

North Northamptonshire Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee

At 7:00 pm on Thursday 6th August 2020

Held as a virtual meeting via Zoom

Present:-

Shadow Members

Councillor M Scrimshaw (Chair)
Councillor J Beirne
Councillor G Titcombe
Councillor H Harrison
Councillor L Lawman
Councillor M Pengelly

Councillor M Rowley
Councillor C Brown
Councillor J Hakewill
Councillor A Henley

Officers

E Elliott – Interim Head of Paid Service
P Goult – North Northamptonshire
Democratic Services
B Smith – North Northamptonshire
Democratic Services

P Helsby – Programme Director
F McHugo – North Northamptonshire
Democratic Services

Also in attendance

Councillor C Stanbra (NCC)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Perry, Davies and McEwan.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The draft minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 9th July 2020 had been circulated.

Councillor Scrimshaw MOVED and Councillor Titcombe SECONDED that the minutes be approved as a correct record.

RESOLVED that:-

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9th July 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Under this item, Councillor Hakewill suggested that additional information be provided on the agenda, to ensure that it was clear to members of the public when the deadline for addressing Committee was for each meeting. A contact telephone number should also be added.

Under this item, Councillor Harrison queried when councillors were due to receive their North Northamptonshire email addresses. The Interim Head of Paid Service had raised this issue with ICT but unfortunately there was no clear date provided as to when this would occur. The Interim Head of Paid Service stated that she

would raise the matter again, but was not expecting the matter to be resolved quickly.

Under this item, Councillor Hakewill again requested where he would be able to review transactional data for the LGR Programme, namely expenditure above £500. It was noted that this data would be held by Daventry DC. A link to the appropriate website would be provided to Councillor Hakewill by the Interim Head of Paid Service.

3 Notifications of requests to address the meeting

It was noted that Councillor C Stanbra (NCC) had requested to address the Committee on Agenda Item 6 – Programme Director’s Update, and Agenda Item 7 – Forward Plan of Decisions.

4 Members’ Declaration of Interest

Councillors were invited to declare any matters of interest on items to be discussed during the meeting. No declarations were made.

5 Announcements

The Chair confirmed that following the previous meeting, he had written to the Leader of the Shadow Authority requesting that some attendance at meetings of the Task and Finish Groups by members of the Committee could be considered.

The Chair had also written to the Interim Head of Paid Service requesting discussion regarding how the Committee could constructively contribute into the LGR Programme.

6 Programme Director’s Update

Councillor C Stanbra was invited to address the Committee prior to the Programme Director’s Update being presented.

Councillor Stanbra stressed the importance of ensuring existing staff were fully engaged in the LGR Programme and the move to a new unitary authority. Councillor Stanbra stressed the need for full and meaningful engagement with the recognised trade unions, and the need to ensure there were appropriate numbers of Change Champions across the current sovereign councils. Councillor Stanbra requested an update on both of these issues. In addition, Councillor Stanbra drew reference to page 32 of the agenda (Appendix B1), and reference to the Adult Review of Target Operating Model. Whilst recognising that the cost of consultants was netted-off, Councillor Stanbra suggested that it may be more open and transparent to show the gross figure. Further comment was made by Councillor Stanbra, as to whether there was any update on progress towards profiling Future Northants Expenditure and Benefits Realisation for future years.

Paul Helsby introduced his report and presentation, which had been circulated to Members with the agenda. Paul Helsby reminded Members that the data included in the presentation was from early July 2020, and had been reported to the Shadow Executive Committee at its meeting on 23rd July 2020. The LGR Programme was currently in a reporting cycle, with an updated report to be tabled at the next Shadow Executive Committee (27th August 2020).

Paul Helsby explained that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been a need to redesign the LGR Programme, taking into account the impact of council's response to the pandemic on new priorities, time and staffing resource.

The presentation included details of the Mobilisation Plan RAG Status, a Programme Status Summary, a Change Management Update, a Communication and Engagement Update, a Blueprint Progress Update and a Financial Report.

