

Report from People Overview and Scrutiny Committee: recommendation in respect of children's services performance

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The remit of West Northamptonshire Council's People Overview and Scrutiny includes scrutiny of matters relating to children, families and education. Reflecting this, the Committee receives updates on children's services performance on a quarterly basis from Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT).
- 1.2 The Committee received the latest one of these performance updates at its meeting on 21 June 2022. The Committee considered information on progress with the overall development and improvement of children's services; demand and performance in key areas; achievements over the past year and priorities for the immediate future. The performance update was presented by the Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and Director of Finance and Resources from NCT.
- 1.3 In considering the performance update the Committee was concerned to note that 47% of children in care in Northamptonshire had an initial health assessment within 28 days of entering care in 2021/22. The Committee raised the need to improve performance in this area. The Committee resolved that it should highlight this need to the Cabinet.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet recognises the need to improve performance from the current position of 47% of children in care receiving an initial health assessment within 28 days of entering care.

3. Reason for Recommendations

- 3.1 The recommendation seeks to bring to the attention of the Cabinet an area of concern identified by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee arising from recent scrutiny of children's services performance.

4. Report Background

- 4.1 The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered an update on children's services performance at its meeting on 21 June 2022. Information was provided by senior representatives from NCT: the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services and the Director of Finance and Resources.
- 4.2 The Committee heard that NCT continued to make progress in improving outcomes for children; in ensuring the consistency of professional practice; and in developing a stable, well-led workforce. 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.

- 4.3 The Committee scrutinised and 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 NCT 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.
- 4.4 The Care Planning, Placement & Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and supporting statutory guidance specify that a local authority must ensure that a health assessment of physical, emotional and mental health needs is carried out for every child they look after. The local authority must arrange for a registered medical practitioner to carry out an initial health assessment of the child's state of health and to provide a written report of the assessment. The initial assessment must be carried out within 28 days of a child entering care.
- 4.5 The Committee was concerned to note that 47% 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 NCT'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 NCT and health partners. However, Committee members emphasised the need to improve current performance, which should be highlighted to the Cabinet. It was commented that West Northamptonshire Council needed to ensure that it had a clear picture of the level that it wanted children's services to reach and the resources required to deliver this.
- 4.6 The Committee recognises that the establishment of the Integrated Care System model will change the ways in which health and care services are delivered. The Committee will need to establish how it links in effectively to the new governance structures created as part of this change. In the meantime the Committee considered that it should raise this matter with the Cabinet. It was commented in this regard that the establishment of Integrated Care Northamptonshire, as well as the Council chairing the Health and Wellbeing Board, provided a specific opportunity to show the strength of partnership working and to improve performance on health checks for children coming into care.
- 4.7 The Committee resolved to recommend that West Northamptonshire Council recognise the need to improve performance from the current position of 47% of children in care receiving an initial health assessment within 28 days of entering care.

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1 Cabinet is asked to consider the recommendation by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and provide a response to the Committee.

5.2 The Committee has made this recommendation with a view to highlighting to the Cabinet a matter concerning the effectiveness of services provided to the residents of West Northamptonshire. West Northamptonshire Council is statutorily responsible for children's social care in the authority. NCT delivers children's social care services on behalf of both West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire councils, its joint owners. The two local authorities are responsible for agreeing NCT's annual contract sum and its business plan, which includes its strategic objectives and financial strategy. The two local authorities have established the Children's Trust Joint Committee as an executive decision-making body to discharge the functions of the authorities that relate to the joint ownership of NCT.

6. Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

6.1.1 The recommendation by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee does not have any direct resources or financial implications. The resources that West Northamptonshire Council provides for children's services are determined on an annual basis through the processes for negotiating and agreeing the NCT provisional contract sum, which feeds into the development and agreement of the Council budget. Once approved, the contract sum forms the budget for NCT for the next financial year. The Cabinet should consider any implications of agreeing the recommendations by the Committee as necessary in this context.

6.2 Legal

6.2.1 Overview and Scrutiny operates within the provisions as set out in:

- the Local Government Act 2000
- the Health and Social Care Act 2001
- the Local Government Act 2003
- the Police and Justice Act 2006
- the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
- the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009
- the Localism Act 2011
- the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011
- the Overview and Scrutiny (Reference by Councillors) (Excluded Matters) (England) Order 2012
- the Health and Social Care Act 2012
- the Local Authority (Public Health, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013

6.2.2 The West Northamptonshire Council Constitution (December 2021) Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules section 6 sets out the following provisions relating to reports by Overview and Scrutiny committees:

- 6.1 *Once recommendations have been formed, an Overview and Scrutiny Committee may submit a formal report for consideration by the Cabinet (if the proposals relate to an executive function and are consistent with the existing budgetary and Policy*

Framework), or to the Council as appropriate (if the recommendation would require a departure from or a change to the agreed budget and Policy Framework).

6.2 *The Council or the Cabinet shall consider the report of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the next available meeting. The Council or the Cabinet shall respond to that Overview and Scrutiny Committee within two months (or following the next available meeting in the case of the Council) of it being submitted.*

6.2.3 The relationship between West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire councils and NCT is governed by a series of contractual and legal agreements. These provide for the operational independence of NCT and for the decision-making powers of the two local authorities over the specific reserved matters set out in NCT's Articles of Association.

6.3 **Risk**

6.3.1 The recommendation made by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is intended to highlight an apparent area for improvement relating to children's services performance. Not agreeing the recommendation could risk a loss of focus on the continuing development of effective children's services for West Northamptonshire.

6.4 **Consultation**

6.4.1 Consideration of the latest position on children's services performance at the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting was informed by discussion with senior representatives from NCT as set out in paragraph 5.1 above.

6.4.2 Information relating to the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 21 June 2022 was published in advance through the Council's usual channels.

6.5 **Climate Impact**

6.5.1 There are no climate impact issues arising from this report.

6.6 **Community Impact**

6.6.1 There are no community impact issues arising from this report.

7. **Background Papers**
