



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Lodge Road, Daventry, NN11 4FP on Monday 7 November 2022 at 6.30 pm.

Present: Councillor Ian McCord (Chair)
Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jamal Alwahabi
Councillor Paul Clark
Councillor Maggie Clubley
Councillor Rupert Frost
Councillor Keith Holland-Delamere
Councillor Mark Hughes
Councillor David James
Councillor Koulla Jolley
Councillor Colin Morgan
Councillor Ken Pritchard
Councillor Azizur Rahman
Councillor Danielle Stone

Also Present: Colin Foster – Chief Executive (NCT)
Andrew Tagg – Director of Finance and Resources (NCT)
Councillor Malcolm Longley – Cabinet Member for Finance
Councillor Wendy Randall (For Minute Item 29)

Officers: Anna Earnshaw, Chief Executive
Martin Henry, Executive Director - Finance (Section 151 Officer)
Stuart Timmiss, Executive Director - Place and Economy
Simon Bowers, Assistant Director - Assets and Environment
Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Richard Woods, Democratic Services Officer

24. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

25. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

26. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Colin Foster and Andrew Tagg from the Northamptonshire Children's Trust to the meeting, who were in attendance to provide the Committee with an overview of the Children's Trust Budget and its main cost drivers.

27. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

28. **Budget Scrutiny**

The Committee received a presentation from the Chief Executive and the Director of Finance and Resources of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) which provided an overview of the Children's Trust budget and its main cost drivers.

In introducing the presentation, the Chief Executive (NCT) outlined that the shared mission between West Northamptonshire Council and North Northamptonshire Council was to create a service capable of radically improving services for children, young people, and families across Northamptonshire. The present leadership of the trust acknowledged that the trust had emerged out of a very difficult set of circumstances with the former Northamptonshire County Council, however the new model had been set on a clear path towards improvement.

The Chief Executive (NCT) explained that a core ambition for the trust was to achieve a 'Good' rating in the next full Ofsted inspection scheduled for 2025, however the result of the recent inspection carried out over the autumn of 2022 would not be made public until late November 2022. Some of the key achievements of the trust so far included:

- 1) Delivered 6,000 more placement days using approx. same funds as 2019/20
- 2) Improved quality of social care practice and management oversight, which is helping to keep children safe, as evidenced in Ofsted visits and inspections, peer reviews and internal quality assurance
- 3) More of our social worker posts are filled 15.8% social worker vacancies in June 2022 (England average 17%) compared with 22.28% in October 2019 and no unallocated cases
- 4) Improved working with our partners and a stronger strategic approach to early help; improved early help assessment, step down process and timeliness of support
- 5) An embedded quality assurance framework working alongside practitioners to collaboratively reflect on practice, celebrate good practice and identify learning, which is 'improving children's experiences'
- 6) Achieved 100% supporting families PBR grant funds through improving practice 21/22 (previous best 37%)
- 7) Reducing pressures in the system in the context of increasing demand

In outlining the key cost drivers behind the Children's Trust budget, the Chief Executive (NCT) explained that these were an increase in children's social care cases in the care system, and increased number of children in care, increased cost

and reduced availability of placements, increasing independent fostering agency fees, and workforce pressures. In terms of additional pressures aside from the key cost drivers that were outlined, the contract negotiation also included the implementation of a staff pay award above the contract sum provision (£1.9m) based on the flat rate of increase of £1,925. There were also additional pressures related to demand growth in children's placements (£4.380m), inflationary increases above the contract sum in placements (£2.062m) and transport (0.675m), the non-delivery of £1.2m for the development of children's homes which had been built into future savings forecasts following the confirmation of capital funding in October 2022, and a cost of £0.844m following a Local Government Ombudsman judgement relating to adoption.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding how the Trust was managing workforce pressures, the Chief Executive (NCT) explained that following several years of upheaval, instability and reliance on agency staff, the overarching ambition was to return the service to a position of stability and make the Trust an attractive employer, however noted the national shortage in children's social workers.

The Chief Executive (NCT) also outlined that the percentage of social worker posts that were vacant across Prevention and Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting (17%) not only compared favourably to the Trust's KPI target of 20% but had reduced by 2.2% since October 2022. However, the percentage of the social worker workforce filled by agency staff across Prevention and Safeguarding was 18.63%, which remained slightly above the Trust's KPI target of 18%, however this excluded temporary funded posts.

In outlining the current budget position of the Trust, the Chief Executive (NCT) advised that the forecast outturn position for 2022-23 was an overspend of £11.062m against the approved net budget of £128.33m. In accordance with the contractual split percentage between West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) this equated to an overspend of £5.973m for WNC and £5.09m for NNC respectively, with the full savings programme of £2.99m having been contained within the forecast outturn position.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding how the Trust planned to mitigate this overspend, the Chief Executive (NCT) explained that in order to achieve planned savings whilst simultaneously improving the service offer, separate one-off investment options of £1.35m revenue and £1.8m, however both options would be subjected to separate detailed business cases in accordance with each Council's governance processes.

At the conclusion of the presentation, the Chair thanked the Chief Executive (NCT) and the Director of Finance and Resources (NCT) for their detailed analysis of the Children's Trust Budget, and the Committee agreed that the cost drivers for the Children's Trust Budget would become a key focus of its budget scrutiny work throughout the budget setting process.

The Chair also explained that once arrangements had been finalised with Officers for the format of the Committee's budget scrutiny process, such arrangements would be communicated to Members of the Committee in due course.