In relation to the Programme Status Summary, Paul Helsby highlighted that at the time on compilation of the report in July, there were four areas highlighted AMBER. A brief explanation regarding each of these areas was provided in the report, which Paul Helsby elaborated on.

With regard to Change Champions, Paul Helsby confirmed that the programme had been paused due to the need to prioritise resources to address Covid-19 and the change in circumstances. Those staff who were not redirected to address Covid-19, were engaged on addressing the need to redesign the LGR Programme in light of the change in circumstances, moving it from being as transformational in the initial phase, to being "safe and legal".

Paul Helsby confirmed that in addition to the 300 indicated in the report, approximately 30 additional Change Champions had been recruited over the last couple of weeks. A GAP-analysis was being conducted to identify if any particular service areas were currently under-represented.

Paul Helsby recognised the normal interaction between trade unions and the respective sovereign councils was continuing. The PMO had started to develop a programme with trade unions regarding wider engagement; due to Covid-19 that programme had not been fully rolled-out. The key meetings on a county basis with trade unions had continued. The trade unions clearly wanted to know the fundamentals for their members e.g. where would staff be working, terms and conditions issues etc.

Work towards the disaggregation of County Council services was continuing, and hopefully further details regarding how this would impact on staff would be known in due course. There were unlikely to be any major changes for the vast majority of district council staff on Vesting Day, with most working from their current locations. Paul Helsby stressed that the LGR Programme was now focused on "Safe and Legal". The trade unions were asking for information that the Programme did not currently have, but it was being stressed that it was not envisaged there would be significant changes for the majority of staff. The Blueprint currently being compiled would be shared with the trade unions, which would provide some further information.

With regards to Adult Services, there would be some transformation of services. These were highlighted in the recent series of Member briefings. Given that Adult Services were working to a different timetable, there would be the opportunity to share more detailed information with trade unions. It was intended to split Adult Services in a "soft way", to operate from October 2020, so testing of processes and the financial implications could be monitored and kept under review.

In relation to the earlier query regarding consultants fees, Paul Helsby confirmed that this was akin to a "no win, no fee" scenario, and related to the level of savings achieved. The higher the level of savings, the higher the fee earned by the consultants. Paul Helsby stated that he would provide further information

regarding this arrangement to Members, within the confidentiality of the commercial contract with the consultants.

In summarising, Paul Helsby pointed out in financial terms the Programme was on track and within budget. It was noted that there was projected to be £85m of financial benefit to be gained from the unitary programme. It was further noted that £35m of that saving had already been delivered in 2019/20, and were on track to deliver a further £14m by Vesting Day, leaving approximately £35m to be delivered by the two new unitary councils.

Paul Helsby informed the Committee that the opportunity had been taken when profiling the Programme, to provide a budget for North Northamptonshire to have its own transformation capability; this was existing money from the funds already allocated to the Programme. There was 2-year provision, at no additional expense to existing sovereign councils.

In conclusion, Paul Helsby confirmed that the work programme ahead was ambitious and would require considerable staff time and resources. Paul Helsby provided a summary of the significant projects currently underway. Staff had responded well to the challenges, particularly the impact of Covid-19. It was important to recognise the efforts made by staff, and ensure that support was available during the coming months, to ensure that the Programme achieved the “Safe and Legal” objective on Vesting Day.

Councillor Scrimshaw noted those items on the Programme Status Summary marked as AMBER. In particular, Councillor Scrimshaw sought clarification around Children Services, and whether this was likely to be able to hit its targets. The Interim Head of Paid Service commented that there was no room for slippage regarding the creation of a Trust. The situation was being closely monitored. Assuming officers could ensure continued progress the 1st November 2020 would be met. Creation of the Trust was well-advanced. It was further noted, that the education service had been required to meet a number of challenges due to Covid-19, which had meant that some of the transformation work had been put on hold. Implementation of some of the transformation benefits would be later than originally planned.

