



Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton, NN1 1DE on Monday 25 September 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Andrew Grant (Chair)
Councillor Stephen Hibbert (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Harry Barrett
Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Louisa Fowler
Councillor Zoe Smith
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
Councillor Mike Warren

Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Cheryl Hawes

Officers:

James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer
Rebecca Wilshire, Director of Children's Services
Lisa Hyde, Interim Director for Communities and Opportunities
Tara Scarth, Single Homelessness Pathway Manager
Phil Brown, Housing Strategy Officer
Louise De Chiara, Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Commissioning, Northamptonshire Children's Trust
Eileen Doyle, Chief Operating Officer, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board
Sian Heale, Head of Children's Transformation, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board

There was one member of the public in attendance.

8. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies were received from Councillor Cheryl Hawes. Apologies were also received from the Executive Director People Services and the Assistant Director Education.

9. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

10. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

11. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair advised that the Cabinet had accepted all but one of the West Northamptonshire Housing Allocation Scheme recommendations made by the Committee at the last meeting. The other recommendation concerning the implementation date for the new Scheme could not be accepted due to legal requirements. It was good to see that the work of the Committee had been recognised.

The Chair advised that he had agreed to the request that the item on Children and Young People's Short Breaks and Respite be considered as the first substantive item on the agenda.

12. **Children and Young People's Short Breaks and Respite - Proposed New Model and Engagement**

Mrs Jean Lineker, a member of the public, addressed the Committee to thank carers and promote the work they were doing. She highlighted the Caring for Carers information booklet produced by Northamptonshire Carers as an example of good practice that should be supported. Mrs Lineker considered that the care sector needed more money and that education assessments for foster children were also taking too long.

The Chair welcomed Louise De Chiara (Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Commissioning, Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT)), Eileen Doyle (Chief Operating Officer, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board (ICB)) and Sian Heale (Head of Children's Transformation, ICB).

The Assistant Director, Quality, Assurance and Commissioning advised that the Chair of the Northants Parent Forum Group (NPFPG) was unfortunately unable to attend the meeting as planned but had provided some written comments.

The Assistant Director, Quality, Assurance and Commissioning and the Head of Children's Transformation presented the report, which sought the views of the Committee on the proposals for a new service model. The following points were made:

- Short breaks were a lifeline for parents. A range of short breaks were currently provided by various providers, some residential and some non-residential.
- The current model was not financially sustainable. The vast majority of resources went into overnight breaks, so the non-residential provision was not receiving enough to cater for complex needs.
- A proposed model had been prepared for a more flexible service. Public consultation had been carried out and the report had been given to the Committee. Most respondents were in favour of a more joined-up process.

- It was proposed to deliver the service under a lead provider arrangement, with a central hub to support all services. There would be a single referral and assessment pathway. A fundraising function would also be introduced.
- Staffing capacity and volunteer opportunities would be increased with buddies for children to enable them to access activities.
- Residential units could be utilised differently, such as being used for daytime activities.
- There was an opportunity to look at joining up the service with home care packages to strengthen the offer and make it more flexible.

The Committee considered the report and councillors made the following comments:

- £2.8m to provide for fewer than 200 children seemed more than adequate. What were the costs for one night's respite care for one child?
- A caveat was needed in the recommendations to explain that the increased budget was due to the inclusion of home care services and would not result in any more money being available. The aim was not to save money but to use it more efficiently, such as shared administration, a shared hub and better use of staff resources.
- It was important to avoid blurring the lines between what was provided in the budget and what came from fundraising. Payment for statutory needs should not come from fundraising.
- Safeguarding training and relevant support needed to be provided for volunteers.
- The West Sussex model provided a good template. The involvement of profit-making organisations in children and young people's service created many issues and should be avoided.
- Was there a risk of financial failure in appointing a single provider?
- The proposed timescale for implementing the new model involved completing due diligence on the service provider in a short space of time in late December. Would this be achievable in practice?
- It was important to speak to young people with lived experience.
- Northamptonshire Carers should be included in the consultation.

In response to questions from councillors, the following comments were made:

- Across the whole of Northamptonshire 70 children accessed residential breaks and 120 accessed non-residential breaks. Just over half of these were from West Northamptonshire. There were two residential facilities – one medical, which required nursing staff and the other for complex ADHD / autism needs. The costs had increased dramatically and the model was not sustainable.
- Linking budgets would not result in less support for children at home. It would ensure that families received a blend of what they needed. They could choose whether to spend their budget on home care or an alternative. Currently most resources went into residential support which meant parents of younger children who did not access this facility were losing out.
- Money from fundraising would be used to provide additional services.
- Volunteers would need to adhere to safeguarding procedures. It was proposed to have a co-ordinator to support volunteers.
- The timeline for introduction of the new model was ambitious as the current provider, Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, did not wish to continue in this role, but would still work with WNC to support a managed

transition. The process needed to be progressed at pace whilst also ensuring it was robust.

