



# **West Northamptonshire Council**

## **People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

### **Annual Report 2022/23**

## **Introduction from the Chair**

I am pleased to present this Annual Report on the work of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee during 2022/23. This is the second such report and will also be the final one after the Council's decision to reorganise its Overview and Scrutiny committee structure from May 2023.

The Annual Report shows that the Committee has dealt with a range of topics from the different areas within its remit: the operation and effectiveness of social care for adults and children; action to address and prevent poverty; the design of new housing services; and the development of new priorities and partnerships associated with the Integrated Care System in the county. The Committee has not been able to look at everything that councillors might have wanted. However, I hope the topics that the Committee has dealt with show that it has recognised the need to prioritise and to do work that contributes to making West Northamptonshire a great place to live, work, visit and thrive.

From all of the work done by the Committee in the past year I would most like to highlight the scrutiny review of support for children and young people's mental health. This dealt with an important current issue relating to a complex service area involving many different partners. Councillors gathered extensive information and used this to make strategic and constructive recommendations. It was an interesting and instructive piece of work to do and one that sought to make a real difference in West Northamptonshire.

I would like to thank the councillors who have contributed to the Committee's work during the past year, through its formal meetings, task and finish panels and other activities. I would also like to thank the Cabinet Members, Council officers and partners who have engaged with its scrutiny and the Democratic Services officers who have helped the Committee to carry out its role.

Finally, I offer best wishes to the new Overview and Scrutiny committees that are now succeeding the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. I hope that they can continue to build on what the Committee has done over the past two years as they respond to the tasks and challenges of the future.



**Councillor Rosie Herring**  
**Chair, People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

## **Purpose of Overview and Scrutiny**

The Overview and Scrutiny function at West Northamptonshire Council helps to improve the quality of services provided to local residents and supports and challenges the work of the Council's Cabinet. Overview and Scrutiny carries out a number of roles, including:

- (a) monitoring the decisions of the Cabinet
- (b) advising the Council on forthcoming decisions
- (c) contributing to the development and review of Council policy
- (d) reviewing decisions that have been taken by the Cabinet but not yet implemented that are 'called in' for further consideration

At West Northamptonshire Council these roles are carried out by three Overview and Scrutiny committees: the People, Place and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny committees. These committees are made up of councillors from different political groups and who are not part of the Cabinet.

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny is a national organisation that promotes effective governance in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny states that good scrutiny involves four fundamental principles:

- (a) it provides constructive 'critical friend' challenge
- (b) it amplifies the voice and concerns of the public
- (c) it is led by independent people who take responsibility for their role
- (d) it drives improvement in public services

## **Remit of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for scrutinising issues and services in the following areas:

- Adult social care, public health and wellbeing
- Housing and communities
- Children, families and education
- Health services

## **People Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership**

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been made up of the following councillors during 2022/23:

- Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair)
- Councillor Karen Cooper (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor Rufia Ashraf
- Councillor Azizur Rahman
- Councillor Harry Barrett
- Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
- Councillor Raymond Connolly
- Councillor Janice Duffy
- Councillor Penelope Flavell
- Councillor Cheryl Hawes

- Councillor Greg Lunn
- Councillor Emma Roberts
- Councillor Sue Sharps
- Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
- Councillor Mike Warren

## **What has the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee achieved and influenced**

The Committee held six formal meetings during 2022/23. Two task and finish scrutiny panels have operated during the year.

Some key areas of work by the Committee and the outcomes resulting from them are highlighted below. The Committee's full work programme and agenda papers are available on the West Northamptonshire Council website at [Committee details - People Overview and Scrutiny Committee - West Northamptonshire Council \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](https://www.westnorthamptonshire.gov.uk/committees-and-panels/scrutiny-committee).

### **1. Children and Young People's Mental Health**

The Committee completed a significant in-depth scrutiny review on the support available in West Northamptonshire for children and young people with mental health needs who may be at risk of self-harm. Evidence-gathering for the scrutiny review eventually ran for the majority of 2022 – reflecting the complexity of the topic – and took information and views from a range of different perspectives. Information providers included representatives from NHS and voluntary organisations providing local services; from West Northamptonshire Council and Northamptonshire Children's Trust; from a range of local schools; and some impressive young people who gave councillors the benefit of their own and their peers' views and experiences on the subject that were absolutely essential to hear. The task and finish panel that carried out the scrutiny review gained a picture of a substantial increase in mental health needs amongst children and young people, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with shrinking resources to meet them. In particular, the panel heard that support from core CAMHS was nearing a two year waiting list. In combination with changes to the criteria for referral over time this made it seem that the waiting list was effectively closed. The panel also heard about the range of agencies providing services and support at different levels of need, which was positive but seemed to result in a complex overall offer. The panel thought that the establishment of the new Integrated Care System in Northamptonshire gave a unique opportunity to take action, for agencies to work more closely together to support need at lower tiers and therefore help to control the demand on more specialist services. The scrutiny review resulted in a range of recommendations for the Council and partners, including calling for a better long-term, whole-system strategy for meeting needs across West Northamptonshire; action to maximise the capacity of CAMHS; and consideration of other opportunities to improve support for children and young people's mental health in schools and in the community. The Cabinet welcomed the recommendations and agreed to come back with proposals responding to them.

