

## **Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Children’s Services (Northamptonshire Children’s Trust) – 4<sup>th</sup> 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**

## **Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Enabling Services – 8<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

### **Present**

#### **Budget Scrutiny Panel Members**

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

Apologies were received from Cllr Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting)

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)

#### **Enabling Services Officers**

Guy Holloway (Assistant Chief Executive)  
Adele Wylie (Executive Director of Customer and Governance)  
Simon Mills (Assistant Director of Customer Experience)  
Jeandre Hunter (Head of Procurement)  
Lucy Hogston (Assistant Director of Revenue and Benefits)  
Rachel Ashley-Caunt (Chief Internal Auditor)  
Sanjit Sull (Assistant Director of Legal and Governance)  
Sadie Nightingale (Head of Registrations and Coroners)  
Heather Jackson (Head of Elections)

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Jeff Abbott (Strategic Finance Business Partner)  
Niall Blowfield (Senior Finance Business Partner)

#### **Democratic Services Officers**

Louise Tyers (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Enabling Services, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

### **Overview**

- i) There would be a balanced budget for 2024/25, however there would be significant pressures in future years. Acknowledging that a balanced budget was a necessity, but some members felt that services which mattered to residents were being taken out of the budget to support the demand-led budgets.
- ii) In response to a question as to how many of the FTE posts within the department were funded, officers confirmed that all posts were budgeted for however, a vacancy factor was also included to allow for turnover. A question was also asked on how many people were actually in post.

**Action:** The Executive Director of Customer and Governance undertook to speak to HR colleagues about how the information can be obtained whilst ERP Gold was unavailable.

### **Finance and Performance**

- iii) It would be helpful for next year that along with a figure for pressures/savings, it was also shown as a percentage of the budget.
- iv) It was the additional income of £4.6m from rises in interest rates guaranteed or would it be affected by changes in the rates over the year? Officers advised that it was a fixed rate of return and would not fluctuate.

### **Customer and Governance**

- v) The Council was looking at alternative ways to fund the Wellbeing Advisor post which was shown as a saving. It was a vacant post so there would be no redundancy.
- vi) Officers explained that the additional income for legal services commercialisation was around looking to support town and parish councils with their legal requirements. There would also be additional income around the school admissions process.
- vii) The proposed service plan objective of developing a business case for legal delivery of children's services was in the early stages and would be looking at bringing those legal services for the Children's Trust in-house.
- viii) Concern was raised at possible changes to customer contacts. In response, officers advised that the Council would be reviewing how customers interact with the Council and the best way of engaging in the future. Multiple outreach sessions had been inherited and it was a matter of understanding them and analysing customer needs. Any changes would be data driven.

- ix) Concern was raised that a proposed saving of £157k had been put into the budget before Members had been consulted about the potential impact on communities.
- x) There was concern that the proposed savings on changes in levels of occupational health provision could have a significant impact with longer waiting times for assessments. It was queried if the possible impacts had been considered?

**Action:** The Executive Director undertook to respond outside of the meeting on whether the possible impacts on the level of occupational health provision had been considered.

## **ICT**

- xi) ICT was one of the biggest risk areas for the Council and investment was needed. The Plan B if the systems failed, possibly due to a cyber-breach, was queried? Officers agreed that cyber breaches can have a significant effect on the Council. The strategy had been developed over the past 18 months and it was important that good virus protection was in place. Staff attitudes and behaviours were also very important around cyber-security.
- xii) The Silver Level Programme was queried as being necessary and whether it had received the correct challenge? It was confirmed that it had been discussed at a high level and appropriate business cases would be needed to draw down funding.
- xiii) It was queried if the Council received value for money for our ICT and what protection there was in the contract with West Northamptonshire Council to enable full disaggregation. Officers confirmed that comparisons on the North Northamptonshire Council's spend with other authorities had been drawn and that it was not above average, however the Council was less mature than some authorities. Disaggregation of ICT was being discussed with members and officers and a number of governance decisions still needed to be made.
- xiv) It was also queried whether the Council was making best use of economies of scale in ICT. It was confirmed that the biggest economy of scale would be a move from multiple systems across former sovereign council areas to single systems.
- xv) The Education Case Management System contract was a significant pressure. Officers clarified that this was required to extend the existing contract until a new NNC system was implemented.
- xvi) Concern was expressed at shutting down the four legacy websites as they held a large amount of information, which was often needed for analysing decisions. The cost of maintaining those sites for a number of years compared to turning them off was queried. Officers advised that whilst they were keen to get as much onto the new website, they did not wish to lose information.