- All of the children accessing residential services had a social worker and all others had an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- It was unlikely that any private providers operating for profit would apply to deliver the new service – they tended to operate in the home care sector.
- Due diligence would be carried out during the tender process to minimise the risk of financial failure of the provider.
- NPFG had worked closely with other partners involved to ensure that consultation on the proposals was fit for purpose. Invitations to the six co-produced workshops taking place across West Northamptonshire would be issued shortly and the survey was due to go live next week. The time frame was challenging but it was hoped that the end of October deadline would be met.
- Further information on consultation events could be provided to the Committee via Democratic Services.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Noted the engagement undertaken to date to develop the proposed redesign of short breaks services.
- b) Noted the plans for a public consultation, due to finish in October 2023.
- c) Noted the next steps in relation to procurement and anticipated timescales to let a new contract for a redesigned service from 1 April 2024.
- d) Welcomed the amount of partnership working with parents and learning from good practice in other areas involved in developing the proposed redesign of short breaks services.
- e) Noted that the purpose of the proposed redesign of short breaks services was to use resources in the most effective way and it was not a cost-cutting exercise.
- f) Requested an update on progress with the proposed redesign of short breaks services be provided for the Committee's agenda planning meeting on 4 January 2024.

13. **Severe Weather Emergency Protocol**

The Chair welcomed Lisa Hyde (Interim Director for Communities and Opportunities), Tara Scarth (Single Homelessness Pathway Manager) and Phil Brown (Housing Strategy Officer).

The Interim Director for Communities and Opportunities presented the report. The Committee was advised that there was no statutory duty to provide accommodation during extreme weather but there was a humanitarian obligation. West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) worked with local partners for emergency provision. The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) was implemented during times of severe weather to provide accommodation for those with a local connection who were rough sleeping with no other options. Strong local knowledge was important to contact rough sleepers and the street services team were key. Individuals needed to agree to assistance and to abide by the rules of the provider.

The Single Homelessness Pathway Manager advised that the purpose of SWEP was to preserve life. In 2022-23 SWEP had been actioned for 4 periods. A variety of types of accommodation were provided, but there were challenges with individuals

with complex needs for whom the provided settings did not work. It was not possible to force people to engage and remain in accommodation. Although there was no charge, remaining in accommodation meant individuals would be responsible for payment of bills, which some did not want. WNC was trying to work with the private rented sector, but this was challenging as the sector was also used for other needs, such as those leaving prison. Use of hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic had been very positive as it had enabled officers to engage with and assess complex cases.

The Committee considered the report and councillors made the following comments:

- It would be helpful to extend the operating times of SWEP accommodation so that people were not left out in the cold for too long in the evening after daytime facilities closed before they were able to get a bed.
- Was data collected in relation to factors such as ethnicity and sexuality? Some people could feel at risk in an open setting such as a night shelter.
- Was there a risk with communal living, such as halls of residence, that people would be targeted if they did not fit in?
- Were there alternatives to spending money on nightly purchase of accommodation?
- Was there a difference in the support available in rural areas?

The following points were made in response:

- There were challenges around drug and alcohol use. This was not allowed inside SWEP accommodation, so time away was needed. In some situations individuals were allowed to take methadone and alcohol under supervision due to the dangers of withdrawal.
- Some data was collected for central government on people using SWEP accommodation, such as about those with mental health needs. Data on gender was not required for this, but the data was still kept.
- Action would be taken where necessary to safeguard a service user with particular needs, such as by providing them with appropriate accommodation.
- Paid staff and volunteers monitored the corridors and communal areas of shared accommodation such as halls of residence as well as undertaking a daily room check, which was an indicator of mental health. During the night there was an open door policy in the office. There was a zero-tolerance approach with an established multi-agency team who were skilled in addressing challenging behaviours.
- There was no choice about using nightly paid accommodation.
- Rough sleeping was very low in rural areas but could be hidden and relied on public reporting.
- Temporary accommodation would be offered when SWEP was triggered.
- Northampton had a lot to offer, such as access to street food, so people tended to gravitate there if they lost their job or were in difficulty.
- The team would look at whatever accommodation was available to meet needs, although not all places were suitable.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Noted the update and expressed confidence that the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol appeared to be working well in West Northamptonshire.

- b) Requested to receive an update on the operation of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol, including any trends and changes in demand, at the Committee meeting on 3 April 2024.

