the Assistant Director – Customers and Corporate Services which provided an overview of the learning and recommendations from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) Annual Review Letter and recognised the Council's comparative performance in relation to the national issues identified by the Ombudsman over the previous 12 month period over 2021-22.

In introducing the report, the Assistant Director – Customers and Corporate Services explained that the central Complaints and Compliments Team administered 131 contacts from the LGSCO during the report period, many of which did not require a detailed investigation and in some cases, were closed following initial enquiries demonstrating no evidence of fault by the local authority. There were 34 complaints that required detailed investigation, down from 38 across the sovereign Council's in the previous year 2020-21, only 11 of which were new complaints originating from services provided by West Northamptonshire Council.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding the Ombudsman's assessment the Council's performance in responding to complaints in a timely manner, the Assistant Director – Customers and Corporate Services added that this was partially attributed to the Council's transition to becoming a Unitary authority during the reporting period, which caused some levels of service disruption, which had since been addressed in the harmonisation of systems, reporting streams, and working practices.

The Assistant Director – Customers and Corporate Services outlined that the period covered by the annual letter included some legacy complaints that originated with the sovereign authorities but were adjudicated within the last year, and mainly occurred during the pandemic which in some cases had impacted on the service delivery and timescales before the complaint was raised with the Ombudsman.

In response to further questions from the Committee regarding whether there was a provision for independent advocacy for those navigating the Ombudsman process, the Assistant Director – Customers and Corporate Services explained that there were limited provisions, which were mainly focussed on minors or adults with learning disabilities.

Resolved

(1) That the contents of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Review Letter 2021-2022 be noted.

17. Highways Contract - Joint Scrutiny Review

The Chair reminded the Committee that this agenda item had been withdrawn and would be brought to the 7 November 2022 meeting of the Committee.

18. Revenue Monitoring Report - Quarter 1 2022-23

The Executive Director – Finance submitted a report which set out the Quarter 1 Revenue Monitoring Report that was considered at the meeting of the Cabinet held on 23 September 2022.

In introducing the report, the Executive Director – Finance advised that the Council was currently projecting a forecast overspend of £7.6m, which represented a forecast variance of 2.2% of the total net budget of £342.3m.

The Executive Director – Finance set out that during the current financial year, this Council along with many other local authorities had seen a significant impact on its finances as a result of external factors beyond its control, including inflationary and cost of living pressures, the ongoing financial aftershocks of the Covid pandemic and the withdrawal of Covid funding by central government, demand-led inflationary pressures on the Children's Trust and Adult Social Care, and a higher than anticipated cost of living pay award.

In explaining some of the mitigating actions currently being taken by the Council, the Executive Director – Finance explained that directors had developed plans to reduce the cost of service delivery in their areas and increase opportunities for income where possible. A spending restriction panel had also recently been set up and all expenditure over £500 is now considered by this panel, unless deemed critical to the delivery of statutory services.

In response to questions raised by the Committee regarding the overspend in the Children's Trust, the Chair proposed that, due to the Council having no financial control over the Children's Trust Budget and taking account of the potential for such an overspend to further increase and add additional pressure to the Council's Budget for 2022-23, it be agreed that the Committee recommend that Cabinet writes to the Department for Education regarding the Children's Trust model and state that, whilst West Northamptonshire Council will honour its contract regarding funding its agreed proportion of the Children's Trust budget, any subsequent difference be covered by the Department for Education.

The motion was seconded by Councillor Danielle Stone and subsequently carried.

Resolved

(1) That Cabinet be requested to write to the Department for Education regarding the Children's Trust model and state that, whilst West Northamptonshire Council will honour its contract regarding funding its agreed proportion of the Children's Trust budget, any subsequent difference should be covered by the Department for Education.

19. Medium Term Financial Strategy - Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report from the Executive Director – Finance which provided an update on the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS).