Information around reports and minutes would remain available, similar to what had happened to the previous County Council information.

### **Chief Executive's Office**

No budget changes were proposed.

### **Corporate Services**

- xvii) LOBO loans – there was a potential for £17m to be called in over the next 12 months and this had been projected in our treasury forecasting.
- xviii) Pay contingency had been included as the pay award for 2023/24 had been slightly higher than had been budgeted for and the difference had come out of general contingency. If anything came out of general contingency, it was topped up if used.
- xix) Following the financial issues at Birmingham City Council around equal pay, it was queried whether this was a risk for NNC? Officers confirmed that work was being done to ensure that we were not in that position.

**End of Meeting**

## **Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Public Health & Wellbeing – 12 January 2024**

### **Present:**

#### **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Members**

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

Apologies were received from Cllr Levell and Cllr Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting)

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)  
Cllr Jason Smithers (Leader of the Council)  
Cllr Helen Howell (Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Sport, Leisure, Culture & Tourism)

#### **Observers**

Cllr Emily Fedorowycz

#### **Public Health & Wellbeing Officers**

Jane Bethea (Director of Public Health)  
Shirley Plenderleith (Assistant Director of Public Health)  
Kerry Purnell (Assistant Director Communities & Leisure)

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Maria Idoine (Strategic Finance Business Partner)

#### **Democratic Services Officers**

Ben Smith (Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer)  
Louise Tyers (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Public Health and Wellbeing, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.



During discussion, the principal points were noted:

## **Public Health**

- i) Members welcomed the progress that was being made with public health.
- ii) Mental health in schools was a very significant issue as it could affect the whole family and the school. It was queried how were they being supported? In response, the Director of Public Health confirmed that since the pandemic, increasing levels of anxiety with young people had been seen, along with increases in self-harm. Public health was delivering a Schools Resilience Programme which included building resilience, providing CAMHS funding and Reach, a youth counselling offer.
- iii) With mental health for young people, schools had indicated that there were long waiting lists to access services, it was asked how waiting times were being monitored? Officers advised that a mental health collaborative oversaw mental health. The ICB commissioned services and public health identified gaps and saw its role to fill those gaps. There was a national problem accessing mental health services and public health had a role in identifying issues and using funding in an innovative way.
- iv) At the request of Members, the Director explained how the funding for drug and alcohol treatment was allocated, with three areas covered – children's, families and adult treatment. Members asked how decisions were made about deciding that funding was spent in these areas rather than mental health for children and young people. The Director explained that all programmes were subject to review. There were some mandatory functions, for example 0-19 services, substance treatment and there were other funding bodies for children's mental health.
- v) It was acknowledged that our needs did not always align with the priorities of central government. It was accepted that there was often tension in meeting priorities, but that the Council undertook needs assessments to understand what our priorities were. A Health and Wellbeing Strategy was being developed to meet local needs.
- vi) Part of public health's role was supporting the NHS in identifying where there was a gap in provision. We had a key role in influencing the system and working in an integrated way with the NHS was a good opportunity to integrate services around people, for example substance abuse and mental health.
- vii) In response to questions around recommissioning of services, officers advised that when a service was looking to be recommissioned, a health needs assessment was undertaken and there would also be engagement with the market. One of the biggest increases in the costs of recommissioned in the NHS was Agenda for Change, where there had been salary increases which needed to be covered.

- viii) Disaggregation was not always best value when it cost more for each council to deliver a service. The Director confirmed that there was an excellent relationship with WNC and disaggregation led to greater control of services but there was a need to keep within budget. If it was thought that disaggregation would put the Council at risk, officers would argue against it. The Leader affirmed that disaggregation was about getting the best service for residents and it was not always about money, but it needed to be remembered that our needs were different to the West.

