

**June 2023**

## **HOUSING**

Work is progressing on the Housing Delivery Plan to underpin the recently adopted Housing Strategy. The Housing Partnership Board met on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023 – proposing a sub-group of the Board will be formed to drive the delivery of affordable homes. Key strategic partners such as Northamptonshire Partnership Homes, Grand Union Housing, Futures Housing Group and Midland Heart are represented on the Board alongside senior WNC staff from Housing, Adult Social Care and Northamptonshire Children’s Trust.

The project to introduce a single WNC housing allocation scheme has moved through the initial phases and milestones including presentations to senior officers and Executive Programme Board (5<sup>th</sup> June 2023). A draft version of the policy will be agreed by Cabinet in July before the document undergoes a 12-week public consultation period. Following any revisions prompted by responses to the consultation exercise the final version of the document will be taken to Cabinet in November for approval. Implementation of the new policy will be a significant phase of the project and will include identification of a single IT system, training of staff and processing of application renewals.

The relationship with Northamptonshire Partnership Homes continues to improve as both organisations work together to develop the quality assurance framework and plan together for the introduction of the new regulatory regime next year. Representatives of both NPH and WNC will attend a joint meeting with the Regulator for Social Housing on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2023 to discuss the new standards.

The Team continues to investigate complaints relating to housing conditions in Private Rented accommodation, and operate both the mandatory and additional licensing schemes for houses in multiple occupation

Since the last Council meeting in March the team have been successful in concluding a number of enforcement cases in the Magistrates Court:

- An organised group of criminal landlords that were illegally renting single family dwelling and then converting them to houses in multiple occupation, without ensuring the necessary licensing and safety measures, were fined in the Magistrates Court. In sentencing the group, the District Judge remarked that this was a deliberate, large-scale operation of falsity and that the defendants broke safety laws with no regard to the safety of the tenants, or the neighbours of the properties, engineered solely for financial gain and profit. The District Judge awarded sentencing fines totalling £414,000 with an additional £20,000 awarded as a contribution towards the Council’s costs.
- A Northampton landlord that was operating unlicensed houses in multiple occupation, with failings to ensure the safety and maintenance of the property. The landlord was sentenced to a fine of £100,000 with an additional £15,000 awarded as a contribution towards the Council’s costs.

## **CULTURE & LEISURE**

### **The Library Service**

Over the winter period the libraries have been part of the network of warm spaces helping people navigate the cost-of-living crisis, providing warm, safe spaces and hot drinks and soup so that people could work or relax without worrying about the cost of heating their homes. Central Library alone saw an increase of between 2000 and 4000 extra visits each month whilst running the scheme. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with customers reporting that having access to the warm spaces offer had been really important to their physical and mental wellbeing and in some cases meant that they were not having to choose between feeding their families and heating their homes.

In February, the first Reading Friends group was launched at the Central Library with plans to roll out across the West Northamptonshire Libraries over the coming months. Reading Friends is an innovative reading befriending programme administered by The Reading Agency, developed with funding from The National Lottery Community Fund, that tackles loneliness through the power of reading. Reading Friends helps both participants and volunteers feel more connected to others and research shows that reading together can help older people to build social networks, connect with others, and has a positive impact on empathy, cognitive function and wellbeing.

The Business and IP Centre Northamptonshire provided by libraries saw another very successful year delivering support to local start ups and SMEs. This was the third and final year of the DCMS funding to enhance the offer and we were able to support another 11 local businesses to develop through the kickstart grant programme and supported the launch of 33 new businesses in West Northamptonshire. UKSPF funding will see this work continue and develop over the next two years.

### **Northamptonshire Museum & Gallery**

As of April 1st, the museum service has attained the prestigious status of being an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. This NPO designation brings along £450k in funding over three years, which will be utilized to execute the ambitious Histories of Northamptonshire Project. This project was conceived to address the necessity of preserving the identity of historic Northamptonshire while expanding the cultural offerings of the museum(s) beyond their physical confines and into the broader West Northants region. The project will actively involve individuals, groups, communities, and organizations in the task of presenting the rich historical narratives of Northamptonshire through a structured program comprising exhibitions, events, and digital activities.

The initial phase of this undertaking has already commenced, with the museum service collaborating closely with the library service to establish four satellite exhibition spaces within local libraries. The chosen locations for these spaces are Brackley, Towcester, Daventry, and Weston Favell. Currently, we are in the process of procuring eight high-quality, high-security display cases, which are expected to be installed by the middle to late summer. These exhibition spaces will feature a dynamic programme of exhibitions, co-curated in collaboration with various communities, groups, and individuals.

Northampton Museum & Art Gallery participated in the festivities commemorating the Coronation of King Charles III on Saturday, May 6. To create a vibrant atmosphere, Guildhall Road was temporarily closed and transformed into a lively street party featuring enticing food stalls and captivating music performances. As part of our contribution, the museum arranged a live stream of the coronation proceedings in the Central Hall, which attracted an audience of over 150 individuals. Moreover, we organized engaging activities such as a trail, face painting, and balloon modelling specifically catered to families. This resulted in an impressive turnout of 1,500 visitors on that day alone, marking it as the highest single day attendance we have experienced since our reopening.

