

Children's Trust Joint Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Children's Trust Joint Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Northampton NN1 1DF on Wednesday 15 February 2023 at 1.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker (Co-Chair, in the Chair)
Councillor Scott Edwards (Co-Chair)
Councillor Lloyd Bunday
Councillor Matt Golby
Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Councillor Jason Smithers

Officers:

Rob Bridge, Chief Executive (NNC)
AnnMarie Dodds, Executive Director of Children's Services (NNC)
Janice Gotts, Executive Director of Finance (NNC)
Martin Henry, Executive Director Finance (WNC)
Richard Woodward, Intelligent Client Function Programme Lead (NNC)
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (WNC)

1. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Matt Golby. Apologies for non-attendance were received from the Chief Executive (WNC) and the Executive Director of Customer and Governance (NNC).

2. Minutes

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meeting of the Children's Trust Joint Committee held on 7 September 2022 be agreed.

3. Declarations of Interest

None declared.

4. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting.

5. Urgent Business

The Chair advised that there was no urgent business.

6. **Northamptonshire Children's Trust Business Plan and 2023/24 Contract Sum**

At the Chair's invitation the Executive Director Finance (WNC) introduced the report, advising that the provisional 2023/24 Contract Sum and Business Plan for 2023/24 – 2026/27 had resulted from development work and negotiation between the relevant parties in autumn 2022. Delivery against the Contract Sum and Business Plan would be monitored across the year ahead.

The Executive Director Finance (NNC) and Chief Executive (NNC) highlighted the importance of recognising both the challenges facing Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) and the need for it to deliver effective services that represented value for money. The owning authorities had provided further investment to support NCT's improvement journey and were working closely with it to mitigate financial risks. The Valuing Care model should also help to deliver value for money.

The Committee considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- A lack of confidence was expressed that NCT would be able to deliver the 2023/24 Contract Sum as planned. The owning authorities had a duty to support young people but also needed to secure value for money from services.
- It would be beneficial if the Committee could have more oversight of how resources were used. This would give assurance on matters such as use of the additional funding provided to support high risk cases.
- There would need to be a significant focus through the year ahead on delivering the budget even taking into account demand pressures. The owning authorities and the Committee would continue to provide support and challenge to NCT on this.
- The Business Plan presented to the Committee included some sections that were not yet complete. The Committee should seek further information on the Strategic Risk Register in particular to ensure that it provided the necessary assurance.
- There should be more of a role for councillors in overseeing NCT than was provided for in the arrangements set by the Department for Education (DfE). Councillors were corporate parents and were accountable to residents for the effectiveness of services. Councillors needed to be able to see that key challenges were being addressed. They could also provide different perspectives that would assist in doing this.
- NCT did not seem to have made much progress so far with service transformation compared to the aims that were projected when it was being developed.
- Proposed savings to be delivered in 2023/24 were predicated on additional investment from the owning authorities. This was not a sustainable approach. Service transformation and effective core services were needed to manage budget pressures.
- The Leader of NNC had written to NCT to seek its response to various matters of concern.

The Executive Director of Children's Services (NNC) made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Operational and Strategic groups had discussed the use of funding provided to support high risk cases at meetings earlier that week to seek assurance on this.

- The Intelligent Client Function (ICF) would be analysing how NCT had used additional funding for early help and fostering provided by the owning authorities. If necessary this could result in recommendations to the owning authorities regarding a second year of funding.

The Chief Executive (NNC) made the following points during the course of discussion:

- It was open to the owning authorities to contact the DfE to seek a meeting to discuss the kind of issues raised at the current meeting and the potential for more democratic oversight of NCT.
- Effective forecasting and modelling of placements was key to financial delivery. ICF and NNC representatives had met with a high-performing local authority and would share the learning gained with NCT.
- The NNC Audit and Governance Committee had identified matters relating to NCT that it planned to consider, potentially including the risk register.

The Executive Director Finance (NNC) advised that the NNC Audit and Governance Committee was due to consider NCT audit reports at a meeting in the following week. Work was also being done by audit officers from both owning authorities and the finance lead for NCT.

The Chair advised that in response to a recommendation from the WNC Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee she had written to the DfE requesting that it fund any overspend on the NCT budget. The DfE had not agreed to do this.

The ICF Programme Lead made the following points during the course of discussion:

- NCT had now set up a Transformation board designed to ensure that resources were used as effectively as possible.
- NCT had identified £2.99m savings in 2022/23 and a further £7.6m proposed savings in 2023/24, including £3.8m from Valuing Care.
- The financial reporting process used with the Operational Group was being improved to provide clearer information about the delivery of in-year savings by NCT. The ICF had sought to work with NCT to streamline processes and enhance transparency. If this approach was not successful the owning authorities could consider further actions available to them under the contract.
- The Contract Sum was provisional until NCT's and the owning authorities' budget setting processes had been completed.

The Chair noted that it was essential to avoid a similar situation with children's services as had occurred under Northamptonshire County Council. There should be constructive discussion between NCT and the owning authorities about their future engagement and how the authorities could support NCT to address the challenges it faced. It was also helpful for the owning authorities to discuss these matters as at the current meeting.

The Chair subsequently invited views from the Committee about its future meeting arrangements, to reflect that meetings were typically very short and scheduled meeting dates were often not used.

Committee members made the following points:

- Discussion at the current meeting suggested that Committee meetings would be longer in future.
- Arrangements for democratic involvement in the work of NCT needed to be maintained at the appropriate level.
- Frequent meeting cancellations appearing on the owning local authority websites could lead to inaccurate perceptions of the Committee's work.

The Chief Executive (NNC) advised that the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Committee were currently focussed more on formal approval for ownership functions and maintaining relations between the two local authorities than holding to account NCT. This focus could be reviewed and subject to further discussion in the appropriate forum, with input from NCT. It would be important for the two owning authorities to show that they had a shared position on this matter.

Committee members expressed support for revisiting the ToR and that the owning authorities should agree common outcomes for this.

The ICF Programme Lead advised that the ToR for the Committee stated that it would meet as and when required. NNC Democratic Services was due to support the Committee in 2023/24 and there had been discussion with them about scheduling quarterly meetings.

The Chair noted that it could be impractical to try to arrange Committee meetings only when required due to the number of senior leaders involved. The Chair also encouraged that future Committee meetings in North Northamptonshire be held in Wellingborough, given its relatively central location in the county.

RESOLVED that: the Children's Trust Joint Committee:

- a) Noted the provisional contract sum for Northamptonshire Children's Trust for the 2023/24 financial year.
- b) Approved the Northamptonshire Children's Trust Business Plan for the 2023/24 – 2026/27 period.
- c) Requested that the completed Strategic Risk Register for the Northamptonshire Children's Trust Business Plan 2023/24 – 2026/27 be circulated to Joint Committee members.
- d) Supported that the Department for Education should be contacted to seek a discussion with the owning authorities about future democratic oversight of Northamptonshire Children's Trust.
- e) Supported that Joint Committee meetings should take place on a quarterly basis in 2023/24.

The meeting closed at 1.40 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____