## **Communities and Leisure**

- (xi) In response as to what was happening with the Kettering Art Gallery, the Assistant Director of Communities and Leisure confirmed that the library had recently moved into the Cornerstone building. There was an issue with the ground floor of the building, particularly with rain, and those issues could not be fully mitigated until the roof was watertight.
- (xii) Officers were asked to explain the proposed pressure of £692k in 2025/26 for domestic abuse funding. Officers explained that if the government did not continue with grant funding then it would become a pressure on our budget and decisions would need to be made. A funding announcement was expected to be made shortly.
- (xiii) With regards to the refugee resettlement programme, once a person was granted asylum it was queried what impact that had on the Council? Officers confirmed that there were different funding streams for each programme. It was accepted that there was some strain around housing when a person was granted asylum as they had 28 days to vacate the temporary accommodation they were provided with. For NNC, there had been three cases and it was working with housing around the options for their transfer to settled accommodation. There was no intention to use the general fund as there was separate funding received from the government.
- (xv) The Kettering Leisure Village had been on the Executive Forward Plan for January but had not come forward. Officers confirmed that the business plan, with a full assessment of the options, would be considered by the Executive in March and prior to that by the Place and Economy Scrutiny Committee in February.
- (xvi) It was queried whether each venue within the Culture, Tourism and Heritage Business Plan should be separated and each have their own profit and loss accounts. The Assistant Director confirmed that each venue had been brought together to maximise efficiencies, but each venue had its own separate accounts. The Deputy Leader advised that Chester House, and the other venues, had been brought together in a single service wide plan. The Chester House Estate had been subsidising the other venues. There had been five years of investment into Chester House and in two years it would become self-sustainable, which would benefit the Council.

**Action:** The separate profit and loss accounts for each venue to be provided (noting they may be commercially sensitive and not for publication).

(xvii) It was questioned what Chester House was costing as the Council was giving a subsidy to a venue which was competing against other private venues and whether the proposed replacement of the greenhouse was value for money? Officers advised that the Council's contribution to Chester House was expected to be zero, by 2027/28 and that they would also be looking to increase commerciality of other parts of the service. There was an ambition to refurbish the greenhouse and develop its use and appropriate funding sources would be examined.

(xviii) Officers were asked to look at the Business Plan as there appeared to be some minor inconsistencies through the document.

**Action:** Officers to look at the figures in the Business Plan and to share the outcome with the Committee.

**End of Meeting**

## **Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Children’s Services (except SEND) – 16 January 2024**

### **Present**

#### **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Members**

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

Apologies for absence received from Cllr Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting)

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)  
Cllr Scott Edwards (Children, Families, Education & Skills)

#### **Observers**

Cllr Keli Watts

#### **Children’s Services Officers**

David Watts (Director of Children’s Services)  
Neil Goddard (Assistant Director of Education)  
Richard Woodward (Head of Business and Performance)

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Yoke O’Brien (Strategic Finance Business Partner)  
David Akinsanya (Senior Finance Business Partner)

#### **Democratic Services Officers**

Ben Smith (Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer)  
Louise Tyers (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Children’s Services, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

## **Education**

- (i) Clarification was sought as to what the pressure of £112k was for income not practically chargeable following disaggregation. Officers explained that this was the element West Northamptonshire Council would have contributed to costs but now would not due to disaggregation.
- (ii) The inclusion of a saving of £59k for attendance fines was accepted as a prudent measure. Officers confirmed that there was enough evidence from previous years that this was recurrent year on year, though the objective was for all children to attend school regularly. This inclusion reflected what actually happened and was not a target.
- (iii) It was stated that disaggregation should not be based on an ideology but on funding. Officers advised that disaggregation enabled better management of the risks and reduced the Council's exposure to changes by our external partners.
- (iv) With the announced establishment of a Spending Board, it was queried how this would work alongside scrutiny? The Executive Director advised that the two were distinct pieces of work with scrutiny looking at the strategic side and the Spending Board looking operationally. The Executive Director of Finance clarified that it was everyone's responsibility to ensure prudent financial management and ensure spending was undertaken in the most appropriate way.
- (v) It was considered that appropriate service levels should be at the heart of scrutiny's budget discussions during 2024/25 by ensuring that there were sufficient funds to deliver statutory services but also by considering what could be done around other areas to reduce spending on statutory services.
- (vi) It was noted that free school meals were funded through the Household Support Fund. The Executive Director advised that questions had been raised about the Household Support fund nationally and councils were waiting for clarification. The Council could not assume that it would continue but was ready if it did so. Members supported the need for the Household Support Fund to continue and that there should be multiple years settlements.
- (vii) Officers advised that in respect of the implications for the schools support block from government being reduced year on year there would be a need in the future to undertake a review of what services could be provided to schools.
- (viii) In respect of funding of improvement recommendations arising from the Ofsted inspection an improvement programme would be developed, along with consideration of how to prioritise funding.

