

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 October 2022

Cllr Adam Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture and Leisure

Report Title Homelessness and Housing Solutions Transformation Project

Report Author Joanne Barrett, Assistant Director for Housing and Communities,
joanne.barrett@westnorthants.gov.uk

Contributors/Checkers/Approvers

West MO	Catherine Whitehead	14/10/2022
West S151	Martin Henry	14/10/2022
Other Director/SME	Rowany Job, Interim Head Homelessness and Housing Solutions	06/10/2022

List of Appendices

None

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To provide an overview of the Homelessness and Housing Solutions transformation project, the project approach and the activity which has taken place so far. To also seek challenge and feedback from the committee to inform the direction and outcomes of the project.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Our Corporate Plan sets out our collective vision for making West Northamptonshire a great place to live, work, visit and thrive. As a new organisation we have the unique opportunity to work collectively, along with our partners, to design services that are customer focussed, providing the services they need in a way that suits them.
- 2.2 As an organisation the scale of our transformation ambition is substantial and to deliver real change for our residents we must prioritise the transformation projects, focussing on those which will have the greatest positive impact.
- 2.3 The pandemic has amplified many of the issues that existed across our communities in West Northamptonshire, resulting in a further demand of increased need and support. One area which has seen an increase in demand is residents seeking advice on housing and approaching the council for assistance. Data submitted to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities evidences this increase in demand since West Northamptonshire Council was created. Across West Northamptonshire, there were 3.36 per 1,000 households owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty in January – March 2022, increasing from 2.62 in April – June 2021, with assessments going up by 28.8% over the same period (from 448 to 557). We are monitoring this trend to identify the capacity required and any efficiencies in working practices to ensure that we are able to respond to demand.
- 2.4 The impact of unsuitable housing or unsettled accommodation can negatively affect people's welfare and impact both their physical and mental health. The importance of good housing advice, prevention and early intervention cannot be under-estimated. Therefore, this service has been identified as a priority project within the Transformation Portfolio.
- 2.5 The Homelessness and Housing Solutions service offer advice and assistance on a range of housing related issues. These include the provision of statutory homelessness services and advisory services to all those affected and utilising various powers to secure accommodation either on an interim basis or as a settled home. The service offers an innovative, solution-focused, multi-agency approach to tackling rough sleeping. The service also manages two housing registers and nominations to our registered providers.
- 2.6 The design of our Homelessness and Housing Solutions service must consider the whole population, building a service which focusses on education, prevention, early intervention and recovery to not only prevent homelessness but also avoid repeat homelessness.

3. Recommendations

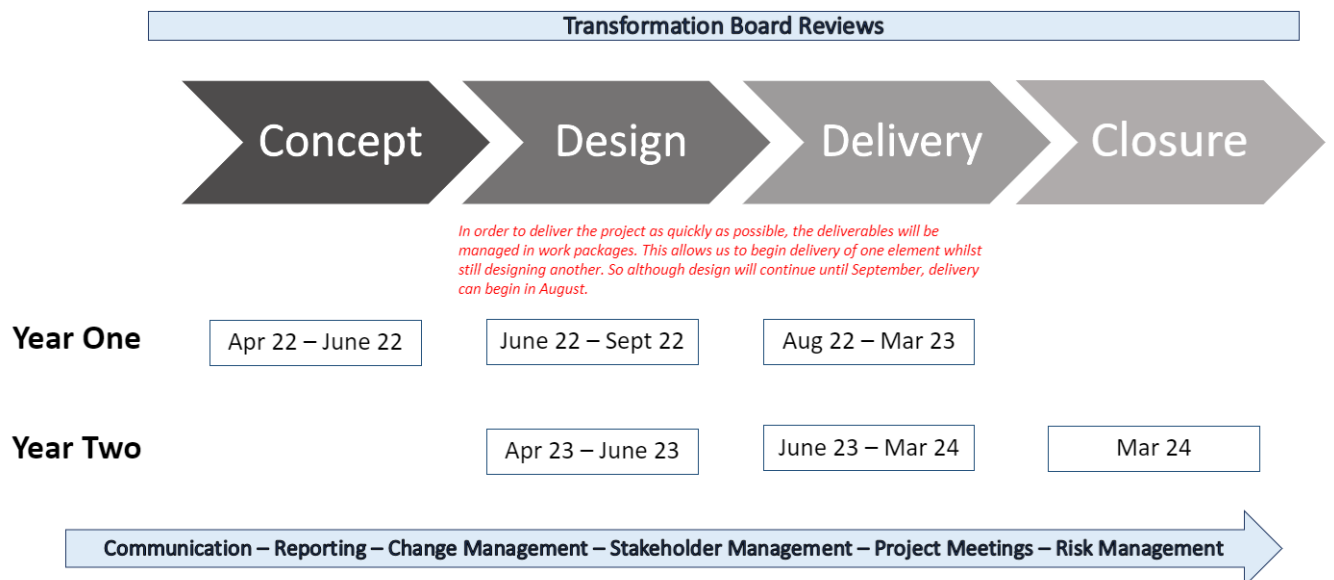
- 3.1 It is recommended that the committee:
 - a) Note the progress made to date
 - b) Endorse the project approach
 - c) Provide any insights and suggestions for additional outcomes.