## **2. Integrated care across Northamptonshire (iCAN)**

The Committee continued to monitor the progress and outcomes being delivered by the iCAN programme, a joint health and social care transformation programme intended to help frail older people to remain living independently for longer, producing better health outcomes for them and helping to manage demand on acute hospital care in the county. The Committee established a task and finish panel to carry out this role on its behalf, which met quarterly during 2022 aligned with key points in the iCAN programme contract. The panel reviewed changes and trends in key performance data presented by the lead officer for the programme and representatives from the external transformation partner commissioner to support its delivery. The panel also took information and views from patient representatives about the practical impact of iCAN initiatives on patients' experience of services. The panel sought to understand and test the situation behind headline level performance, highlighting, for example, that reductions in patients' length of stay in acute care should not result in worse individual outcomes and that patient re-admission rates should be considered in judging the effect of iCAN initiatives. The panel also raised the need to review demographic projections informing work on independent living for older people in light of the clearer picture produced by Census 2021 information. Following changes to the delivery model for the original iCAN programme whilst the scrutiny review was in progress, coupled with the reorganisation of the Overview and Scrutiny function for 2023/24, the panel is now in the process of reporting back on its work to date.

## **3. Debt and money advice service**

The Committee provided Overview and Scrutiny input in the development of future services to provide West Northamptonshire residents with advice on debt issues and money management, at an early stage in the transformation project and later when potential service models had been identified. The Committee gave early views about key principles that should inform future service arrangements. This included highlighting the need for the Council to take a realistic view of capacity available in the voluntary and community sector, given other pressures on these organisations; the risk of people who needed support giving up if services were not easily accessible; and the potential advantages of providing advice services through a partner, or under different branding, given that people seeking support might have debts owing to the Council. The Committee was subsequently able to consider possible service models resulting from further development work and related consultation with stakeholders. The four options identified were to continue the existing mixed approach inherited from predecessor authorities; move to a wholly in-house or a wholly commissioned service; or adopt a hybrid approach, delivered both by the Council and some external providers. The Committee supported the proposed hybrid model as its preference from the options presented to it but requested the opportunity to scrutinise detailed proposals before they were agreed. The Committee raised the need for the final proposals to provide a good standard of service across the authority that would also address more specific issues, such as deprivation in some parts of Northampton or limited access to services in smaller communities in South Northamptonshire.

#### **4. Outpatient renal dialysis services in Northampton**

The Committee scrutinised proposals for changes to the provision of NHS outpatient renal dialysis services in Northampton, reflecting its remit for carrying out the Council's statutory responsibilities for scrutinising the planning, provision and operation of the health service in the local authority area. The proposed change involved the relocation of an existing dialysis unit from Riverside House to a new site in the town. The Committee considered the requirements relating to dialysis services and the case for moving the existing unit, which included issues resulting from the redevelopment of Riverside House from office space to housing. The Committee also sought assurances about the suitability of the proposed new location for the dialysis unit, raising questions about its accessibility to patients, transport links, staffing levels and the availability of additional medical support in the event of an emergency. The Committee was ultimately satisfied that the proposed change would support an effective future service and resolved to support it. The dialysis unit reopened at its new site on 1 May 2023. The Committee also recommended that the Cabinet looked into the issues arising from the change of use of Riverside House to identify if there were any lessons that could be learnt relating to partnership working. The Cabinet agreed to follow up this matter.

