

Minutes of a Meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

At 7.00 pm on Tuesday 12th December, 2023

Held in the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby

Members

Councillor Lyn Buckingham (Chair)

Councillor Jim Hakewill

Councillor Richard Levell

Councillor Paul Marks

Councillor Steven North

Councillor Russell Roberts

Officers

Janice Gotts – Executive Director of Finance and Performance

Adele Wylie – Executive Director of Customer and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

David Watts – Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing &
Director of Children’s Services

Graeme Kane – Interim Executive Director of Place and Economy

Guy Holloway – Assistant Chief Executive

Mark Dickenson – Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy

Claire Edwards – Assistant Director of Finance Accountancy

Nana Barfi-Sarpong – Chief Information Officer

Tom Barden – Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships

Louise Tyers – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance

Councillor Lloyd Bunday – Executive Member for Finance and Transformation

Colin Foster – Chief Executive, Northamptonshire Children’s Trust

Andrew Tagg – Director of Finance and Resources, Northamptonshire Children’s
Trust

29 Apologies for non-attendance

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Lora Lawman, Zoe McGhee and Dr Anup Pandey.

30 Members' Declarations of Interest

The Chair invited those who wished to do so to declare any interests in respect of items on the agenda.

No declarations of interest were made.

31 Notifications of requests to address the meeting

There were no requests to address the meeting.

32 Minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

33 Northamptonshire Children's Trust Budget Monitoring Report for Period 6

The Chair welcomed Colin Foster, Chief Executive and Andrew Tagg, Director of Finance and Resources from Northamptonshire Children's Trust to the meeting.

The Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing (DASS) and Interim DCS presented the report which provided Period 6 budget monitoring and the forecast outturn position for Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT).

The report contained a detailed review of the financial position of NCT as at the 30th September 2023 and also detailed the variances at individual service level, service demand pressures and proposed mitigations. The report also provided an update on the delivery of the agreed savings programme.

Mr Foster advised that the Trust welcomed challenge and they had recently attended two budget scrutiny sessions. The Trust and the councils were working to develop an effective system which helped families stay together. The level of demand on services had been recognised in the 2024/25 contract sum but other pressures were also recognised.

During discussion on the report, the following key points were made:

- i. A significant portion of the Council's budget was given to NCT and this was an opportune time to consider their budget. NCT was a risk to the financial position of the Council and this was an opportunity for Scrutiny to seek reassurance.
- ii. Mr Tagg explained that the report before the Committee was produced on a monthly basis and contained contractual information. The delivery of children's services was the most challenging it had ever been and the Trust were looking to transform the delivery of children's services.
- iii. In response to a question as to whether this year's pay award had been taken into account in the staffing variance, Mr Tagg advised that the contract sum included any pay award, but this year it had been higher than budgeted for. A vacancy factor was also included. The Trust had a significant number of agency staff and these could be up to 35% more in costs than permanent employees. Significant work was being undertaken to recruit social workers but it was a national problem.
- iv. Mr Foster explained that the Trust worked closely with Northampton University. Some of the students in the Social Work Academy came from the university and a significant number were expected this coming year.
- v. Retention of staff was one of the biggest issues. Staff were supported with caseloads and other support to stay. Social Workers were starting to feel that NCT was a safe place to practice.
- vi. The largest cause of the variance was due to placement costs. Assumed growth of £3m for placements had been included. There had been an increase of 30 places between October and December and some of these were in supported

accommodation. The fluctuations were very challenging along with a very fluid placement market. In one case, the cost of a mother and baby in care was £17k per week. Supported accommodation and accommodation for over-18s was at the mercy of the independent sector but the Trust were now working with housing colleagues.

- vii. A recent report had found that there was a significant level of profiteering within the independent sector, where demand outstrips supply. When young people had been taken into custody this was also a significant cost at £20k per week. A bid was being looked at to the Department of Education for a high needs children's home.
- viii. Mr Tagg also explained that the Trust were working with health and education for joint funded places. The Integrated Care Board (ICB) would also be challenged about funding which would reduce the placements budgets. It was important that all partners contributed.

It was moved by Councillor Jim Hakewill and seconded by the Chair that the three local MPs and Local Government Association be written to outlining our circumstances and the challenges we face with children's social care in North Northamptonshire.

On being put to the vote, there were three votes for the motion, none against and three abstentions, therefore the motion was carried.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the contents of the Period 6 Budget Monitoring Report for the Northamptonshire Children's Trust.
- (ii) That the three local MPs and Local Government Association be written to outlining our circumstances and the challenges we face with children's social care in North Northamptonshire.

34 Key Performance Indicator 2023/24 for Period 6

The Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships presented the report which provide an update on the Council's performance across a wide range of services. The report provided a detailed assessment of the Council's performance in relation to Key Performance Indicators for 2023/24 for Period 6.