- (ix) Some schools were charging parents for additional curriculum support and these hidden fees and charges were a concern. Officers advised that the underlying principle was that education was free. Schools were able to charge curriculum supplements due to their financial positions. The alternative would be not to offer any additional support at all. Most schools would support disadvantaged families where they could.
- (x) It was noted that the SEND Accountability Board had recently considered a report on Educational Health and Care Plans and a request was made for the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to see that report.

**Action:** The Assistant Director of Education to circulate the presentation.

- (xi) Members requested an update on the backlog of EHCP reports. Officers confirmed that the statutory target was 20 weeks for the preparation of an EHCP. Performance was now just over 70%, whereas in the former County Council, it had fallen as low as 7%. Significant moves had been made to clear the backlog, but that had led to an unintended consequence of putting pressure on the dedicated schools grant to deliver the Plans.

### **Commissioning and Partnerships**

- (xii) The majority of the pressures within Commissioning and Partnerships was the investment into the Children's Trust Contract Sum.
- (xiii) Clarification was sought on what the one-off investment in the Children's Trust was. Officers advised that it included social worker capacity. There was a pressure on the workforce nationally when recruiting social workers. The Trust currently used a mixture of permanent, agency and managed teams. There were particular pressures on front-end social work teams including vacancies and rising caseloads. The use of agency staff changed on a daily basis and rather than include these costs in the contract sum, a one-off payment was made.

**Action:** Officers to provide a breakdown of the workforce between permanent, agency and managed teams.

- (xiv) Members sought an explanation as to why there was an increase in demand for services. The Executive Director explained that there were a number of parts including an element of risk aversion when partners referred cases. About 50% of referrals resulted in no further action and the Trust was looking to provide partners with the tools to help with referrals. Also, whilst there was early help, it was often not as early as would be liked.
- (xv) It was welcomed that the Children's Trust budget appeared to be starting to be managed. Officers confirmed that the Trust and both councils had managed to agree the contract sum on time. A Transformation and Efficiency Board had also been established.

**Action:** Officers to provide details of the projects turned down at the Transformation and Efficiency Board, once known.

### **Dedicated Schools Grant**

- (xvi) A recent report had stated that some of the alternative provision the Council used had been rated as inadequate. Officers confirmed that two of the larger providers the Council sent children to have been rated inadequate and it had precluded from any new pupils being sent to them. Both had now improved, and the Council was happy to send pupils to them again.
- (xvii) The cost of out of area placements was high, and it was queried whether everything was being done to provide more places in North Northamptonshire? Officers explained that a bid had been made to the government for a new alternative provision school in North Northamptonshire, which the government would fund. The Council could choose to build a facility itself, but it would be a significant investment. It was also looking at developing ways to educate pupils as close to home as possible.
- (xviii) How the further academisation of schools may affect the budget was also discussed. Officers confirmed that there would be an impact as some of the services were based on the number of schools.
- (xix) Regarding the impact be on the budget for funding for 2 year olds, officers advised that it was difficult to say at this stage but take up had been assumed, and would be adjusted through the year.
- (xx) The amount of children who did not have a school place due to SEND numbered around 100 children awaiting places.
- (xxi) The requirement slides in the presentation pack should be included in the response to the Executive as it succinctly puts down what is required.
- (xxii) When academy schools excluded a pupil, it put pressure on the authority as it had to support those pupils. It was queried if officers believed that academies were too quick to exclude pupils? In response, officers advised that they worked with all schools to minimise exclusions. However, nationally there was evidence to suggest that academies were quick to exclude. This put pressure on authorities as alternative provision was expensive.
- (xxiii) It was queried whether post-16 provision, particularly for SEND, had improved? It was responded that within North Northamptonshire there was limited Post-16 provision. The breadth of curriculum was an issue as it was very academic with a limited vocational offer.

