

28th September 2023

Since our last full council meeting, I have worked with the Cabinet, Members, the Chief Executive and Officers across all areas of the Council. Many of these activities and issues are referred to in more detail in Cabinet colleagues' reports.

Sustainability

Our cross-party member working group continues to meet on a monthly basis to drive our sustainability programme activity and we are grateful to all members involved for their time and commitment. Councillor Jonathan Harris is attending the UK100 Leadership Academy and will be providing feedback to the working group, so that we can share the benefit of ideas and good practice from the UK 100 programme across all areas of the council.

The sustainability team have been successful in securing a £44k funding grant from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This funding will be used to inform local businesses about actions they can take to decarbonise. The 18 month project will be delivered in partnership with the University of Northampton, with initial steps involving stakeholder engagement with 100 - 120 local SMEs and start-ups. This will be followed by a series of 3 webinars, 2 online workshops and final face to face work. During the webinars and workshops businesses will be introduced to the project, have the opportunity to baseline their business's CO₂e emissions using a carbon calculator developed by the UoN, and identify actions to reduce future emissions. Throughout the project businesses will also have access to the skills and knowledge of UoN staff, as well as WNC sustainability team officers.

Work continues to promote sustainable warmth schemes to west Northants residents, enabling them to access grants to support energy efficiency improvements in their homes.

Carbon literacy training is in development for councillors and colleagues to support and enable delivery of our sustainability commitments.

An emissions reduction plan is in development following the publication of our baseline emissions data, to enable the delivery of our 2030 net zero target for West Northants Council and by 2045 for West Northamptonshire residents and businesses.

Our first annual sustainability report was reported to Cabinet earlier this month. The report sets out the sustainability projects that have taken place, and the progress towards our sustainability pledges, that has been made during 2022/23. The publishing of this report delivers on our promise at the launch a year or so ago of our Sustainability Strategy, to provide an annual update against the council's various sustainability commitments, including Net Zero, sustainability pledges and more recently our first environmental accreditation to the Investors in the Environment (iE) Scheme.

Communications

We launched our new resident's magazine this summer, providing important news and information about council services. The first edition of 'West Northants Life' included a summer what's on guide, promoting some of the area's fantastic visitor attractions, events and activities. Other articles included a review of the council's activities and spending over the last year, top tips to help people recycle more and waste less, a look at recent investment in our highways, and a focus on some of the exciting regeneration schemes that are taking place across West Northamptonshire.

Many of us live in a digital world these days, but we know a number of residents still value or rely on the printed word, and the member working group which looked at the subject of resident communications felt that this was important. This new magazine offers a way for everyone to find out more about the many things our council is doing across West Northamptonshire and the services and support that is available.

The magazine is also contributing to our efforts to be more sustainable, incorporating the existing Adult Learning brochure, which would otherwise be distributed separately, into a single publication. It provides an opportunity for us to share important information to all residents about a range of services, without the need to produce additional printed materials. It is also printed on recycled paper and delivered by Royal Mail alongside their existing postal deliveries, minimising the need for additional distribution methods.

Designed and produced in-house by the council's communications team to keep costs down, West Northants Life will be published twice a year, with the second edition due out in the winter.

Copies of the magazine are available for download at www.westnorthants.gov.uk/magazine.

Residents who would like to stay more regularly updated on the council's activities are encouraged to subscribe to the fortnightly e-news www.westnorthants.gov.uk/newsletter.

The communications service continues to deliver a high volume of proactive communications including on subjects such as:

- Housing cladding
- Schools and other council buildings impacted by RAAC
- SEND unit opening comms and media visits
- Bridge Street fire – ongoing discussions about closure / re-opening
- Flu and covid-19 vaccinations – national booking system go-live (joint with ICN)
- Community Training Partnership go-live (joint with Hope Centre /Community Law)
- Fly-tipping prosecutions
- Market Square section opening
- Heritage open days
- Consultations
- Council finances
- Decisions coming to Cabinet
- Support to find the right job and small business support
- Applying for school places
- Household Support Fund 4– low wage applications

Business Intelligence, Policy and Performance

Recent work in this area has included:

- Completion of the Quarter One Corporate Performance Dashboard, monitoring progress across the council against the delivery of our Corporate Plan and Priorities
- Completion of the team restructure to ensure we have the right skills and expertise in place to deliver, and to support all directorates
- Supporting the development of Local Area Profiles, using Local Insights tool as well as offline work
- Developing and improving reporting in Adult Social Care, to enhance our ability to manage budgets and improve data quality.

Transformation

The Transformation portfolio continues to focus on priority projects linked to significant savings or complex issues. Closer integration of related transformation projects and IT projects is providing benefit, for example in the Planning department where transformation has had significant elements of both a process and people project, but also large IT enabling project.

Highlights of each directorate's key developments is provided below.

Place

The new DEF Mastergov single system for planning has been delivered, providing a single view for planning across WNC through merging legacy council's planning systems. Customer enquiries will be centralised in the Customer Contract Centre to ensure a better and more consistent customer experience when residents are contacting the council regarding planning issues. This ensures that simple queries can be responded to quick and efficiently, in line with the aims of the Customer Experience Strategy. The £350k saving in Planning for 2023/24 is still on track for delivery, with a new department structure confirmed in August, for which the final recruitment activity is underway.

