

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Commission

At 7:00pm on Tuesday 28 February 2023

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

Present:

Members

Councillor Wendy Brackenbury (Chair)	Councillor Kevin Watt (Vice Chair)
Councillor Valerie Anslow	Councillor Zoe McGhee
Councillor Robin Carter	Councillor Andy Mercer
Councillor John Currall	Councillor Gill Mercer
Councillor Mark Dearing	Councillor Lee Wilkes
Councillor Jim Hakewill	

Officers

AnnMarie Dodds – Executive Director of Children’s Services
Adele Wylie – Executive Director of Customers and Governance (Monitoring Officer)
Rob Atkins – Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships
Louise Tyers – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Councillor Scott Edwards – Executive Member for Children, Families, Education and Skills
Colin Foster – Northamptonshire Children’s Trust
Cornelia Andrecutt – Northamptonshire Children’s Trust

60. Apologies for Non-Attendance

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Philip Irwin and Geoff Shacklock.

61. 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.

62. Notification of Requests to Address the Meeting

There had been no requests to address the meeting.

63. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 31 January 2023

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed.

64. Consideration of Any Matter Referred to the Commission for Call-In

There had been no requests for call-in.

65. Ofsted Inspection of North Northamptonshire Local Authority Children's Services

The Scrutiny Commission considered the Ofsted Inspection report of North Northamptonshire Local Authority Children's Services following an inspection held in October 2022.

This was the first inspection of North Northamptonshire local authority children's services and the outcome of overall effectiveness was requires improvement to be good. Children's services in the predecessor authority of Northamptonshire County Council were judged inadequate in 2019.

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

- i. In response to a question from a member as to how the Children's Trust would describe what good looked like, the Chief Executive said it would include good leadership and management, including the Trust and also the Executive Director and Executive Member of Children's Services at NNC. There needed to be cohesion on leadership and consistent, high quality practice with good outcomes for children. It was acknowledged that early help was not as yet developed as how the Trust would want it to be, but staff were working hard to ensure the right support at the right time.
- ii. A question was asked on how good practice was fed back to staff. In response, it was advised that a plan was being put together with the child at the centre. This would be a multi-agency plan and the Trust would be looking for consistency in practice. Work was happening with other professionals and the Trust were learning from what did not go well.
- iii. In response to a question as to how weaker members of staff would be carried through and supported, the Chief Executive advised that the Trust needed experienced leaders and a stable leadership team. Quality assurance was taking place at a case file level and monthly supervision meetings would appropriately challenge poor performance and drive good practice. The Executive Member advised that it was about ensuring all staff were on board with what was trying to be achieved. There had been success in changing staff attitudes.
- iv. Some care leavers had told the inspector that some temporary accommodation was of poor quality, who inspected accommodation and what was defined as 'poor' quality? In response, officers advised

that there had been work on the provision available and it was around ensuring that there was more choice available.

- v. A large number of homeless people were likely to be care leavers and if poor accommodation was offered, they may choose not to stay. It was accepted that accommodation was not good in the county for post-16 and work was ongoing to improve accommodation, with housing now sitting on the Corporate Parenting Board.
- vi. The report stated that access to one-to-one intervention by mental health practitioners had been limited by short-term funding decisions. It was clarified that funding had ended at a point but during the inspection funding had been secured.
- vii. There was a risk of exploitation for some care leavers and there was a need to bring in meaningful access to services for young people. It was acknowledged that exploitation was a major concern but there was a strong care leaver offer in place. It was important care leavers had high aspirations and staff looked to support this.
- viii. The report stated that most child protection and child in need meetings focussed primarily on the completion of actions and not sufficiently on the impact of services and interventions for children, this implied that there was less focus on the children and more on the system. In response, the Commission were reminded that in 2019 there were poor systems in place. Moving from inadequate, there did need to be some focus on compliance, but it was accepted that some further improvement was needed.
- ix. With regards to staff recruitment, how many staff were needed and what was the plan for recruiting and retaining staff? Recruitment was a national challenge and overcoming Northamptonshire's reputation was probably the biggest challenge, however some former staff were now returning. The Chief Executive advised that he spoke to everyone who applied to work at the Trust to thank them for their interest and this personal touch was building trust. There had been 586 application over the last five months, with 13% recruited and the Trust was now in a position where there were more joiners than leavers.
- x. It was noted that the police were spending a lot of time chasing missing children and asked what the Trust were doing to improve the situation. In response, officers advised that they checked in on the children when they were found and looked to learn from the reasons why they had gone missing. They supported the police and were working well together.
- xi. The lack of life-story work for children in care was very disappointing. In response, the Chief Executive advised that eight life story workers had been made redundant in 2018 by the former County Council. Capacity was now being rebuilt in and there had been some good work from a starting point of zero. The culture of life-story work was also changing so it became less functional and more meaningful.

- xii. It was noted that oversight of unregistered children's homes was not good. In response, officers advised that it was important to ensure the needs of the child were met and management decisions to use these premises should have been recorded and appropriate checks made. Ofsted would fast track a registration if an unregistered provider met the needs of the child.
- xiii. The work of the social work academy was highlighted within the report and officers were asked to explain how it operated and was it delivering quality people who were now staying with the Trust? The Chief Executive advised that the Trust would be more than happy to do a future session on the Academy and bring some people who had gone through it. The Academy was delivered in partnership with Northampton University and historically, there had been a number of higher leavers, but more were now staying. The Academy was something to be proud of.
- xiv. In response to how the Trust learnt from other authorities, particularly those who had been graded as outstanding, it was confirmed that the Trust was a member of a number of regional groups. They also took part in Peer Reviews and the aim was to learn from each other and to share learning.
- xv. With regard to what resources were needed to deliver future improvement, officers confirmed that budgets were under pressure, mainly due to placement costs. If there was support with demand led pressures, then this could be tackled. For future inspections, they were likely to be two separate inspections for North and West, which would lead to a resource challenge.