In introducing the report, the Executive Director – Finance outlined the key pressures, caused by external factors, that have emerged since the budget for the current year was set in February 2022 which resulted in the current projected £7.6m overspend. The Executive Director – Finance reiterated such an overspend represented 2.2% of the total net budget and was therefore within acceptable tolerances and reminded Members of the management action being taken to alleviate further pressures being faced.

The report also provided Members with an overview of Capital Monitoring and the Treasury Management Quarter 1 report.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding whether the Council was reliant on its reserves, the Executive Director – Finance explained that the use of reserves and contingencies to bring the overspend within the 2.2% acceptable tolerance of the total net budget would be a temporary measure, and that robust management action would be required to end any reliance on reserves or contingencies.

Resolved

(1) That the contents of the report be noted.

20. Corporate Plan Performance Report - Q1 2022-23

The Executive Director – Finance submitted a report which provided an update for Quarter 1 on the Council's performance metrics for the current year and set against the priorities outlined in the Corporate Plan.

In introducing the report, the Business Intelligence Manager outlined that the Business Intelligence service interacts with all other services Council-wide, in order to pull together performance data to ensure that services are performing well and that identified priorities are being monitored and delivered against. The Business Intelligence Manager also explained that performance was monitored within services and owned by service directors, and that performance data was also fed into the Executive Programme Board and Executive Leadership Team.

The Business Intelligence Manager set out that at the end of the first year of West Northamptonshire Council's existence, a review was undertaken on the performance metrics in order to ensure that the reporting to Cabinet was representative of the Council's corporate priorities. This reporting had been developed and streamlined since vesting day, leading to the continuous improvement of the Council's ability to accurately report on and monitor its service-wide performance data.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding the metric covering 100% self-directed adult social care, the Business Intelligence Manager explained that anybody in receipt of social care received a level of self-directed support, which was targeted towards their specific care needs rather than a blanket level of support for all cases.

Resolved

(1) That the contents of the report and appendices be noted.

21. Expenses Policy Review

The Deputy Democratic Services Manager presented the final report of the Expenses Policy Task and Finish Group, which sought to understand how West Northamptonshire Council's Expenses Policy for employees was structured and operated and to make recommendations as to potential improvements. The Task and Finish Group also reviewed the procedures in place for Councillors claiming expenses, while acknowledging the policy matters fall under the responsibilities of the full Council, with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the impact of this report in six months' time.

Resolved

(1) That the report of the Expenses Policy Task and Finish Group be Approved.

(2) That it be agreed that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as part of its monitoring regime, reviews the impact of this report in six months' time from when Cabinet responds to the recommendations detailed in the report and then subsequently as part of the agreed monitoring schedule.

22. Process for Budget Scrutiny 2022-2023

The Committee considered its process for scrutiny activity relating to the Budget Setting Process for 2022-23.

Following a discussion between Members of the Committee and officers it was highlighted that a key area of concern amongst Members was the Children's Trust budget, and it was therefore agreed that an agenda item relating to the Children's Trust Budget be added to the next meeting of the Committee, with an invitation extended to the Chief Executive of the Children's Trust, in order to explain the trust's current financial position and gain an understanding of service delivery and any further financial pressures that may be to come, and how this may impact upon West Northamptonshire Council's budget.

The Executive Director – Finance explained that the Council's draft budget for 2022-23 would likely be brought before Cabinet shortly before Christmas 2022, therefore officers, in consultation with the Chair of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, be requested to identify dates for further workshops for scrutiny of the draft budget.

Resolved

- (1) That an agenda item relating to the Children's Trust Budget be added to the next meeting of the Committee, with an invitation extended to the Chief Executive of the Children's Trust.
- (2) That officers be requested to identify further dates for scrutiny of the draft budget before Christmas 2022.

23. Review of Committee Work Plan

The Committee considered its Work Programme.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding future scrutiny activity of the Waste Contract, the Deputy Democratic Services Manager explained that this item had been listed on the work programme of Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee for a future review.

Resolved

- (1) That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

The meeting closed at 7.43 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____

