



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held at Council Chamber, The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Tuesday 11 June 2024 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Adam Brown (Chair)
Councillor Matt Golby (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Fiona Baker
Councillor Rosie Herring
Councillor Rebecca Breese
Councillor Mike Hallam
Councillor Phil Larratt
Councillor Malcolm Longley
Councillor David Smith

Also Present:

Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Keith Holland-Delamere
Councillor Rosie Humphreys
Councillor Peter Matten
Councillor Kevin Parker
Councillor Ken Pritchard
Councillor Bob Purser
Councillor Wendy Randall

Officers:

Anna Earnshaw, Chief Executive
Rebecca Purnell, Assistant Chief Executive
Martin Henry, Executive Director - Finance (Section 151 Officer)
Catherine Whitehead, Director Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer
Paul Hanson, Head of Democratic & Elections
Jane Carr, Director of Communities & Opportunities
Sarah Reed, Executive Director - Corporate Services
Stuart Timmiss, Executive Director - Place, Economy and Environment
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer
Gillian Baldock, Political Assistant to the Conservative Group
Sally Burns, Director of Public Health
Josh West, Political Assistant to the Labour Group

166. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Daniel Lister.

167. **Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

168. **Minutes**

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting of 7 May 2024 were approved and signed as a true and accurate record.

169. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair congratulated Northampton Saints on their Premier Championship win and expressed thanks to all those, including the Town Centre and Communications teams, who had successfully organised the event welcoming the team home. Thousands of people had attended to join in the celebrations.

170. **Revenue Monitoring Provisional Outturn 2023-24**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Longley presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. There had been an overall underspend of £220k which was a credit to all budget holders.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Whilst using contingency funds to balance the budget was prudent, it was not sustainable.
- Transformation had been impacted by staffing cuts.
- Concerns were expressed about the reduction in car parking revenue. Were fewer people visiting the town centre? There had been severe disruption due to the Market Square and other works and there was no longer a major store in the town.
- The new SEND provision was welcomed but more would be needed.
- Concerns were expressed about temporary accommodation pressures.
- Were there enough social services staff to meet demand?
- There were ongoing pressures from Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) – the council were responding positively but rising costs were a significant financial risk. Auditors had recommended increasing reserves but the S151 officer had not agreed.

Councillor Longley responded as follows:

- The purpose of contingency funds was to be used if needed.
- The process of transformation resulted in more efficient processes, which could require fewer staff.
- Car parking was still suffering from the Covid downturn but was improving.
- The provisional audit report had recommended increasing reserves. However, the S151 officer had produced a report demonstrating his disagreement which had been sent to the auditors who had subsequently revised their report.
- Any suggestions for cost savings would be welcomed.

The Chief Executive highlighted some of the areas of transformation. Investment had been made in areas such as NCT staff, digital and family hubs. After 2-3 years of investment NCT were seeing a levelling-off of demand. There had been £9m savings in children's services this year. Strategic work was being done in temporary accommodation for both adults and children to enable the provision of in-house services at a lower cost.

Councillor Baker advised that the number of agency staff had been halved in NCT and ways of moving forward were being looked at.

The Chair noted that transformation was a major focus to ensure services were sustainable and delivered for residents. Capital investment had been made in a new special school which would not meet all needs, but would make a significant contribution. Reserves were being monitored to ensure they were fit for purpose.

RESOLVED:

- a) Noted the provisional outturn position for 2023-24 and associated risks
- b) Noted the deliverability assessment of West Northamptonshire Council savings requirement for 2023-24 summarised in section 10 and detailed in Appendix B
- c) Noted the Treasury Management update in Appendix C
- d) Approved aged debt write off's detailed in section 7
- e) Approved additions to the 2023-24 Flexible Use of receipts strategy detailed in section 8
- f) Recommended that Full Council approve amendments to the General Fund capital programme of £5.6m for additional capitalisation identified in 2023-24.
- g) Delegated authority to the Executive Director – Finance in consultation with the portfolio holder for finance to apply any budget virements required to effectively manage the overall budget.

171. General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Capital Provisional Outturn 2023-24 and Revised Capital Programmes

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Longley presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated.