Comments on several specific indicators were made, including:

- Vacancies – how can Corporate Scrutiny Committee add value and scrutinise the stress on existing staff and understaffed departments? In response, the Executive Director of Customer and Governance advised that vacancy information provided in the report was only one piece of information and wider performance should be looked at. Is there a causal link between the performance and staff data? The Chair confirmed that there would be a report to this Committee on agency/OPUS in June.
- It was important that there was not information overload and perhaps 101 indicators was too many. In response, the Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships advised that the number of indicators showed the diversity in

the Council's business. A review of the Performance Management Framework would take place early in the new year.

- Agency (MPS10) –were there issues in certain areas, for example Planning Services, where agency staff were needed? The Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing advised that agency staff levels were monitored in each department. However, some may only be for a day to cover a service to ensure that there were acceptable levels of staffing. Workforce planning and vacancies may be an issue the Chair and Vice Chair may wish to raise through the Scrutiny Management Board.

RESOLVED:

To note the performance of the Council and its services.

35 Forecast Draft Outturn 2023/24 for Period 6

The Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy presented the report which set out the draft outturn for 2023/24 as at Period 6. The report set out the material financial issues which had been identified since the budget had been set in February 2023.

The forecast outturn position for the General Fund was an overspend of £7.575m and an overspend of £52k for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Dedicated Schools Grant was forecasting a £6.404m overspend.

The Children's Trust was forecasting an overspend of £23.434m, of which the cost to the Council was £10.348m. If these pressures were not mitigated, this would pose a significant financial risk to the Council.

During discussion on the report, the following key points were made:

- i. It was noted that the Children's Trust were looking at potential mitigations, however a potential risk was the delivery of efficiency savings. These costs could not be mitigated each year through contingency and cannot be ongoing.
- ii. The HRA had £1.5m in arrears but this was never shown as a pressure and not reported. In response, the Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy advised that these arrears will ultimately be a pressure and were included in the bad debts provision.

RESOLVED:

To note the draft outturn report for 2023/24 as at Period 6.

36 Capital Outturn 2023/24 for Period 6

The Assistant Director of Finance Accountancy presented the report which set out the Capital Forecast 2023/24 as at Period 6. The report set out the material financial issues which had been identified since the budget had been set in February 2023.

The forecast position following the review and reprofiling of budgets was a General Fund underspend of £21.6m and an underspend of £15.9m for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

A range of schemes had been delivered or were in progress during this year, including Corby Towns Fund – 6th Form College and Train Station to Town Centre, Street Lighting upgrades, a number of school related improvements such as completion of work at Prince William Academy, delivery of highways maintenance programme, Disabled Facilities Grants and the Refugee Resettlement Programme.

RESOLVED:

To note the capital forecast for 2023/24 as at Period 6.

37 ICT Update

The Assistant Chief Executive gave a verbal update on ICT. The key points made were:

- We all were reliant on ICT within the Council.
- There were three broad areas of ICT provision – NNC, services we receive from WNC and a consortium of public service providers.
- NNC continued to be serviced by WNC and the former district and boroughs were serviced by NNC.
- The ICT Team was around 40 people, including service desk, applications support, infrastructure, cyber security, technical project implementation, service management and leadership.
- There had been a number of achievements since vesting day including:
 - Keeping services running effectively
 - Adjustment to the unitary authority
 - Coming out of the pandemic
 - Sustaining transformation
 - Moving from data centres – more efficient estate
- There had also been a number of challenges:
 - System upgrades
 - Efficient delivery of ICT to support services
 - How we moved forward with ICT – talks with WNC about taking on more services
 - Retaining staff in a buoyant market

During discussion on the item, the following key points were made:

- i. A number of systems appeared not to be used effectively and more work needed to be done to ensure they were more effective, including the costs of licences. In response, the Assistant Chief Executive advised that systems were being rationalised and we were looking to get the most out of them. Contract lengths and costs were also being looked at.
- ii. How was data managed when transferred to a new system? In response, the Chief Information Officer advised that this was a priority for ICT. Suppliers were fully vetted and we ensured that we had the appropriately skilled staff. There was a need to ensure that the data was accurate and correct.
- iii. How quickly can the website be amended to enable reporting of potholes and damage? The Executive Director of Place and Economy advised that

potholes can be reported through the complaints and feedback page on the website.

RESOLVED:

To note the verbal update.

38 Scrutiny Work Plan for the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee received the Scrutiny Work Plan as it related to the Committee.

During discussion on the report, the following points were made:

- i. When items are referred to the Scrutiny Management Board for consideration, there needed to be a feedback process to advise when items were or were not accepted. The Executive Director of Customer and Governance advised that she would ensure that Democratic Services feedback when a decision was made on an item.

RESOLVED:

To note the Scrutiny Work Plan as it relates to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee.

39 Close of Meeting

The Chair thanked members and officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm.

Chair

Date