The Trust were thanked for all their work whilst recognising there was still work to do. They were asked to pass on our thanks to staff.

On behalf of the Commission, the Chair thanked everyone involved in the improvement and that they would welcome to see the Post Action Plan when it was available.

RESOLVED:

To note the Ofsted Inspection of North Northamptonshire Local Authority Children's Services.

66. Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

The Scrutiny Commission received a presentation from the Executive Director of Children's Services on the North Northamptonshire SEND Improvement Programme.

The challenges for SEND in North Northamptonshire were:

- Special school provision was unable to meet the increased number of children and young people referred
- The budget was under pressure as local special school demand and use of external independent providers increased

- Lack of strategic and operational oversight for the allocation and quality of specialist provision and resources
- SEND early help offer was not joined up with gaps in parts of the specialist support services
- Processes for statutory assessment were wieldy and not working and performance variable
- A backlog of over 140 out of time assessments and 900 annual reviews that had not been processed in July 2022
- No specific allocation of specialist teams for children with an EHCP or with identified complex needs – all SEN case officer led
- Tribunal cases were at a critical level with 37 cases, the majority having missed the deadline for submission
- Broken relationships between the LA and with families and schools

The key priorities of the SEND Commissioning Delivery Programme were:

- To support schools in developing local provision by strengthening an early help offer of SEND advisory teams around mainstream schools
- Working closely with the SEND team to review and develop responsive, flexible and effective local specialist provision
- Ensuring the special educational needs of children were responded to quickly and effectively through development of a brokerage service
- Supporting schools to improve their offer to children through robust quality assurance programmes
- Ensuring value for money through contract monitoring, reviewing and evaluation of our commissioned services
- Robust accountability and governance of both spending and quality assurance through comprehensive reporting mechanisms
- Transition for children and young people is improved across all areas of operation

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

- i. In response to a question on EHCPs and how long they should take, the Executive Director advised that they should be undertaken within 20 weeks. This included undertaking the assessment and consulting with schools.
- ii. The Executive Director advised that a number of historic arrangements had been made with some settings which either had no units or a child was not at the setting. Funding should follow the child.
- iii. In response to how the LA dealt with parental choice around SEND, the Executive Director clarified that it was parental preference and not choice. If a preferred school could not meet a child's needs, conversations needed to be had and decisions made based on the evidence available.
- iv. A number of vulnerable children may be taken out of school if their preferences could not be met, which could lead to safeguarding issues. It was accepted that this was a risk, but children could be home educated, and the LA worked closely with the Children's Trust.

- v. If a child was being educated in a special school and during a review it was believed that they should not be in that setting, the LA would not disrupt the child's education to solve the problem.
- vi. In response to how the LA ensured that funding was getting to the child as it was intended, the Executive Director advised that outcomes were monitored and there was also an annual review process.

Members welcomed the presentation and were reassured that the situation was improving.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the presentation.
- (ii) To receive a further update on the SEND Improvement Programme at a future meeting.

67. Performance Indicator Report 2022/23 (Period 9)

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided an update on the Council's performance across a wide range of services, as measured by performance indicators. The report provided a summary of the performance of Council services and further detail including trend lines and exception reports.

Comments on several specific indicators were made, including:

- % of complaints answered within the Service Level Agreement (20 working days or agreed extension) (MPS34) – performance was not improving. Was there a need for a different complaints system or was more staff needed to process complaints? In response, the Executive Director of Customer and Governance acknowledged that performance was disappointing, and it had been highlighted with managers about the importance of a response within the SLA. Following a restructure in Customer Services, one of the managers now had responsibility for complaints. Complaints data should come to scrutiny, along with budget and performance information to provide full information.
- Number of voids (STP36) – there were 80 voids in Corby, and it needed to be acknowledged that when a property was void it was lost rental income. It was suggested that the median time taken for turnaround may be a better indicator.
- Total number of non-emergency repairs completed (STP10) – a member stated that he did not believe that these types of repairs were being completed efficiently within the Corby area and that the performance of the repairs service should be scrutinised. The Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships advised that some of the longer repairs may be legacy ones, but he would provide a fuller response.
- % occupancy of East Northamptonshire Enterprise Centre (MPS28) – it was noted that there were issues with the roof at the Enterprise Centre. It was questioned who would be paying for the faulty roof as it was only completed recently. It was noted that occupancy was low and had always been low. Was there an agency running the Centre and what

impact could we have to improve occupancy? The Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships advised that management agents did run the Centre and they were looking to develop a new marketing plan.

- Total active applicants on the Keyways Housing Register (STP04) – was it possible to provide a breakdown of applicants in each of the areas and how long people were waiting to be housed?
- Number of E-Scooter trips (GSE01) – was there any data on the number of accidents reported to the Police? The Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships undertook to see if this information was available.
- Number of rough sleepers (single night snapshot figure) (AFL12) – the number of rough sleepers was increasing, and Wellingborough was seeing an increase. Where was the refuge accommodation? The Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships advised that he would provide a fuller response.
- Determination of planning applications (STP15 – STP17) – there had been low performance for quite a while. There were a lot of major applications waiting, which was concerning.
- Percentage of rent collected (STP38) – the performance was not good. How much was it in money terms?
- Breastfeeding rate at 6-8 weeks (BBF01) – it was noted that performance was dropping, what was the Council's policy to reverse this trend? The Interim Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships advised that he would provide a fuller response.

RESOLVED:

To note the performance of the Council and its services.

68. Close of Meeting

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

The meeting closed at 9.47pm.

Chair

Date