Councillors made the following comments:

- There were challenges in the delivery of projects and improvements were needed to ensure major projects stayed on track.
- There had been an overspend on the Market Square and CIL money had been used.
- When would the North West Relief Road be completed?

Councillor Longley responded as follows:

- The Market Square works had been funded by a combination of government grant and CIL money, so there was no overspend.
- Contingencies and final costings for the North West Relief Road were being looked at. There was a slight overrun of less than 4%. Part of the road was open and the rest would be completed in the summer. Persimmon would commence their works soon.

RESOLVED:

- a) Noted the 2023-24 provisional capital outturn position for the General Fund and HRA;
- b) Approved the proposed capital carry forwards for the General Fund capital programme which are required due to rephasing in the 2023-24 programme. These are detailed in appendix B.
- c) Approved the proposed capital carry forwards for the HRA capital programme which are required due to rephasing in the 2023-24 programme.

172. **Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)**

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Larratt presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. The paper asked Cabinet to note the work undertaken to update the BSIP and delegate authority to agree the plan prior to submission to the Department for Transport tomorrow.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Cross-party discussion and ongoing consultations with the bus working group had been good. The consultants were thanked for their work.
- There had been challenges in getting passenger numbers up.
- Lane enforcement and personal safety at bus stops needed to be addressed.
- There were major concerns around affordability in rural areas when the £2 cap was removed.
- Inter-town bus routes needed improvement
- Change was difficult when 95% of the market was controlled by one operator.
- The bus station in Northampton was not adequate and those arriving by coach had a particularly poor experience.
- There was no agreed funding after 2025 so the plan was aspirational.
- Outreach needed to cover digitally-excluded residents. Older people needed paper timetables and current timetables needed to be available at bus stops.
- Sufficient capacity needed to be ensured at peak times, particularly on the X7 route.

Councillor Larratt responded as follows:

- Staff and consultants were thanked for their contributions. The enhanced partnership and cross-party working group had been good.
- Encouraging more people to use buses was a challenge. Significant fare increases when the £2 fare cap ended would be off-putting.
- Inter-town services were important and work was being done with partners in areas outside WNC.
- The welcome for those arriving by coach was being looked at as part of the Greyfriars development.
- More needed to be done for rural areas. A study was being done in Brackley to identify services required and would be extended elsewhere in due course.
- Bus stops were important – shelter, information and lighting all needed to be provided.

- Options to address capacity issues on the X7 route were being looked at with Stagecoach but height restrictions meant double decker buses could not be used.

The Chair noted the aspirational nature of the plan but priorities needed to be identified so that action could be taken when funding became available.

RESOLVED:

- a) Noted the work undertaken to update the BSIP and the refreshed draft in Appendix A.
- b) Agreed to delegate authority to the Executive Director for Place & Economy in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, to agree the final BSIP prior to submission to the DfT by 12 June 2024, and subsequent publication on the Council's website.

173. ZEBRA 2 Grant Update

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Larratt presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. A successful bid for £9m together with £22m from Stagecoach would enable 51 zero-emission buses on 11 routes, together with vehicle charging at the depot. Buses had been ordered and would be operational in 2026 resulting in an improvement in air quality and journey experience.

Councillors made the following comments:

- The initiative was welcomed. The average age of buses in Northampton was 8-10 years. What was the life-expectancy of an electric bus?
- Rural communities were not being considered.

Councillor Larratt responded as follows:

- The life-expectancy of electric buses would be investigated and reported back.
- Electric buses were unfortunately not suitable for rural areas. Demand related transport was being considered for rural areas and a visit to Essex was planned to look at their work with dial-up buses.

RESOLVED:

- Noted the update provided on the ZEBRA 2 grant.
- Delegated authority to the Executive Director of Finance to approve any and all documentation (including entering into a form of grant agreement with the bus operator) to administer the allocation of the grant funding and ensure adherence to the Department for Transport (DfT) grant funding terms and obligations.

174. Landlord Services 2023-24 Annual Performance Report including the Housing Ombudsman Self-assessment

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Herring presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. WNC had a governance arrangement to monitor the performance of Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH) against KPIs. The results had been collated via Acuity and an improvement plan was being developed following this.

