

3rd November 2022

Since our last 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.

Transformation update

In the context of the financial position experienced by all local authorities across the country, the teams have been revising their activities to focus on financial efficiencies, following a rigorous round of Star Chambers budget sessions with each directorate. Highlights of each directorate's key developments are provided below.

Place

The Post Room Aggregation project is on track to deliver £200k in 2023/24 and the benefit of the aggregation has led to the function being able to take on the logistics of the important stop smoking service for public health.

A second phase of efficiency work is being initiated within the Planning service building on the early integration and initial £40k saving. This includes a programme of process improvement work, the development of a single planning system but will also focus on making the teams and management structures efficient and customer focused.

Work has begun on a project to drive productivity in how WNC meets residents' needs around Home to School Transport, against the backdrop of rising demand and increasing costs, and following the council's request to our auditors to look closely at this service and make recommendations. This will include encouraging independence and choice through options including safe walking routes, providing independent travel training and personal budgets forming part of our offer. Also, procurement approaches and ensuring suppliers are compliant with our standards will drive up quality and value for money.

Communities and Opportunities

The Housing Solutions project is developing a full business case including reviewing management structures and teams to drive a single consistent culture across WNC, again recognising rising demand and the complexity of residents' needs is increasing. Specific workstreams focusing on making sure our temporary housing approach and options meet need but also offer value for money as well as workstreams around homeless intervention and a simplified pathway to access support.

The Debt & Money Advice project has made progress on designing options which maximise both the council's internal expertise but also those resources out in the community, and to drive improvements by having clear processes, clear messages to residents, and removing duplication.

Investment has also been secured to review current cases within housing to ensure people are in the right places and that the council are maximising the use of funding from central government.

People

The Social Care Reform - Market Management Project has been recently initiated to proactively engage with legislative change that will result in significant changes to current arrangements across social care.

Another project has also recently secured investment to bring forward an online financial assessment tool to assist people in completing their financial assessment online. The digital tool will give welfare benefit advice, calculate a person's contribution in line with government guidance, whilst being bespoke to West Northants. The benefits involve moving the financial assessment earlier in the process to speed it up, ensuring the client gets a care plan in place promptly. Also, this will give control to people to be able to complete the financial assessment outside of office hours as well as encourage the take up of using Direct Debit's.

Corporate

The Customer Services programme has been focusing on driving efficiency and productivity for the organisation by migrating customer contact from more expensive and specialist workers and into the customer contact centre where possible, so it can be managed by multi-skilled operatives. Service including Revenue and Benefits and planning are among the first being considered for migration. The Continuous Improvement Programme continues to make changes to processes and information to drive productivity and a better customer experience.

The Office Optimisation Plan has been developed and launched to outline our drive to ensure that our core buildings are used in the most efficient and effective way and to lay out our approach to our main office and locality hub locations. This aims to minimise the cost to taxpayers for council office accommodation, so that their money is directed towards services rather than office space, whilst at the same time maintaining or improving services direct to residents.

People Strategy

Activity is continuing across all workstreams, and the launch of the recruitment hub for West Northants is a significant milestone which has been delivered. A series of initiatives around staff recognition have been delivered this period to aid in the building of the culture of the organisation. Also, reflecting the financial position the project has refocused efforts around robust budget management through reviewing relevant training and guides. In terms of Pay and Grading, extra panels have been implemented to keep the pace of delivery against a backdrop of increase volume and higher complexity than expected.

Finance

Transformation effort in this directorate has been concentrated on supporting the budget taskforce actions, and the coordination of council wide efforts. The Programme Management Office is also administering the Spending Review Panel which aims to provide oversight and assurance of expenditure.

Sustainability

Following the launch of the sustainability strategy and our pledge to make West Northamptonshire Council Net Zero by 2030 and West Northamptonshire net zero by 2045, as part of membership of UK 100, work has been progressing to baseline our emissions for our first year.

The Council has adopted the Green House Gas Accounting Tool produced by Local Partnerships in cooperation with the Local Government Association. Emissions data has been collected for all scope 1 and 2 emissions sources within the council and scope 3 emissions which fall within the financial control boundary.

We have so far moved approximately 25% of our energy purchases to renewable sources, these purchases are supported by Renewable Energy Guarantees of Origin certificates. The energy purchased in this way continues to be counted in the emissions report along with energy purchased via non renewable sources. This ensures the emphasis remains on reduction in consumption of energy.

To develop a detailed emissions reduction pathway, data has been gathered from all Council services to produce a comprehensive CO2 emissions report. This data will be published in our annual report showing key actions taken during the year and progress towards our Net Zero target.

The cross-party Sustainability Group continues to meet to oversee the workstreams being delivered by our recently expanded Sustainability Team.

Communications

We have launched our new WNC e-newsletter, which we are aiming to issue fortnightly as an additional channel to help us keep people informed, updated and engaged on our work, services and activities.

We recognise that clear, transparent communication is vital to us achieving our ambitions as a council, and a cross-party Task and Finish group identified the need to create such a newsletter. We want to tell people about what we're doing on their behalf, and of course how we're spending their money - and that's why we're constantly trying to improve the way we communicate.

This new newsletter will sit alongside our other key communications channels to keep people informed about the services we provide, from bin collections to highways, environmental health to housing, schools and education, to health and wellbeing.

There will be regular updates on the support we are offering to help soften the ongoing impact of the current cost of living crisis, as well as on the grants that are available to support community and voluntary groups to deliver important services, and it will also keep people updated on the fantastic regeneration projects our Council is leading on across West Northants, as well as promoting opportunities for residents to have their say on the important issues that affect us all.

Finally, a key aim of the newsletter will also be to highlight some of the fantastic days out and places of interest that West Northamptonshire offers, our many wonderful heritage and tourist attractions, as well as our parks and open spaces. The newsletter is in its infancy at the

moment, but we will continue to drive subscriber numbers via a range of communication methods, and people can subscribe via the link on our website.

Our coverage on social media of the incredible spectacle of large crowds enjoying Northampton's Diwali festival recently proved extremely popular. The 22nd annual event featured food, events and activities centred around the Market Square, followed by the incredible procession through the town centre, and culminating in the switching on of the Diwali lights followed by music and dancing.

The event was organised by Northampton's Indian, Hindu Welfare Organisation, with support from our Council, Northampton Town Council, Northampton Town Centre BID, Inspiration FM and Festive Road, an art company which was commissioned to work with schools and elderly residents to make lanterns for the festival.

Civic

Less than a year after achieving bronze status in the Ministry of Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS), West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) has been awarded silver status; a great achievement!

The ERS silver award is the second step in a constant improvement programme which makes it easier for reservists to find flexible employers and improves employment pathways between the forces and the private and public sectors. Work is now underway to achieve gold status.

Business Intelligence

Development of the quarter 2 Corporate Performance Dashboard is underway, monitoring progress against the delivery of our Corporate Plan and Priorities.

Multiple Adult Social Care and Education and Early Years statutory returns have been submitted and collaborative working with Children's Trust colleagues throughout the Ofsted inspection to provide data and intelligence.

Supporting the development of Local Area Profiles (Using Local Insights tool as well as offline work) has been important work, and is of huge value to our first two Local Area Partnerships which are now up and running. The team has also been developing and improving reporting in Adult Social Care, and thereby enhancing the ability to manage budgets and improve data quality.

Work continues on our website project to improve the quality of information and online services available to our residents. Thank you to those councillors who have provided help with testing new areas and providing feedback.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council