(xxiv) It was noted that officers supporting early years were not present at this meeting, it was suggested that the Early Years Strategic Advisor could provide a briefing note/presentation on early years and answer any subsequent questions.

**Action:** Officers to examine the possibility of a briefing note/presentation on early years from the Early Years Strategic Advisor.

**End of Meeting**



## **Notes of the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Children’s Services (Early Year’s Block) – 19 January 2024**

### **Present**

#### **Budget Scrutiny Panel Members**

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)  
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)  
Cllr Anne Lee  
Cllr Paul Marks  
Cllr Steven North  
Cllr Russell Roberts

An apology was received from Councillor Level and Councillor Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting).

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)

#### **Observer**

Cllr John McGhee and Cllr Keli Watts

#### **Children’s Services Officers**

David Watts (Director of Children’s Services)  
Kelly Mills (Information and Support Team Manager)

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Yoke O’Brien (Strategic Finance Business Partner - Children Services)

#### **Democratic Services Officers**

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

The Budget Scrutiny Panel considered a presentation by Kelly Mills and Yoke O’Brien, which outlined the allocation and spend of Early Years Block funding of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

## **Early Needs Block**

- (i) If not enough people were to access SEND funding would it be handed back to the Department for Education and was funding sufficient to address issues? Officers explained that funding was an issue and that of the SEND funding 5% was retained centrally and 95% passported on to providers through the Early Years Funding Formula;
- (ii) It was queried what could be done to improve SEND provision for Early Years? Officers responded that there was a SEND and inclusion fund to support children with low level and emerging needs in early years settings to support them with resources; this has been in place for over a year. SEN Inclusion Funding was also available for children with high level and complex needs and requiring an EHCP;
- (iii) It was pleasing to note that there were currently no childminder vacancies with enough spaces available to satisfy demand. This had been helped by the Government provision of start-up grants for newly registering childminders (£600 through registering with OFSTED and £1200 in two instalments through a childminder agency).

**End of Meeting**

## **Budget Scrutiny Phase 2 – Place and Environment – 19<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

### **Present:**

#### **Budget Scrutiny Panel Members**

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)  
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)  
Cllr Anne Lee  
Cllr Paul Marks  
Cllr Steven North  
Cllr Russell Roberts

An apology was received from Councillor Hakewill, Councillor Level and Councillor Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting).

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)  
Cllr Matt Binley (Highways, Travel and Assets)  
Cllr David Howes (Rural Communities and Localism)  
Cllr David Brackenbury (Growth and Regeneration)  
Cllr Harriett Pentland (Climate and Green Environment)

Apologies were received from Councillor Mark Rowley.

#### **Observers**

Cllr Keli Watts

#### **Place and Environment Officers**

Graeme Kane (Interim Executive Director of Place and Economy)  
Rob Harbour (AD Growth and Regeneration)  
Jonathan Waterworth (AD Assets and Environment)  
Steve Smith (AD Highways and Waste)  
Iain Smith (AD Regulatory Services)

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Sundeep Sangha (Strategic Finance Business Partner)

#### **Democratic Services Officers**

Ben Smith (Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer)  
Carol Mundy (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Panel considered a presentation by the officers of the Place and Economy Directorate, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the following principal points were noted:

### **Assets and Environment**

- (i) Members asked about the budget realignment of income in relation to the Children's Trust. It was confirmed that this was a saving and reflected the levels of support service provided.
- (ii) A question about the differing dates for each review of fees and charges was raised, as it was thought that these were all reviewed as at 1 April each year. Officers clarified that fees and charges can be increased at any time within the year. Due to inflationary pressures and the need to protect budgets a business decision was made in 2023 to increase some charges from 1 January 2023. This did not relate to every charge and for example any increases in the Garden Waste charge are intended to apply from 1 April in each year.
- (iii) Reference was made to car parking fees and charges and the harmonisation of these across North Northamptonshire. It was noted that there remained in place different costs. One member recalled that parking charges had been welcomed in town centres at one time to encourage turn-over of vehicles, rather than someone parking all day. Officers clarified that the fees and charges would be incorporated in the Parking Strategy. It was noted that parking charges for the country parks would increase to £3.50.
- (iv) In relation to the garden waste collection officers were asked if the direct debit system was in place yet and whether users could pay by instalments. Officers confirmed that the direct debit system was on track, but it would not allow instalment payments. The payment had to be taken as a one-off.

### **Growth and Regeneration**

- (v) Members noted that the restructure was still in the process of being completed and that the aim was to have it in place by summer 2024. There had been some delays due to the corporate pay and grading review also taking place at the same time and the need to align job evaluations for new posts with that of the new pay structure for the Council.
- (vi) Flood Management and Climate Change - Members raised their concern over climate change and the high risk of flooding which was of concern and asked about the cost pressures in the Flood and Water Management Service of £56k for 2024/25 and number of officers who worked in this area. Reference was also made to natural springs and whether this issue was known to the authority.

- (vii) It was confirmed that this area fell within the Kier contract who provided the Flood and Water Management Service as an extension of its wider contract with the Council, with several specialists available to be called upon within the wider organisation for advice, thus ensuring resilience and additional resources which was more beneficial than the previous flood and water management arrangements. Details of natural springs where there were issues would also be useful to be aware of.
- (viii) There was ongoing work in relation to the Section 106 process and officers clarified that harmonisation work was ongoing to ensure that the legacy councils' information was available on a full database on a single IT platform.
- (ix) Vacant Posts and Contract Employees.  
Officers clarified that there was ongoing work to ensure that planning officers were recruited to the vacant positions, rather than contractors being engaged.
- (x) Subscriptions, which were non-essential would no longer be subscribed to.
- (xi) Planning Process – Members were pleased that there would soon be one IT platform available across the whole of North Northamptonshire to deal with the planning process. Officers were asked about the current planning income and how this fluctuated.
- (xii) Officers confirmed that fees were charged for a planning application and had been set by the government, with fees recently being increased for the first time in several years. The number of applications received and dealt within the set performance period of 13 weeks was increasing. It was difficult to estimate if the current financial climate would result in the receipt of fewer applications.

### **Regulatory Services**

- (xiii) Members asked about dangerous dogs and whether this fell under regulatory services. Officers clarified that the enforcement would fall under the Police. However, regulatory services would be involved regarding animal welfare.
- (xiv) Thanks were extended to the team for ongoing work undertaken in the Wellingborough area.

### **Highways and Waste**

- (xv) The following issues were raised by members of being of high importance to the public:
  - Missed bins;
  - Fly-tipping;
  - Bulky Waste
  - The future of the Household Waste and Recycling Centres;
  - Potholes

- Highway repairs

Officers clarified the current position and reported on the work being progressed on each subject matter.

- (xvi) Members asked if like for like comparisons in relation to pothole issues were carried out between neighbouring councils. This did not happen currently, but the Department of Transport was in the process of issuing guidance on this.
- (xvii) The Isham Bypass was raised, with frustration expressed that the timescale for action was getting very close and the concern that funding could be lost. It was confirmed that there was ongoing work taking place to update traffic figures following the Covid pandemic.
- (xviii) Changes were taking place to the Bulky waste service with the number of items per collection being increased. Fly-tipping remained an issue and would continue to be monitored.
- (xix) Pothole repairs – officers were asked for their opinion on the use of the Thermal and Roadmaster equipment. It was confirmed that both were used successfully. Ongoing work was taking place with Kier about quality control, but target figures exceeded what had been agreed.
- (xx) Home to School transportation was referenced and it was confirmed that following disaggregation that the budget pressures had slightly reduced for the coming year. The impact of the cutting back of bus services would be carefully monitored.
- (xxi) Concern was raised about the reduction in funding for local cycling and walking infrastructure plans (LCWIPs) particularly as two had recently been approved. It was confirmed that work would continue on the approved LCWIPs in Corby and Kettering. Government funding would continue to be sought. The Wellingborough and Rushden LCWIPs exercise would continue.
- (xxii) Requests for double yellow lines and the timescale for these to be implemented was raised. Officers clarified that the cost and timescale for making an order was considerable and as such several would be worked on at the same time to save costs. Each had to be advertised and consulted on and on average cost over £4,000 per request and considerable officer time.

