



Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held at The Forum, Towcester, NN12 6AF on Tuesday 11 April 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Jonathan Nunn (Chair)
Councillor Adam Brown (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Rebecca Breese
Councillor Matt Golby
Councillor Mike Hallam
Councillor Phil Larratt
Councillor Daniel Lister
Councillor Malcolm Longley
Councillor David Smith

Also Present:

Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Phil Bignell
Councillor Jonathan Harris
Councillor Nigel Hinch
Councillor Keith Holland-Delamere
Councillor Kevin Parker
Councillor Ken Pritchard
Councillor Bob Purser
Councillor Wendy Randall

Officers:

Anna Earnshaw, Chief Executive
Martin Henry, Executive Director - Finance (Section 151 Officer)
Jane Carr, Director of Communities & Opportunities
Sarah Reed, Executive Director - Corporate Services
Sally Burns, Interim Director of Public Health
Sarah Hall, Deputy Monitoring Officer
James Povey, Transport Strategy and Transport Manager
Becky Hutson, Head of Communications
Paul Hanson, Head of Democratic and Elections
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer
Jed Scoles, Political Assistant to the Labour Group

171. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

172. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet on Tuesday 7 March 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

173. **Chair's Announcements**

There were none.

174. **Report from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (if any)**

There were no reports from Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

175. **Planning Advisory Service - Planning Peer Review**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Breese presented the report and summarised the salient points. With a view to establishing best practice, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) had been asked to undertake a Planning Service peer review of WNC. Some areas of particular challenge had been identified and an action plan had been drawn up to positively move the service forward.

Councillors made the following comments:

- The report was disappointing and concerning. Why had transformation not been commenced earlier?
- Poor behaviour on planning committees should not have been allowed to continue.
- Acceptance of the issues raised was key to moving forward positively.
- Transparency was needed regarding the reasoning behind changes.
- Training was needed for planning members.
- Staff needed to be better supported. There was a huge backlog of work and morale was low.
- Town and parish councils needed to be recognised and their views taken into consideration.
- There were concerns regarding the community infrastructure levy (CIL) and Section 106 contributions.
- A broader view needed to be taken – for example, notifying neighbouring parishes of major developments.
- Were WNC on target to get things done?
- Planners needed to be at the centre of the service.
- Significant housing growth and town centre regeneration needed to be well-managed.

The Leader expressed complete confidence in the Cabinet Member for Planning and noted that WNC had requested the report in order to fully understand the issues around planning and had put in place an action plan to address them.

Councillor Breese accepted that there had been issues and made the following points:

- Communications, such as timely responses to emails, were being improved,
- A comprehensive training programme was being developed for parish councils and members.
- Section 106 reporting systems had not been adequate and new systems were being looked at.
- Transformation had not been commenced earlier because during the shadow period Covid restrictions had been in place and the council had to concentrate on the government agenda during the crisis.
- Recent feedback suggested that staff were feeling better supported and more settled. The Northampton planning team would be moving to Towcester in May/June which would help cohesion.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

- a) Noted the finding and recommendations of the PAS Peer Review (Appendix A)
- b) Endorsed the Action Plan and the next steps for the Planning Service (Appendix B) and;
- c) Agreed the proposed mechanism for monitoring and reporting progress on the Action Plan and transformation programme.

176. **Community Grants Framework**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Smith presented the report and summarised the salient points. The framework would provide a consistent platform for both existing and new grants.

Councillors made the following comments:

- The report was welcomed.
- Could there be a representative from the voluntary sector on the community funding panel?
- Will there be one member from each group on the cross-party advisory group?
- Promotion of partnership and collaboration was important to prevent duplication.
- It was important that the application process was not over-complicated.
- Multi-year grants were preferred because this enabled organisations to plan and recruit staff.
- Were community transport groups eligible to apply for these grants?
- It was disappointing that there had not been an increase in budget this year.

Councillor Smith responded and made the following points:

- The grants were one-off rather than ongoing funding.
- A cross-party working group had worked well in the past.
- Voluntary sector representation on the grants panel would be considered.
- Community transport groups could make an application for a grant.

Councillor Brown welcomed the report and had seen the value of the grants in the sporting and performing arts sectors. The flexibility of one-year grants could be useful for those starting out.

Councillor Golby also supported the report and advised that the anti-poverty oversight group spoke highly of the way WNC had been engaging with the voluntary sector.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet

- a) Approved the proposed Community Funding Grants Framework for West Northamptonshire Council for implementation from 2023/24.
- b) Approved the composition of the Community Funding Panel and the role of the Cross-party Advisory Group.

177. Private Sector Housing Enforcement and Civil Penalties Policy

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Brown presented the report and summarised the salient points.

A councillor made the following comments:

- The report was welcomed and the team commended.
- The removal of early bird discounts was welcomed.
- Did WNC have the capacity to monitor 33,000 privately rented properties?
- It would be good to see all private rental housing registered.

Councillor Brown acknowledged that the team will never be big enough to monitor all private housing stock. The aim was to respond to complaints effectively and proactively seek out properties showing signs of poor management in order to protect the people living in the homes.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet

- a) Approved the Private Sector Housing Enforcement and Civil Penalties Policy v2 (attached to the report as Appendix A)
- b) Delegated to the Head of Private Sector Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure; the responsibility to maintain the policy and make any minor amendments in light of legislative changes, Court or Tribunal decision, or identified typographic error.