14. **Response to the child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm scrutiny review**

The Director of Children's Services provided an update on the actions and progress in respect of recommendations made to Cabinet by the scrutiny review carried out under the former People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Feedback from the ICB was also included.

The Committee considered the report and councillors made the following comments:

- In the USA every school had a counsellor. WNC needed to look at having support in secondary schools even if it was voluntary.
- Providing mental health support in schools was very expensive.
- There were not enough professionals working in children's mental health and waiting lists were too long. There were a range of organisations offering services. Co-ordination was needed so that children knew what was available. Many organisations were offering 'soft' support rather than addressing severe issues.
- All teachers were trained to look out for mental health issues. Even if there were counsellors in schools the problems would remain because CAMHS was too busy.
- The template for reports to Cabinet and Council should include consideration of equality and diversity impacts.
- Councillor Herring, as the Chair of the former People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, had commented to the Cabinet that there needed to be more urgency in implementing the recommendations and they should have been redirected by the ICB to the appropriate agency where required.
- WNC needed to address the issue of fragmentation and provide better opportunities for service integration.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education made the following comments:

- The reported reduction in the CAMHS waiting list from 2 years to 9 weeks was possibly as a result of the introduction of a triage system. Waiting times for actual treatment may not be any shorter.
- The proposal to consider using a top-slice from schools budgets to provide mental health support in schools could be put to the Schools Forum as recommended. However, school budgets were already under considerable pressure.
- WNC had put in place support to help to manage the impact on young people of current demand on CAMHS. The launch of the West Northamptonshire Local Offer would also provide one-stop access to information about local services.

The Director of Children's Services further advised that there were several initiatives being led by Public Health on prevention in this area which would be worthy of consideration on a wider scale.

RESOLVED: that the Committee requested to receive an update on action being taken to address issues raised by the scrutiny review of child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm at the Committee meeting on 3 April 2024.

15. **Task and finish scrutiny review of support for foster carers in West Northamptonshire**

The Chair thanked Councillor Fowler for the work she had done in preparing a draft plan for the scrutiny review, which had been circulated ahead of the current meeting.

Councillor Fowler advised that circulation of the draft plan had been timed to allow more opportunity for non-executive councillors to express an interest in being on the task and finish panel. It would still be helpful to have some more rural councillors and a councillor representing a Daventry ward.

The Committee considered the draft plan and councillors made the following comments:

- The scrutiny review should consider a balance of views, from organisations as well as individuals.
- The scrutiny review should look at different options for obtaining views from parents to enable a greater number to participate than would be possible at a meeting.
- It was important to hear from those with lived experience and to be aware of what young people were hearing, although if young people were involved directly this needed to be done in a sympathetic environment.
- What specialist support was available for foster carers supporting young people who had been exploited or groomed to get involved in crime?
- Were children who were being fostered getting access to therapeutic care?
- The Northamptonshire Foster Carers Association should be able to assist with facilitating engagement between the task and finish panel and evidence providers.
- The scrutiny review needed to establish whether foster carers felt supported and how WNC could encourage more people to become foster carers.
- Being in a family environment was the best place for children.
- Consideration should be given to the balance of gender and ethnicity in those involved in the scrutiny review, both for the members of the task and finish panel and for those consulted.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education commented that this could be a positive piece of work and highlighted that it could produce good outcomes by identifying when services were working well rather than just identifying areas for improvement.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Agreed the proposed plan for the task and finish scrutiny review of support for foster carers in West Northamptonshire.
- b) Agreed that the Chair and Vice-Chair be authorised to confirm the membership of the task and finish panel to carry out the scrutiny review of support for foster carers in West Northamptonshire.

16. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report and invited the Committee to review its existing work programme, taking into account additional topics identified at the current meeting.

The Committee considered the work programme and councillors made the following comments:

- Confirmation was sought on when a further update on work concerning the provision of free broadband to care leavers would be provided to the Committee.
- The Committee should seek to meet with Northamptonshire Children's Trust to scrutinise issues relating to the number of young people coming into care and the amount of prevention activity being done.
- There had been a significant reduction recently in the time taken to process child protection orders under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

The Chair noted that some issues raised during discussion would be covered by the topic of the early help offer and 0-19 services in West Northamptonshire, which was already included in the work programme but had not yet been scheduled.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Agreed to include the following topics as agenda items for the Committee meeting on 5 February 2024:
 - Early help offer and 0-19 services
 - School exclusions
- b) Agreed that the work programme be updated to include additions identified at the current Committee meeting.
- c) Requested to receive information on the number of child protection orders under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 made in West Northamptonshire in the past year and how this compares the position before the COVID-19 pandemic.

17. **Urgent Business**

There was none.

The meeting closed at 8.20 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____