#### **5. Children's services performance**

The Committee scrutinised the overall performance of children's services in West Northamptonshire at the start of 2022/23, meeting with the Chief Executive and directors of Northamptonshire Children's Trust. The Committee was told that the Trust continued to make progress in improving outcomes for children; in ensuring the consistency of professional practice; and in developing a stable, well-led workforce. As a result, the challenges that Northamptonshire faced in these areas were now similar to those affecting other local authority areas, whereas two years before it had been an outlier compared to its counterparts. The Committee provided challenge in various areas relevant to current and future progress, including the scope to develop in-house provision; social worker recruitment and retention; and how well the Trust understood young people's experiences, practice strengths and areas for improvement through its quality assurance framework. Committee members highlighted that the situation had been steadied and improvements made. However, it was questioned what plans were in place to achieve significant change where this was necessary. An area of performance that was particularly highlighted in this regard concerned the completion of initial health assessments for children entering care. The Committee was concerned to note that only 47 per cent of children in care in Northamptonshire had an initial assessment within 28 days of entering care in 2021/22. The Committee recognised that this matter was not within the Trust's sole control as health checks were carried out by health partners. The Committee was advised that this was a priority area and was the subject of work by the Trust and health partners. However, the Committee resolved to highlight this matter to the Cabinet. The Cabinet subsequently recognised the need to improve performance.

## **6. Adult social care social worker recruitment and retention**

The Committee considered the Council's performance on recruitment and retention of social workers supporting the delivery of statutory adult social care services towards the end of 2022, including how it had used additional resources from the national Workforce Recruitment and Retention Funding (WRRF) scheme to help to manage pressures over the previous winter. The Committee was generally satisfied that the Council had delivered the WRRF scheme effectively and that additional payments for staff members had made a real difference. In relation to regular recruitment and retention, the Committee was advised that the number of vacancies in in-house provided care settings had reduced through 2022. The Council had operated targeted recruitment campaigns in preparation for additional pressures over the winter. The process for screening and interviewing applicants and making job offers had also been speeded up, although there needed to be continuing focus on this area. The Committee heard that interest in care and support roles had increased since the introduction of the £10 per hour minimum pay rate by the Council for 2022/23 but there were still challenges in converting this interest to posts filled. This included continuing negative perceptions of care work, which Council recruitment activity sought to counter by highlighting the range of skills involved in care work and the career opportunities that it offered. The Committee looked at additional ways to raise the profile of opportunities in care work amongst different demographic groups. The Committee recommended that more promotional activity focussed on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and on young people, working with relevant community groups, should be considered. The potential benefit of introducing a local 'heroes' scheme was also highlighted.

## **7. Homelessness and housing solutions service**

The Committee considered work towards the creation of a single homelessness and housing solutions service offer for West Northamptonshire to replace legacy services. The Committee was advised of the methodology, timescales and focus areas for the transformation project and plans to consult with staff members, partners and other relevant stakeholders. The Committee encouraged that the integration of existing services did not take a levelling down approach and emphasised that housing options was a specialist function that could benefit from retaining local knowledge. Reassurance was also sought about arrangements to introduce new IT systems intended to support the housing options function in future. The Committee ultimately endorsed the direction being taken on the transformation project. The Committee also sought reassurance about how effectively the Council was responding to more general challenges relating to housing and homelessness, including the number of people in temporary accommodation in West Northamptonshire, accommodation for refugees, the approach on rough sleeping and the response to issues connected with houses in multiple accommodation.

## **8. Support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities**

The Committee held a single-issue meeting to scrutinise the planned development of services supporting children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in West Northamptonshire. Committee members represented their own experience of the difficulties experienced by children and parents with the previous service offer in the

county, in addition to hearing directly from a representative from a local parents' group on this. The Committee was advised of the significant challenges facing all local authorities when trying to deliver national requirements relating to SEND provision in the context of a significant increase in the number of children with additional needs, and in the complexity of those needs, over the past 10 years. Associated challenges in West Northamptonshire included a 25 per cent increase in requests for assessment in the past year; pressures on staffing capacity; and a shortfall in specialist educational provision. The Committee then considered an overview of action being taken by the Council to address these practical pressures and to develop a new SEND Delivery Plan for the longer term, which would be co-produced with partners. The Committee provided constructive challenge in areas including the effectiveness of arrangements to oversee the development and implementation of the Delivery Plan and future communication and engagement with parents. The Committee ultimately agreed to set up a task and finish panel to scrutinise the assessment of local needs relating to SEND and plans to meet them. The Panel began its work in 2022/23 but will need to continue into the next year.