178. Replacement of existing contract for WNC's main Housing Management System 'OpenHousing'

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Hallam presented the report and summarised the salient points. A short-term extension of the current contract would ensure adequate time to undertake proper procurement of a new system.

A councillor commented that this was an important project which needed to be progressed as the system was the core software for managing housing stock.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet authorised the Chief Information Officer to award a contract to Capita for the use of the OpenHousing housing management system, via the KCS framework (Y20023), for three years with the option of extension for a single year.

179. **A43 Northampton - Kettering Improvements Phase 3**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Larratt presented the report and summarised the salient points. The report provided an update on progress with the A43 Northampton to Kettering improvement, seeking to agree joint working arrangements with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC). 83% of the works were in WNC, who would lead on the scheme. The existing congestion problem would be tackled and active travel improved.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Not everyone would see the scheme as an improvement – it could just move the problem further along the road.
- Health and wellbeing needed to be looked at. The embodied carbon calculation and air quality data were not yet available. Careful consideration was needed to ensure the scheme provided improvements in these areas.
- Active travel needed to be included in the over-arching strategy. How was this scheme promoting active travel?
- Would the scheme be value for money? A strong assurance was needed that costs would be controlled and kept within budget.

Councillor Larratt made the following points:

- The scheme could not be allowed to cause problems further down the road.
- The scheme addressed the growth in the Moulton area, and would deliver benefits alongside the northern orbital road.
- Carbon and air quality issues would be raised with officers.
- The scheme was funded by the Department for Transport and WNC would be working with them to ensure the project was delivered within budget and on time.
- An active travel strategy was being worked on which would feed into the overall transport strategy for West Northants. There would be an active travel corridor along the route.

Councillor Brown noted that it was essential where possible to provide infrastructure alongside new housing – which was being done with this project.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

- a) Noted the progress made to date in undertaking improvements to the A43 between Northampton and Kettering.
- b) Agreed to delegate authority to the Director of Place and Economy to agree the joint working arrangements with North Northamptonshire Council, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment, Transport, Highways and Waste, the S151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Finance.

180. **2023/24 Bus Subsidy Budget**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Larratt presented the report and summarised the salient points. The report agreed the use of money from the contingency fund to enable non-commercially viable bus services to continue. A bus review has been commissioned which will inform a report to Cabinet in the summer. Any changes will be subject to consultation.

Councillors made the following comments:

- The continued support for bus services was appreciated by residents and mitigated rural isolation.
- The bus group needed to meet swiftly once the report was published to provide comments.
- Concern was expressed that subsidy may not be the most cost-effective way to deliver services.
- The promised consultation on changes to services was welcomed.

Councillor Larratt advised that the bus report had not yet been seen by members. The bus group would meet once the report was received. Wider issues such as rural isolation needed to be taken into account when planning the way forward.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

- a) Agreed the use of £215k from the contingency fund in 2023/24 to provide continuing support for non-commercially viable bus services.
- b) Noted that this will be used to continue to support the services currently receiving financial support.

181. **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Report**

At the Chair's invitation Councillors Hallam and Baker presented the report and summarised the salient points. Councillor Hallam advised that the report fell into his area because of the complaint and ombudsman involvement. The report from the ombudsman had been accepted. Councillor Baker advised that the report informed Cabinet of the findings in relation to a complaint. The SEND cohort was expected to rise by 25% and there was also a rising national crisis for Educational Psychologists to implement EHCPs.

Councillors made the following comments:

- The report was shocking to read. A child had been left isolated because the school could not meet their needs. The council did not amend the EHCP for 3 months. WNC needed to work with, not against, parents.
- 1:1 support should be provided for children that needed it.
- Data needed to be collected to ensure that the new specialist school in 2025 provided suitable provision.
- What was being done to ensure children were adequately supported now?

Councillor Baker advised that when children were out of school, every effort was made to put in a part-time tutor at home. This was recognised as not being ideal because it did not help with peer socialising. The team needed to be supported in their work – continual accusations of doing a bad job were making staff leave.

Councillor Brown recognised that any issue with children was deeply emotive. The service provided for over 3,000 children with SEND and was striving to do better in future.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet noted the findings of the report and considered the public interest that may be generated by the publication of the report.

182. SACRE Annual Report

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Baker presented the report and summarised the salient points. It was the duty of all schools to teach religious education. There had been failings in the board who were still without an adviser. This had resulted in RE data not being collected or monitored. Plans were in place to take over the monitoring because this had to take place in future.

A councillor who was also a member of SACRE advised that the service faced challenges because it was shared with NNC, with the vacant post being paid for equally by both councils which made it difficult to implement agreements for WNC. The capacity of SACRE had been reduced due to Covid and support from the council was appreciated.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet received and approved the SACRE annual report.

183. Consolidating printers into a single contract

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Hallam presented the report and summarised the salient points. Fewer machines were needed due to office optimisation and improved ways of working had reduced print volumes. The units would be bought outright and good savings would be delivered.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet delegated authority to the Executive Director – Corporate Services in consultation with the portfolio holder for Corporate Services to progress and enter into a single contract for the provision of multi-functional devices.

184. Consolidating phone lines into a single contract

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Hallam presented the report and summarised the salient points. This consolidation provided a more modest saving than the printers. It was not changing the telephony system but consolidating the physical phone lines.

RESOLVED: that Cabinet

- a) Agreed to the Chief Information Officer carrying out a procurement process to select a new provider; and
- b) Authorised the Chief Information Officer to award the contract for a period of up to 5 years to the successful bidder on completion of the procurement process.

The meeting closed at 7.45 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____