Councillor Henley raised concern that the presentation before the Committee was 6-weeks old. Councillor Henley felt that for the Committee to “add value” there was a need for the information to be provided to the Committee’s membership sooner.

Councillor Henley also queried why on the Programme Status Summary there was no direction of travel in relation to the programmes marked AMBER, or a “return to GREEN” target date.

The Interim Head of Paid Service stated it was difficult to specify a “return to GREEN” date. Each programme comprised a considerable number of projects, each being monitored. The data behind the Summary was detailed and complex and would not be suitable for general distribution, however it was suggested that the Committee may wish to scrutinise the AMBER areas as part of its work programme.

The Interim Head of Paid Service did indicate that with regard to Children’s Services this was unlikely to turn to GREEN prior to 1st November 2020, as this

was a high-risk area, but work streams within the project were being closely monitored.

It was noted that for the Committee to see early-sight of all reports there may be a need to significantly alter the approved committee timetable. Paul Helsby stressed that he would always try to give the Committee an early indication of progress, it was noted that the Trust issued involved other partners, it was not just an NCC or Programme Team matter.

Councillor Pengelly suggested that his impression from trade union colleagues was that the dialogue with the Programme was not as good as presented, and there was a need for improvement. Councillor Pengelly wondered whether it may be appropriate for the trade union representatives to be invited to attend Committee, and provide their views.

Councillor Pengelly also questioned whether communication to the general public was satisfactory, as there seemed little direct communication or consultation. Councillor Pengelly questioned whether Members were receiving adequate information; there seemed to be bullet points but little detail. Councillor Pengelly felt that Members were not being kept up-to-date. Councillor Scrimshaw agreed that should there seem to be a discrepancy in what trade unions were saying regarding their involvement in the Programme, and what Members were being informed, the Committee may wish to explore that further.

The Interim Head of Paid Service informed Members that she, and her counterpart in the West, would be meeting with trade unions to hear any concerns; this was unlikely to be until after the summer holidays. If following that meeting, the trade unions still had concerns it was perhaps a matter that the Committee may wish to consider further.

The Interim Head of Paid Service also confirmed that discussions had been on-going with the trade unions regarding the establishment of a Children's Trust, as the timeline for this was more urgent. A strong communications strategy had been agreed in relation to Children's Services with staff and trade unions.

A Communications and Engagement Strategy had been approved by the Shadow Authority, and the Interim Head of Paid Service indicated that additional resources were to be provided to implement that.

Paul Helsby indicated due to the last few months, the Programme appreciated that some engagement had been delayed. It was recognised that the Committee would be setting its work programme later in the meeting. Paul Helsby suggested that there were possibly three areas that the Committee may wish to consider further scrutiny. These included the Human Resources work stream, ICT and the legal aspects that need to be in situ for Vesting Day.

Paul Helsby stated the presentation was high-level, however the Committee were entitled to look at the detail when they felt it appropriate to do so. It was intended to be a summary only. It was again emphasised that the Programme was playing "catch-up" due to the lockdown period, and staff were working extremely hard to ensure the various work streams were completed.

In relation to the earlier question from Councillor Stanbra regarding financial profiling over future years, Paul Helsby confirmed that was stick work in progress, and would be completed when more certainty could be provided.

Councillor Scrimshaw thanked officers for their update regarding consultation and engagement with the trade unions, and requested that a summary of the outcome of the meeting between the Interim Heads of Paid Service and the trade unions be provided to the Committee in due course.

Councillor Pengelly again suggested that “backbench” Members were receiving very little information with regard to what progress was being made. Paul Helsby reminded the Committee that only recently all sovereign councils had received a briefing on Children’s Services, Adult Services and the LGR Programme. Pre-lockdown the LGR Engine Room at One Angel Square had been open to all Members to attend. Officers had made themselves as available as possible, given the difficult circumstances. Paul Helsby stressed that the recent briefing had been conducted at each of the eight sovereign councils.