The resumption of the Treasure valuation committee by the British Museum, as a crucial component of the Portable Antiquities Scheme following the disruptions caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, has presented exciting opportunities for the museum. In the past month, we have successfully acquired a remarkable array of materials that will form an integral part of our NPO project, leaving a lasting impact on our visitors. These acquisitions include:

- A Bronze Age gold bracelet, purchased with a generous grant of £900 from Northamptonshire Archaeological Society.
- A significant Bronze Age axe/palstave hoard discovered in Northants, generously donated by a diligent metal detectorist, with an estimated value of £400.
- Another remarkable Bronze Age axe/palstave hoard unearthed in Northants, with half of it generously donated by a metal detectorist and the other half purchased, valuing at £52.
- A striking Bronze Age gold strip, also donated by a dedicated metal detectorist, further enriching our collection with an estimated value of £600.

These remarkable acquisitions highlight our commitment to preserving and showcasing the rich historical heritage of Northamptonshire. They will undoubtedly enhance the Histories of Northamptonshire project and will initially be displayed as part of the offsite display programme.

The renowned painting 'Sacred and Profane Love' by John Collier has been on loan to the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg as part of a major four month exhibition titled 'Femme Fatale - Gaze - Power - Gender,'. As one of Germany's largest and most revered art museums, the Hamburger Kunsthalle has curated an exceptional exhibition featuring not only Collier's masterpiece but also works by other notable British artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John William Waterhouse. To date there have been 90,444 visitors to the exhibition.

## **Archives and Heritage Service**

The first quarter of the new financial year has seen the service launch a revised web presence on the West Northamptonshire Council website. This site replaces an outdated and information-poor site that had not been updated since the service was managed under Northamptonshire County Council. Much work remains to be done in developing the pages further, but it is an important step forward in ensuring a presence on the West Northants council site to which researchers can refer for all the service's basic visiting information.

The service received extremely positive feedback from its customer survey undertaken in February this year, with the results published in March. Of the questions about user satisfaction, no-one said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Everyone using the service was satisfied. We can be pleased to note that the service has 100% user satisfaction (taking satisfied and very satisfied together).

Looking at the percentages of very satisfied, these are extremely high, especially at a time when the service was coping with staff shortages and illness. For example, 96% were very satisfied they had been treated fairly and sensitively, and 93% were very satisfied with the service overall. The main aspect on which people wanted the service to improve was the online catalogue whereby people can search for the descriptions and references of documents that they might wish to consult. This is largely outside the control of the service and it has now been accepted that the issue will only be addressed by a migration of the whole database to a updated version of the software. It is hoped that this can be addressed in the next quarter. Many researchers also chose to leave comments on the survey and 19% of these were to make written comments about the staff. These included, 'Excellent facility and friendly helpful staff', 'Thanks to all the staff for answering enquiries and great help!', 'Everyone was very friendly', and 'Very helpful and willing to go above and beyond'.

The only other points to note in the first quarter are the continuing pressure on the small team at a busy time of year. It is hoped that the March 2022 staffing structure will largely be in place by the summer. Also that there remain issues to be managed in respect of the building and its long-term capacity and suitability for archives storage.

## **Sport, Leisure & Culture**

The cost-of-living rise has hit the leisure industry hard with the impact of rising energy costs. Local Authorities and Leisure Operators face continued challenges with the cost of running swimming pools, despite high demand for use (for example swimming lessons), operating costs remain higher than income generated. The Council's Leisure operators in West Northamptonshire are working hard to mitigate risks and reduce energy consumption. These actions are proving successful to date as all the council owned pools have remained open since returning from Covid-19.

In support of the rise in energy costs the Government announced its £63m Swimming Pool Support Fund. This fund will be administered by Sport England. WNC has submitted information to a factfinder survey being collated by Sport England. This is part of the scoping from Sport England for Local Authorities to request support from the Governments £63m Swimming Pool Support Fund. It is worth noting that the fund is limited so expectations should be 'appropriate and realistic' given the 300+ local authorities across the country.

The first distribution of funding is anticipated during late Autumn/Winter this year.

Consultants KKP (Knight, Kavanagh & Page) are on track to complete the Council's Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) and Sports Facilities Strategy (SFS) by the end of 2023. Both the PPS and SFS will play a key role in providing an evidence base for sports facility provision across West Northamptonshire. The strategies will detail the level of existing sports facilities and how this meets current population needs as well as forecasting against local population growth up to 2041.

The service is currently working with British Cycling (National Governing Body for cycling) to formalise a partnership which will see increased opportunities for cycling across West Northamptonshire. The partnership, expected to launch this summer will bring added social value including local recruitment and volunteering opportunities.

Councillor Adam Brown  
**Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture & Leisure**