Councillors made the following comments:

- This was a significant report for regulating social housing.
- It was right that tenants expected high standards, such as repairs done on time and an effective complaints procedure.
- The standard for repairs was not being met – more specialist staff were needed.
- Complaint handling was very poor.
- Whilst most tenants were excellent, those who deliberately damaged property should be charged and not re-housed.
- Were measures being put in place to improve standards?
- It was suggested that the new Cabinet Member should undertake site visits.

The Director of Communities and Opportunities advised that this was not a full assessment, but the KPIs linked to the NPH management agreement.

Councillor Herring acknowledged that repairs needed to be done more quickly. There were challenges due to skills shortages in the market. This would be discussed with NPH. A stock condition survey was currently being carried out.

The Chair noted that this report was an important step forward in the management of NPH.

RESOLVED:

- a) Noted the contents of the report and Appendix A on the performance of Housing Landlord Services provided by NPH.
- b) Noted the outcome of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey results as detailed in Appendix B and associated NPH Improvement Plan detailed in Appendix C, ahead of the results being submitted to the Regulator of Social Housing.
- c) Noted the contents of Appendix D on the performance of complaint handling services provided by NPH.
- d) Approved the self-assessment detailed in Appendix E for submission to the Housing Ombudsman and for publication on the Council's website.
- e) Noted Appendix F, NPH's Complaints and Feedback Policy ensuring compliance with the Code.
- f) Approved the appointment of the Cabinet Member for Housing as the Member Responsible for Complaints in relation to complaints in scope of the Housing Ombudsman code.
- g) Noted the nomination of the Head of Housing Strategy and Partnerships as the senior lead person accountable for complaint handling under the Housing Ombudsman code.

175. Avenue Campus - Disposal of Bassett-Lowke Building

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Herring presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. The plan had been to provide affordable homes on the Avenue Campus site, but this was no longer financially viable due to increased costs.

A Councillor made the following comments:

- The project had suffered due to delays resulting from the transfer between authorities following the creation of WNC which was frustrating.
- There were no figures in the report – could a pink paper have been provided?

- Social housing needed to be provided rather than affordable housing.

The Chair and Councillor Herring both advised that work was being done to provide as much social/affordable housing as possible, but viability needed to be ensured.

RESOLVED:

- a) Authorised the Assistant Director Assets & Environment in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance (Chief Finance Officer) to dispose of the Bassett-Lowke building and associated land subject to satisfactory due diligence.
- b) Noted the use of further funds from the HRA to undertake the above recommendations where applicable.

176. Additional Capital Funding for Highway Maintenance

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Larratt presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated. Cabinet were recommending to Council that an additional capital sum of £10m be provided for highway maintenance.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Why was this money being provided from capital rather than revenue?
- It was good that the Soap Box Derby community event in Welton could go ahead because road repairs had been undertaken. The event had been unable to take place since 2018 because of the road condition.
- A traffic calming chicane had been installed poorly in Crick and resultant deterioration of the road had damaged cars. Urgent action was needed.

The Executive Director, Place confirmed that capital money could be used for a significant project which was proactive rather than reactive. The S151 Officer agreed that action which enhanced the asset could be regarded as capital. This had been confirmed by the external auditors.

Councillor Larratt advised that the issues in Crick had been looked at and would be rectified shortly.

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet would recommend to Full Council to provide an increase in the capital programme of £10 million additional funding/borrowing to deliver additional Maintenance.

- our most vulnerable areas prior to the next winter season.
- There is a clear indication from both members and residents alike that the condition of our roads is a top priority and that there is mass support for both increased funding and removing obstacles to repair.

177. Royal & Dergate Theatre RAAC remediation works

At the Chair's invitation Councillor Longley presented the report, copies of which had been previously circulated, and advised that WNC had landlord responsibility for the Royal & Dergate Theatre. The report outlined two options to address the RAAC problem.

A Councillor noted the importance of the theatre in bringing visitors to the region and recognised that the work needed to be done. Would it be possible to add PV panels to the roof?

Councillor Longley pointed out that the roof was not being replaced as part of the works, but the question would be asked.

RESOLVED:

1. Recommended to Council that a budget of £1.1 million is created for the Royal & Derngate roof works.
2. Authorised procurement of the works.

The meeting closed at 7.50 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____