The Interim Head of Paid Service informed Members that the recent briefing at the Borough Council of Wellingborough had been recorded, and a link to this could be provided to those Members who had missed their own briefing session. In addition, an updated newsletter had recently been circulated to all Members.

Discussions were ongoing with the Leader of the Shadow Authority, as to how backbenchers could become more involved, this include a recent email to all Members regarding gauging interest in involvement in any of the proposed portfolios. The Interim Head of Paid Service did comment that there was a significant amount of information in circulation, whilst recognising that this may be in different formats and locations. A review of Member communications could be conducted in due course.

The Interim Head of Paid Service also informed the Committee that she was due to meet with the Chief Executive of NCALC in the near future, to discuss engagement with local councils.

Councillor Hakewill suggested that he felt some Members were not being fully engaged. An opportunity had been missed in engaging more Members due to the exclusion from the Task and Finish Groups.

Councillor Hakewill also expressed concern that the timetable was very tight, and the current unitary proposal would not negate the underfunding of public services in the county.

Councillor Hakewill also queried the reference to the consultancy arrangement in Adult Services, referred to earlier in the meeting, and felt more detail of the arrangement and cost should be available. In addition, Councillor Hakewill wondered what the criteria for a RED would be in relation to the Programme Status. Paul Helsby explained that a RED would be where a deadline had been missed, and was unrecoverable. An AMBER was that concerns had been identified and mitigating action was being undertaken to bring the programme back on track. It was agreed that the Community may wish to “drill down” in more detail those items marked AMBER, to gain a better understanding of what problems there may be.

Councillor Harrison felt that Members could receive more detailed information, in order to gain a better understanding of the key issues. It was important that Members were provided easier access to the more detailed information, in order

that Members could more completely fulfil their role. There was a balance of information to be achieved.

Councillor Hakewill noted that there was a current consultation underway with regard to Customer Service and how this would be delivered in the new unitary council. Councillor Hakewill suggested that it was restricted in the options provided to the public. It would be better to allow the public to express their preferences and then consider.

Councillor Hakewill also expressed concern in relation to the proposed portfolios, that there was no reference to rural matters, particularly in relation to parish and town councils. The Interim Head of Paid Services confirmed that “rural” liaison was to be covered by Councillor D Jenney within his portfolio. In addition, there was likely to be further discussion with parish and town councils to discuss potential for service delivery in the future post-Vesting Day.

Councillor Hakewill stressed that direct contact and discussion between local councils and the Shadow Authority would be welcomed. Councillor Hakewill was particularly concerned whether there was likely to be any impact in relation to precept-setting. It was confirmed that the Shadow Authority would not be looking for local councils to undertake any additional services, local councils should precept for their normal services currently undertaken.

7 Forward Plan of Decisions – August to November 2020

A copy of the recently issued Forward Plan for August to November 2020 had been circulated.

Councillor C Stanbra addressed the Committee. Councillor Stanbra suggested that there was an issue with the Forward Plan, as there were items which would likely have to come forward for determination but were not yet listed. Councillor Stanbra was suggesting that an additional item be added to Forward Plans that detailed items to be determined in the future, but where no specific determination date could currently be given. This would at least make Members aware of what items were to appear later in the year for consideration.

(Councillor Stanbra was removed from the virtual meeting at this point)

The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that officers would consider the suggestion from Councillor Stanbra. The Interim Head of Paid Service also indicated that she was happy to circulate details regarding the work of the Task and Finish Groups and their respective key tasks and reporting deadlines.

Councillor Henley commented that certain items had been dropped from the previous Forward Plan. It may prove useful in future if items were dropped that a brief explanation as to why be provided. It was noted that the item on the NCC Highways Contract had been dropped; this was queried. The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that she had enquired why, but had yet to receive an answer. A further enquiry would be made, with the response circulated to Members.

8 Work Programme: Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Scrimshaw confirmed that following the previous Committee meeting, he had written to the Leader of the Shadow Authority with regard to the request for members of the Committee to be able to observe proceedings at the Task and Finish Groups. The Leader had indicated that some arrangement could possibly be considered, however no firm “counter proposal” had yet been received by Councillor Scrimshaw.