4. Reason for Recommendations (NOTE: this section is **mandatory** and **must** be completed)

- To challenge the work completed to date, the direction of the project and to support the proposed outcomes.
- To understand and support the transformation approach, which ensures that the design is led by the service and has a strong customer focus.

5. Report Background

- 5.1 The Housing options service was previously delivered via three separate councils, Northampton, Daventry and South Northants. The aggregation and transformation of this service is a long-standing part of the plans for creating the unitary authority of West Northants Council (WNC). The activity was originally scheduled for delivery as part of the Future Northants programme in 2020-21, however it was delayed due to the impacts of Covid-19 and therefore the service continues to operate, with the three legacy approaches continuing to provide the service in the same way it had done so previously.
- 5.2 After the initial year of the new unitary council where the focus was on stabilisation, the aggregation of the service needs to progress to facilitate tackling some of the issues the service is currently facing and reduce any negative impacts currently being experienced by both residents and officers.
- 5.3 There is an ambition to provide a great service which, covers the whole of the West Northamptonshire area, is consistent but also responsive to the diverse needs of our population. The transformation project will draw the current teams into a unified structure and team culture, facilitate service improvement and fully support the new ways of working.
- 5.4 The structure of this transformation project will follow the timelines set out below. The Design phase of the project will focus on current strengths, identify best practice to build on and provide space for the team to create a common vision and direction for the service.



- 5.5 Effective and thorough engagement with staff, customers, key partners and stakeholders underpins the success of this project. We are seizing the opportunity that Unitary has provided to design a service that utilises the range of resources available to meet the needs of our residents and achieve the best outcomes for the people needing the service across West Northants.
- 5.6 Appropriate engagement activities will be undertaken throughout the project with relevant teams and services across WNC, including Customer Services, Regeneration, Assets, Adult Social Care and Public Health to make sure we fully understand and embrace the opportunities and cross-cutting elements throughout the Design phase. Seeking the views of a range of interested parties and adopting a collaborative approach to develop the shared vision to create a great holistic service and the best way to deliver this service to the population of West Northamptonshire.
- 5.7 A series of staff workshops held during August gave all staff within the Housing Options service an opportunity to understand the different ways the service is currently being delivered, opportunities to consider how to deliver the service in the future and how these opportunities could be turned into a reality.
- 5.8 All feedback from the workshop has been collated and themes were identified. This feedback has cemented the themes identified by the project team and will form a series of work packages. This approach will enable this complex and large scale transformation project to be delivered alongside delivering a demanding front line service.
- 5.9 The agreed work packages are shown below:



- 5.10 This transformation programme links to several contracts, working arrangements with some key partners and other transformation projects, including:
- Management agreement and partnership working with Northampton Partnership Homes
 - Contracts for homelessness and housing allocations software
 - Working arrangements with Registered Provider partners
 - Working arrangements with our customer services team
 - Large scale voluntary transfer contracts in the Daventry and South Northants localities

- Partnership working arrangements and service level agreements with registered providers and some voluntary sector organisations that provide accommodation and/or support for vulnerable, single households at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping
- Plans to improve the quality and value for money of local supported housing. This will be work that cuts across benefits team, housing, adult social care and children trust
- Debt & Money Advice Transformation project

5.11 As an identified priority project within the Transformation Portfolio the existing project governance process will be followed. This will ensure that the necessary quality assurance has taken place and that the project is delivered on time.