## **9. Development of Integrated Care Northamptonshire**

The Committee reviewed progress with the development of the Integrated Care System in Northamptonshire and the practical impact of new priorities and groups resulting from it at the end of 2022. The Committee heard that the Cabinet had endorsed Integrated Care Northamptonshire (ICN)'s 10 year strategy, which set out 10 shared ambitions underpinning the overall aim for residents to 'Live Your Best Life'. The Council would now refresh its Corporate Plan where necessary to support these ambitions and partners would apply them to their own services, reflecting the wide range of services that contributed to good health outcomes. Two pioneer Local Area Partnerships (LAPs) were operating: N4 in Northampton and DSN4 in the south of the authority. These were identifying issues affecting health and wellbeing in their respective areas as well as building experience of operating LAPs. The Committee provided constructive challenge about the timetable for establishing all 9 LAPs in the authority; the resources and expertise that would be available to support them, for example, in bidding for external funding; and the balance between enabling LAPs to operate in different ways and being able to judge their effectiveness as a whole. The Committee raised the need for all LAPs to operate within a common outcomes framework to assist in assessing the results that they produced. The Committee also received a positive response from the Chief Constable of Northamptonshire Police to a request, arising from this topic, for the force to update its crime data reporting processes so that they reflected West Northamptonshire Council's ward boundaries.

## **10. Fostering services**

The Committee considered West Northamptonshire Council's response to the Ofsted inspection of Northamptonshire Children's Trust fostering services reported in March 2023, which resulted in an overall rating of 'inadequate'. The Committee was advised of immediate action being taken by the Trust and the Northamptonshire local authorities to support necessary improvements in areas including introducing a better information recording and case management system; enhancing child-led practice; and arranging more effective safeguarding training for social workers and foster carers. The Committee



highlighted some practical areas where support for foster carers could be improved, such as better access to training on the Signs of Safety care model, and the need to offer training comparable to more bespoke packages provided to foster carers by other authorities. The Committee also sought confirmation of arrangements to ensure that children would be seen consistently by supervising social workers in future. The Committee took some reassurance that senior leaders at West Northamptonshire Council seemed to have a clear view of current areas for development and were committed to working with the Trust to address these. However, the Committee identified new systems and improvement projects that it recommended should be subject to further scrutiny by its successor in 2023/24.

The Committee also recommended that Overview and Scrutiny should be kept in touch with any future discussion between the Northamptonshire local authorities and the Department for Education about the long term direction for the children's trust organisational model.

## **11. Anti-Poverty Strategy**

The Committee scrutinised the outcomes of work done under the West Northamptonshire Anti-Poverty Strategy during its first year in operation. The Committee was advised that experience gained so far had validated the multi-agency approach used to develop the Strategy, although there was the potential to broaden engagement still further. Work in the first year had been stronger on supporting people already in poverty than on preventing people from falling into it. Moving forward, there needed to be a shift to a more proactive approach. The implementation of an emergency debt and money advice service from summer 2023, and the development of immigration support and advice hubs represented examples of this approach. The Committee was further advised that the Household Support Fund (HSF) had worked well in West Northamptonshire, although more analytical work needed to be done into the circumstances that had led people to claim food vouchers distributed under HSF-3. Similarly, data on attendances at the Warm Welcoming Spaces provided in winter 2023 needed to be properly understood and used to inform the future, whilst also recognising that this provision had enabled 3,371 people who might otherwise have been missed to be referred on to wrap around services. Ensuring that the collective resources of West Northamptonshire were being mobilised as effectively as possible to prevent people from falling into poverty would be a key challenge regarding the future implementation of the Strategy. The Committee welcomed the honest picture given to it and highlighted that the Council had effectively been able to support the Strategy so far using significant funding from the government, although the Council staff members and voluntary and community sector partners involved deserved credit for the way this had been deployed. The Committee sought assurance that a decision on the distribution of HSF-4 funding would be taken by the Cabinet and subsequently received confirmation that this would be the case.

## **12. Housing allocations**

The Committee considered plans to develop a new Housing Allocation Scheme for West Northamptonshire to replace the different approaches inherited from predecessor authorities by the end of 2023/24. The Committee was advised of the statutory requirements relating to the allocation of social rented housing and areas where there is local choice. The Committee sought reassurance about how the new Scheme would deal

with different issues, including provision for members of HM Forces and veterans; the difference between social rents and affordable rents; and how overcrowding would be defined, given examples in Northampton of homes that were occupied at a level that represented overcrowding in practice but was below the statutory definition.

The Committee encouraged that the Council should seek to minimise the amount of change experienced by service-users when selecting and implementing IT systems to support the new Scheme. The importance of providing councillors with clear information about how the new Scheme would operate as part of implementing it was also highlighted. The Committee supported further pre-decision scrutiny of the developing Scheme. The Committee also recommended that development work should explore the potential for the Council to apply a broader definition of overcrowding than the statutory definition.