Councillors Scrimshaw and Perry had also written to the Interim Head of Paid Service, regarding how the Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee could play a constructive, pro-active role in discussions regarding the formulation of policy. Councillor Scrimshaw was concerned that currently the Committee were playing “catch-up” with decisions being taken by the Shadow Executive Committee without any scrutiny input. The Interim Head of Paid Service had responded and suggested that she meet with Councillors Scrimshaw and Perry to discuss. This invitation would be followed-up.

The Committee then considered what items that it wished to consider over future meetings.

A number of potential issues were raised including Adult Services, Children’s Services/Trust and the unitary council budget-setting 2020/21.

Councillor Rowley expressed a wish to investigate the consultancy arrangements around the Adult Review of Targeting Operating Model, as mentioned earlier in the meeting.

Members were reminded that their role was to scrutinise the development and introduction of the unitary council and not sovereign councils’ current operational decisions.

Councillor Harrison supported the proposal to look at Adult Services, Children’s Services and the 2020/21 budget. Councillor Harrison was particularly interested in the future unitary council input into Children’s Service provision, and the role and/or accountability of future unitary Members.

Councillor Scrimshaw suggested that discussions could be held outside of the meeting with officers to agree a timetable for these items to be timetabled.

Councillor Hakewill suggested that the Leader of the Shadow Authority be invited to attend the Committee in future to provide an opportunity for a general Question & Answer session. In addition, when significant items are to be discussed, the appropriate portfolio holder be invited to attend, with relevant senior officers.

Councillor Hakewill also suggested a future item to discuss local council matters, where NCALC and others could be invited to attend.

Councillor Hakewill also drew reference to the current LGA consultation on a potential revision to the Code of Conduct, and wondered whether the Committee should feed into any response. The Interim Head of Paid Service suggested that the Interim Monitoring Officer could compile and circulate a briefing paper on the consultation.

Councillor Pengelly suggested that the Committee seek out best practise from elsewhere, particularly with other Children’s Trust arrangements, to see how Members interact in those scenarios. Councillor Pengelly agreed that the future

provision of Adult Services was an important issue for the Committee to consider. With regard to the Task and Finish Groups, Councillor Pengelly felt that the Committee should wait to see what proposals arose from the Groups' discussions, and comment accordingly.

Councillor Scrimshaw confirmed that he would discuss with officers outside of the meeting, on scheduling-in the items raised by Committee members.

9 Member Training and Development

The Committee briefly discussed what additional training and development they felt was required, in order for Members to constructively discuss the issues likely to arise at future meetings. It was noted that a number of significant topic areas would be discussed at future meetings, and it was agreed some background information in advance would be beneficial to Members.

The Interim Head of Paid Service indicated there was an aim to build upon the recent Member briefings.

Councillor Hakewill suggested there may be a benefit to hear from Members in other authorities who had gone through the unitary process. In addition, it may be of interest to consider what training will be made available to unitary Members after the election in May 2021. The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that the issue of Member training and induction was being considered as part of the Programme and by a Task and Finish Group. There were no confirmed proposals at present.

The Interim Head of Paid Service indicated some informal training sessions could be arranged in the interim.

Councillor Harrison felt interactive forums would be particularly beneficial, particularly with regard to Adult Services and Children's Service. Councillor Harrison agreed obtaining the experience of Members with knowledge of existing Children's Trusts would also be beneficial.

Councillor Scrimshaw suggested that he discuss future training needs with officers outside of the meeting, and that proposals be developed.

Councillor Henley sought confirmation that being a member of the Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee did not preclude a Member from working with any portfolio holder group. The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that all Members were being encouraged to work with portfolio holders within their respective subject areas.

10 Exempt Items

There were no exempt items discussed.

11 Urgent Items

There were no urgent items discussed.

12 Close of Meeting

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 9:07 pm.