### **Draft Capital Programme**

- (xxiii) No questions were raised on the draft capital programme.

**End of Meeting**

## **Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 - Adults, Health Partnerships, Housing - 19th January 2024**

### **Present**

#### **Budget Scrutiny Panel Members**

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)  
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)  
Cllr Anne Lee  
Cllr Paul Marks  
Cllr Steven North  
Cllr Russell Roberts

Apologies were received from Councillor Hakewill, Councillor Levell and Councillor Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting).

#### **Adults, Communities and Health Officers**

David Watts (Executive Director of Adult Social Care)  
Sam Fitzgerald (Assistant Director of Adult Services)  
Matthew Jenkins (Assistant Director of Commissioning and Performance)  
Zakia Loughhead (Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Wellbeing)  
Evonne Coleman-Thomas (Assistant Director of Housing)

#### **Executive Members**

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)  
Cllr Mark Rowley (Housing, Communities and Levelling Up)

#### **Observers**

Cllr John McGhee and Cllr Keli Watts

#### **Finance Officers**

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)  
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)  
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)  
Maria Idione (Strategic Finance Business Partner)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

## **Adult Social Care**

- (i) The service presented an updated position since the draft budget was published. There was an underlying pressure of £9.2m of which this has been partially mitigated by savings / efficiencies of £5.1m – resulting in a net pressure of £4.1m. Clarification was given that for 2024/25 the £4.1m would be funded through smoothing reserves.
- (ii) A detailed overview of the pressures and savings, including descriptions of the programme of works were shared with Members.
- (iii) One member emphasised that the budget must be ‘dynamic’, due to the demand-led nature of need affecting service provision.
- (iv) Members queried whether provision had been built into the budget to ensure that services would not be adversely impacted if unforeseen expenditure should result in a significant deficit position.
- (v) One member queried whether issues of hospital capacity and demographic growth would increase the budget pressure relating to adult social care services and whether this pressure fell on the local authority, rather than the NHS Foundation Trust.
- (vi) Members acknowledged that the model of adult social care had led to an increased reliance on independent providers of services. They queried whether this was sustainable to address the increased levels of need arising from demographic growth.
- (vii) The eligibility criteria was nationally-set, to determine requirement of service provision.
- (viii) Demand for adult social care services had increased as a result of demographic growth in this area. The local authority aimed to reduce need, through providing alternative pathways to care. This included meeting with patients earlier during the process of being discharged from hospital, to best determine subsequent care needs and improve early help.
- (ix) Through commissioning, the local authority had secured several contracts with independent providers and maintained sufficient capacity for home care. Officers were confident that payment rates to service providers were sustainable. The vacancy rate within the independent care market had also decreased during the course of the previous year.

## **Strategic Partnerships**

- (x) One member emphasised the importance of maintaining strategic partnerships, to reduce the cost and maximise efficiency of service delivery.



## **Housing Revenue Account**

- (xi) Members queried how many accommodation properties the local authority owned across North Northamptonshire.
- (xii) Members queried the rates of bad debt provision.
- (xiii) Members queried whether energy efficiency measures had been established for Council properties.

In response, officers clarified that:

- (xiv) The local authority owned around 8,000 properties across North Northamptonshire.
- (xv) Bad debts provision was maintained at the same rates and would be re-assessed on an annual basis.
- (xvi) Energy efficiencies were determined when contracts with energy providers were secured, and regular reviews of these contracts were undertaken.

**End of Meeting**