

Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Children’s Services (Northamptonshire Children’s Trust) – 4th December 2023

Present

Budget Scrutiny Panel Members

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Russell Roberts
Cllr Paul Marks
Cllr Jim Hakewill

Executive Members

Cllr Scott Edwards (Children’s Services)
Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)

Observers

Cllr Gill Mercer

Northamptonshire Children’s Trust Officers

Colin Foster (Chief Executive of Northamptonshire Children’s Trust)
Andrew Tagg (Director of Finance and Resources)

Children’s Services Officers

David Watts (Exec Director for Children’s Services)
Neil Goddard (Assistant Director of Education)
Susan Tanner (AD)

Finance Officers

Mark Dickenson (AD for Finance and Strategy)
Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)
Claire Edwards (AD for Finance Accountancy)

Democratic Services Officers

Ben Smith (Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer)
Raj Sohal (Democratic Services Officer)

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Contract Sum 2024/25

The Committee considered a presentation by the Chief Executive of The Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT), which outlined its 2024/25 Contract Sum submission.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried what transformation work was being undertaken to mitigate any potential unforeseen budget pressures.
- Members queried whether additional provision had been built into the NCT's budget to address potential future pressures.
- Members requested a timeline of planned transformation work for scrutiny to assess progress.
- Members queried how confident officers of the NCT were that it would secure sufficient staffing to deliver its proposed transformation projects and whether a heavier reliance would be placed on agency or full-time staff.
- Members queried what investment the NCT had received from North Northamptonshire Council for its IT systems and how transformation work in this area was progressing.
- One member suggested that the local authority and NCT fund voluntary sector organisations, such as 'Home Start', to assist in service delivery and relieve internal pressures.
- Members queried what impact the living wage would have on wages within the budgetary year.
- Members queried which services the NCT considered transferring back to North Northamptonshire Council.

In response, the Chief Executive of the NCT clarified that:

- The recruitment of social workers on a permanent basis and the cost of placements for children were both significant and challenging pressures. The NCT sought to mitigate further pressures in this area.
- The NCT had built inflation provision in to its budget of over £5M, with an additional £2.7M allocated for potential future growth pressures of an increasing care population. Projections of growth had been accurate to date however, placement costs were modelled based upon averages rates of growth. The NCT had also built uplifts into contracts with independent sector service providers.

- A series of business cases would go to the Transformation and Efficiencies Board and would include timelines for planned work.
- The budget for children's homes was £3.7M and the NCT did not seek to create savings that would place financial burden on the Council. These services would be funded through transformation work and service provision would be transferred from the Trust back to North Northamptonshire Council.
- The actual contract sum for transformation was £177.9M, under 'Block 1' core funding. The local authority had, in principal, agreed to fund 'Block 2' transformation work of £2.58M.
- There had been a delay in recruitment and officers of the NCT desired to carry out effective investment in staffing. £2.58M was allocated for short-term measures, which the Chief Executive suggested would create £4M in savings, with a further reduction of costs as soon as caseloads reached a manageable level. The medium term financial plan set out detailed staffing costs and other 'demand and inflationary' pressures.
- There was an agreement for 'Eclipse' IT system implementation for the NCT. Procurement for a new children's social care IT system had also progressed and the deadline for submission of contracts was two weeks prior to the meeting. Officers of the Trust were testing potential providers' systems and would decide by February 2024. The NCT intended for its new IT system to be live by Easter 2025.
- Additional support for service provision and funding for voluntary sector organisations existed through early help activity within the contract sum. Family hub work also tied in with the voluntary sector.
- The NCT had mirrored the Council's 4% increase relating to pay. The national living wage had increased by 9.83%.
- The NCT would consider transferring children's homes and non-statutory services back to North Northamptonshire Council.
- The medium-term financial plan would be made available by Friday 8th December.

End of Meeting