6. Issues and Choices

6.1 As this transformation project is in the early stages, there is an opportunity for any additional actions or area of focus to be included in the project. This will ensure that the view of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is included in the design and delivery of this priority project.

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1 Resources and Financial

7.1.1 Transformation resource has been allocated to this project and is within existing budgets.

7.1.2 Through the Star Chamber and budget setting process for 2022-23 a £412k savings target was set to be achieved across the Housing and Opportunities area, for delivery by April 2023. £270k of this was expected to be delivered through reducing the use of temporary accommodation for homeless households. The service has encountered an increase in demand in:

- Total number of approaches to service: 2020 = 3498; 2021 = 4183; 2022 to date (6 months) = 3390 (compared to 3109 at this date in 2021)
- Number of households owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty per 1,000 of population: 2.62 for April to June 2021; 3.36 for January to March 2022
- 28.8% increase in homelessness assessments completed

This has made achieving the required saving from the temporary accommodation budget difficult, with this budget currently forecasting an overspend. The temporary accommodation work package of this programme has been scoped and work to formulate an action plan to achieve reduced use of temporary accommodation and deliver financial savings is being prioritised.

7.1.3 There is an additional financial pressure on the council relating to housing benefit subsidy loss related to legacy charging arrangements for temporary accommodation in certain legacy councils. Progress in developing and delivering the action plan and work programme for the Temporary Accommodation Work Package will be monitored both through the corporate work on budget savings and the Transformation Board.

7.1.4 The full extent of the benefits and savings of this project are currently being baselined however some specific financial benefits identified so far include:

- Reducing the costs incurred by employing agency staff;
- Increase in homelessness prevention which is more efficient and reduces costs incurred throughout the customer journey; and
- Reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation.

7.1.5 The full business case is currently being prepared and will include anticipated financial and non-financial benefits.

7.2 **Legal**

7.2.1 There is a requirement for the council to provide general housing advice to all residents and a legal duty to assist households who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. This includes working with households to prevent homelessness from occurring where possible.

7.3 **Risk**

7.3.1 All risks have not been identified yet, however a failure to complete this project will result in additional costs for the council, should residents not seek timely advice. Evidence shows that education and early intervention are essential in delivering a prevention focussed service.

7.3.2 There is a reputational risk to the Council from failing to provide a consistent service across the geographical area.

7.3.3 Failure to provide a timely homelessness and housing advice service poses a financial risk to the council. Appropriate support, advice and guidance encourages early intervention and prevention which is a more-cost effective approach to delivering a housing options service.

7.3.4 Any risks arising from this project will be identified and mitigating actions will be deployed to reduce the impact of these.

7.4 **Consultation**

7.4.1 This transformation project is being completed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including Revenues and Benefits Team, Finance Team, Customer Services, Emergency Planning, Public Health, the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) that manages the council's housing stock and is the delivery vehicle for new council homes, other key Registered Housing Providers and our key DLUHC contacts (specialist advisers).

7.4.2 Any staffing changes arising from this project will be subject to appropriate consultation.

7.5 **Climate Impact**

7.5.1 There are no known climate/environmental impacts at this time.

7.6 **Community Impact**

7.6.1 This project will provide a positive community impact by enabling a consistently great homelessness and housing advice service across West Northamptonshire.

7.7 **Communications**

7.7.1 Timely and appropriate communications to staff are critical for a successful transformation project. A thorough communications plan has been developed and implemented as part of this project.

7.7.2 Once the revised service is designed and we progress into the project delivery phase colleagues from the Communications team will be involved in its development to promote clear and consistent messaging to let residents know the help and support that is available to them.

8. **Background Papers**

8.1 None.