Resolved

- (1) That the information on cost drivers of the Children's Trust Budget be fully utilised to inform the Committee's budget scrutiny activity going forward.
- (2) That, once finalised with officers, it be agreed that arrangements for the Committee's budget scrutiny process be communicated to Members of the Committee as soon as practicable.

29. Call-in of Cabinet Decision of 11 October 2022 - Agenda Item 13: Office Optimisation Stage 1 building adaptations budget and disposals

The Chair introduced the Call-In request and explained that, on the advice of the Monitoring Officer, the Call-In request had been through the appropriate channels and was deemed to be valid. The Chair then explained the procedure for the Call-In and invited the Call-In originator, Councillor Wendy Randall, to address the Committee and outline the reasons for the Call-In.

In outlining the reasons for the Call-In, Councillor Randall explained that the decision of Cabinet to proceed with Stage 1 of the Council's office optimisation and building adaptation proposals, which included the closure of the Lodge Road Offices in Daventry and the establishment of a smaller office base in The Abbey Centre, had been taken without the appropriate consultation with staff having taken place, inadequate consideration of alternative options, inadequate consideration of the impact the decision could have on voluntary organisations based in The Abbey Centre, and also a lack of consideration to the CCTV system operated by Daventry Town Council, the cabling for which was linked to the Lodge Road building.

Councillor Randall questioned why no business plan or forward plan had ever been produced and shared with all Councillors prior to the taking of this decision and explained that it was of vital importance that Councillors be fully consulted not only on this decision, and all decisions of such magnitude in the future.

In outlining the possible impact of the Cabinet decision on staff based at Lodge Road, Councillor Randall expressed disappointment with the fact that the announcement of this decision was shared with all staff via email with no prior warning for the affected staff, though noted the Chief Executive's explanation that this had to be done quickly and decisively to quash inaccurate rumours. As part of the Call-In, Councillor Randall also requested further information on the effect of this decision on office-based staff at Lodge Road, who it was claimed were now facing additional costs associated with more regular home working or travelling to the Council's other office buildings in Northampton and Towcester.

Members of the Committee had no questions of the Call-In originator.

In response to the Call-In, the Executive Director – Place and Economy sought to explain the rationale behind the office optimisation project, which was to ensure that the Council's core buildings were used in the most efficient and effective way, taking

account of changes to working practices and building requirements following the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the introduction of worker types for all staff across the organisation.

The work behind the office optimisation project had reviewed the Council's core buildings for the best use and space, monitored the occupancy levels of the buildings, sought to understand the future space and storage requirements of all services, and considered the current costs, age, flexibility, usage, and local context of all core buildings.

The Executive Director – Place and Economy explained that the project would facilitate the creation of local hubs, which would be based out of The Abbey Centre in Daventry, The Forum in Towcester, and The Guildhall in Northampton, along with the Council's main office locations at One Angel Square and The Guildhall in Northampton, with a main office base for the Council's Planning service to be created at The Forum in Towcester.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding the cost and savings associated with the closure of Lodge Road, the Executive Director – Place and Economy addressed the issue raised in the Call-In regarding staff consultation and transparency and explained that the proposed operating model was not shared with staff or unions due to the necessity to move forward with the first stage of the project in order to realise the savings arising from the closure as soon as possible.

The Executive Director – Place and Economy explained that, after taking into consideration a programme of refurbishments of approximately £1m being required to The Abbey Centre in order to create the Council's new Daventry hub, the overall position of vacating and selling the Lodge Road Building would deliver a saving of approximately £343,379.

In summarising the Call-In, Councillor Randall reiterated the view that the decision of Cabinet to proceed with Stage 1 of the office optimisation project had been rushed, had not been subjected to the appropriate consultation with affected staff and unions, had not been subjected to the appropriate prior scrutiny, had not considered the possible impact on Daventry Town Council's CCTV system, left unanswered questions with regards to staff wellbeing and individual circumstances and did not appropriately consider the impact on service provision with fewer desks being available for staff at the proposed Abbey Centre hub.

Findings and Conclusions

During the deliberation session, the Committee concluded that there was a need for the decision to be referred back to Cabinet as there had been a lack of consultation and communication regarding the closure of the offices at Lodge Road, a lack of consideration of the impact on the town's CCTV system linked to the Lodge Road site and adopted by Daventry Town Council, lack of consideration of service provision and concerns over the layout of desk space at the Abbey Centre. The Committee also agreed that there was a need for Councillors to have sight and review of the desk plan for the Abbey Centre.

After all of the evidence had been heard, it was proposed by Councillor Danielle Stone and seconded by Councillor Andrew Grant that the call-in be upheld and the decision be referred back to Cabinet for further consideration. The motion was put to the vote with nine votes cast in favour of the proposal and two votes cast against, therefore the motion was carried.

Resolved

- (1) That the call-in be upheld and the decision referred back to Cabinet on the grounds that:
 - (i) There is a need for wider consultation and communication regarding the closure of the offices at Lodge Road, to ensure that the people of Daventry do not lose out democratically or in service provision.
 - (ii) There is a need for consideration on the impact on the Town's CCTV system linked to Lodge Road and adopted by Daventry Town Council.
- (2) That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee request that all Councillors are provided with desk plans for the proposed hub at The Abbey Centre as soon as such plans are available.

30. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Committee considered its work programme and no changes were proposed.

Resolved

- (1) That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.24 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____