Through the Home to School Transport Project a public consultation was concluded on the West Northants School Transport Policy, and presented to Cabinet on 11th July. This is now in the process of implementation towards delivering a saving of circa £500k in 2023/24 and a further saving of £525k in 2024/25.

In addition, following an internal audit review of this service, a more robust process has been implemented underpinned by a new Flexi-route system. This means that more checks are carried out to ensure accurate payments, as well as providing route optimisation to maximise the efficiency of the transport runs. Innovation also has a role in this project with a virtual reality pilot underway with Billing Brook school, providing independent travel training. Run with support from the SEN Parent Group, this gives children the confidence to be more independent.

Communities and Opportunities

The Housing Solutions Project is continuing to deliver a single housing allocations policy for WNC, and is currently considering consultation feedback on proposals. To deliver the policy in the most efficient manner options have also been drawn together to rationalise the housing allocations systems into a single system. Despite rising demand in this area, the project is also looking to minimise loss from housing subsidy by working with housing providers. From a technology and application perspective work has also began mapping the systems and information flows in preparation for rationalising the Housing IT system.

The Debt & Money Advice project has made progress and is currently piloting the integration of Welfare Benefit officers into Adult Social Care to provide a multi-disciplined and more integrated response to residents. A similar pilot for Customer Service agents to provide a greater level of support at the first contact, therefore reducing hand offs and the number of different people residents are required to speak with, has concluded and this approach has now been made part of everyday activity, following a marked increase in resolution at the first point of contact. Working in a similar way with NPH has also been agreed, in order to integrate their skill set and expertise into this single offer, so that housing related issues can be dealt with quickly and efficiently to the greater satisfaction of residents.

People

The Strength Based Working project is continuing to deliver a new Reablement West Service, and has delivered service improvements and benefits. Those improvements have been seen in the evidence that from March 22nd to May 23rd the service averaged 23.46 starts in the service per week, which is a 35% improvement since before the changes were introduced. This will also deliver cost avoidance savings, anticipated to equate to £4m over 3 years.

The Optimisation of Single-Handed Care project aims to proactively work on 250 high-cost packages, and complete an end to end process review to embed good practice. Whilst the quality of care remains paramount, this has also led to £817k in saving on care packages in 2022/23 and a further £325k so far in 2023/24.

The delivery of a new framework for commissioning Homecare providers has concluded, and a launch event for providers has been delivered with the aim of creating increased support with imperatives for providers to build increased capacity, increased satisfaction, more resilience in the sector, and improved efficiency including reduced travel times. The final contract is due to be issued at the end of this month, when transfers will begin on less complex and/or more urgent care packages.

The Supported Living Outcomes project has completed 159 Care Act statutory reviews resulting in 156 referrals to other statutory / universal services to meet individual needs, with the aim of improving the health and well-being of these local residents. This supports the council to be Care Act compliant and address provider concerns whilst also making £520k savings to date for the council during the current financial year.

A major IT project is also underway to replace the Adult Social Care System. A business case was presented to cabinet in June, and following that the procurement process commenced in August, following approval of the evaluation criteria. Also, to support the pace of delivery, a migration readiness programme is underway.

Corporate

The Connected Customer programme continues at pace, improving the way residents engage to a much less disjointed range of siloed methods, and so providing a much improved and more consistent customer experience. In Revenues and Benefits all front door activity, through which contact with a resident begins, has migrated to the customer contact centre. One example of the resulting benefits is that Council Tax email responses rates have improved by 75%, along with improvements in first time resolution rates, as our agents are able to spend much longer on the call but resolve the issues there and then.

Furthermore, customer services are providing outreach services, taking WNC Customer Services out to communities and 8 out of 9 LAP areas across West Northants, and supporting the 93 Welcoming Spaces so that visitors to the Welcoming Spaces have advice and support readily available to them. This support will be enhanced in Northampton North (N5) LAP when Kingsthorpe Library is available.

From a technology perspective the four legacy Customer Experience Management Systems continue to be merged into a single instance, unlocking potential to better see trends across our whole area, and thereby aiding prevention. This project will also mean standardised approaches and forms across the whole area, giving increased efficiency and better access to informative data, and is on track to be completed by Nov 2023.

The ambitious West Ways of Working programme continues to deliver our hybrid working model. 300 staff from Lodge Road have been relocated, many to the Abbey Centre in Daventry, which will also now be a paperless environment and which through renovation has had its energy certificate raised from C to B. The programme is also delivering an IT infrastructure rationalisation, and to date 42 virtual servers have moved to Angel Street to consolidate our operations, increasing efficiency of operating at fewer sites and also reducing risk.

As a boost to productivity and giving staff the right tools, our Hardware Refresh programme has supplied 160 Daventry staff with new equipment. DTI support staff now can remote access onto these devices when needed, using our SNOW asset tracking application, increasing efficiency in updates and security patching. Next cohort for upgrade is currently being designed for rollout.

Pay and Grading for WNC staff is beginning the transition from the significant project that it has been, to 'business as usual'. Appeals will be concluded by September 2023, and career management support has been launched for our staff. Attention is now turning to the next phase of this project which will focus on schools.

Finance

Transformation effort in this directorate has been concentrated on supporting on going Star Chamber and budget setting process.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council