

Budget Scrutiny Panel – Phase 2 Meeting

Session Title: Enabling and Corporate Services

Session Number: Session 6 of 11

Date of Meeting: 6 January 2025

1. Attendance and Apologies:

Panel Members:

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)

Cllr Scott Brown (Vice Chair)

Cllr Leanne Buckingham

Cllr Paul Marks

Cllr Andy Mercer

Cllr Steven North

Executive Members:

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Executive Member – Finance and Transformation)

Observers:

Cllr Martin Griffiths

Cllr Graham Lawman

Officers in Attendance:

Claire Edwards – Executive Director of Finance

John Morley – Executive Director of Strategy and Change

Sanjit Sull – Director of Law and Governance

Guy Holloway – Assistant Chief Executive

Dean Mitchell – Assistant Director of Finance and Accountancy

Mark Dickenson – Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy

Nana Barfi-Sarpong – Chief Information Officer

Simon Mills – Assistant Director of Customer Experience

Lucy Hogston – Assistant Director of Revenues and Benefits

Kamila Coulson-Patel – Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic

Tom Barden – Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships

Jeff Abbott – Strategic Finance Business Partner

Niall Blowfield – Senior Finance Business Partner

Kunwar Khan – Interim Scrutiny Manager

Louise Tyers – Governance Officer

Apologies:

Cllr Anup Pandey

Cllr Russell Roberts

2. Purpose of Meeting:

Scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2025/26 for Enabling and Corporate Services.

The primary focus of this session was Finance and Performance, Customer and Governance, IT, Chief Executive's, and Corporate Services.

3. Enabling and Corporate Services Presentation

Presented by: Claire Edwards, Executive Director of Finance and Performance.

Summary Overview:

- The draft net budget for these service areas was £59.463m in 2025/26, which was around 15% of the overall budget. Summary by directorate table below shows the opening budget.

Summary by Directorate	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
Enabling & Support Services				
Opening Budget	40,255	43,666	43,048	42,622
Finance & Performance - Pressures	1,880	53	56	57
Finance & Performance - Savings	(1,308)	(10)	(10)	(10)
Customer & Governance - Pressures	2,596	(600)	0	0
Customer & Governance - Savings	(367)	(14)	0	0
IT - Pressures	1,525	(2)	(472)	100
IT - Savings	(915)	(45)	0	0
Chief Executive - Pressures	0	0	0	0
Chief Executive - Savings	0	0	0	0
Closing Budget	43,666	43,048	42,622	42,769
Corporate Services				
Opening Budget	19,767	15,797	23,898	31,434
Corporate - Pressures	6,049	8,214	7,651	5,345
Corporate - Savings	(10,019)	(113)	(115)	(117)
Closing Budget	15,797	23,898	31,434	36,662

- Services provided explanation of the movements in the draft budget for their areas by spend type, highlighting movements, including pressures and savings of more than £500k.
- The Enabling Services draft Capital Programme 2025/29 was £8.244m, within ICT.
- Additional information as requested in Phase 1 budget scrutiny session was also provided and noted.

4. Key Lines of Enquiry:

- Query 1:** Members noted that Windows 10 would no longer be supported later this year, how did this fit in for forthcoming newly elected councillors and staff and their ICT requirements?
 - Response:** The Chief Information Officer advised that they were currently assessing where we needed to be in relation to IT hardware. A number of

Windows 11 devices were now being procured and this work was strongly aligned to ensure that it did not impact service delivery. The Director of Law and Governance also advised that a piece of work was currently being undertaken ready for Members' induction on devices and the training members would need to be provided with as well.

- **Query 2:** Members highlighted that some of the former legacy councils had borrowed from the Public Loans Board before vesting day. Was the Council looking at ways of paying some of the borrowing back early to reduce the Council's burden?
 - o **Response:** The Executive Director of Finance and Performance advised that Minimum Revenue Provision, which looked at the whole borrowing envelope, was looking at that provision. The best model was the annuity model, which was supported by our treasury advisors and our auditors. It was based on benefit realisation so that the benefit was realised up front when the asset was newer and not at the back end when the asset would be older. It was felt that this was more representative in terms of a fairer distribution of the costs to residents. Due to the cost of borrowing being borne by council taxpayers, we were not currently looking at different ways of how to finance borrowing because our average investment borrowing rate was significantly lower than the actual bank rate. Early repayment of our borrowing would also cost a lot more as we would have to make early redemption payments on those loans, and it would not be in our best interest to do that.

- **Query 3:** Members raised that they were hearing services reviews and other factors was delaying the transformation journey. It would be helpful to have an understanding on what we would be spending on transformation and when that funding would be spent.
 - o **Response:** The Assistant Chief Executive acknowledged that the Corporate Leadership Team had recognised that there had been an element of delay and that being a new council, there had been a significant amount of change. We had wanted to control the transformation journey until the pay and grading project was fully in place, which had now happened, and this will allow us to speed up the transformation journey. We also want to empower staff, at all levels of the organisation, to be able to drive change. We want to avoid staff thinking that improvements could not happen until a restructure had taken place as that should not be the only tool to deliver improvements. The One Council Programme has been highly successful in building positivity and confidence amongst staff, but we realise that there is more work to do. Enabling Services was a key component of reviews, but we needed to ensure that we did not hold back the progress of the organisation.
 - o The Executive Director of Finance and Performance stated that she was keen to ensure that we addressed and unblocked those areas which we were finding were stopping us from moving forward. The transformation work will be starting to address what sort of organisation we wanted to be and how did that look. The budget should be based on where we should be and our budgets will show members what a full establishment looked like. They will show a fully costed organisation and the in-year monitoring will show where we actually are. The budget for 2025/26 has included investment in services, particularly within Children's and Adult Social Care, as they are the biggest drivers that could cause financial distress to the organisation.

- **Query 4:** Members highlighted that in previous scrutiny committee meetings it was acknowledged that some areas of the district had a very high aging population. Some areas are also very rural and there is a culture that some residents prefer to use the telephone and other traditional communication methods to contact the Council rather than moving onto digital channels. There is a need to take this into careful consideration during transformation to ensure that we deliver what residents want.
 - o **Response:** The Assistant Chief Executive acknowledged that this was an important point and we are not proposing to go down the route, as other organisations have done, by requiring everything must be done digitally. It was important to get things right first time, so to avoid unavoidable contact. We needed to provide more choice but to also be there to support those who need more support. The Assistant Director of Customer Experience advised it was about smarter ways of working. There were over 500,000 interactions a year via customer services and he was bringing together a number of teams and processes to ensure there was a consistent way of dealing with customer contacts. If we are able to get out to customers and signpost at the earliest point, we will be in a better place to help them in a more proactive way which is better for the customer.

- **Query 5:** Members highlighted that for the whole budget there were pressures identified of £26m. Officers had advised that this would be offset from various areas such as Council Tax, but how realistic did officers believe it was to find savings against those pressures?
 - o **Response:** The Executive Director of Finance and Performance confirmed that there would be some risks in delivering savings and she would cover those when she prepared the section 25 statement for the final budget. For children's services, the ongoing pressures would be the SEND High Needs Block and the DSG. There was also significant demand within the demographics for adult social care and the continuing pressures around that. Investment has been put in around family hubs and for adult social care it is looking at those complex cases and needs and how we can deliver those services differently but still maintain outcomes for residents. The Performance Team were doing a lot of work around understanding the data and data quality to ensure that we make informed decisions based. We have inherited vastly under invested services, but it needs to be remembered that we have had to make significant investments over the last 3-4 years to ensure our services met the standard minimum requirements.
 - o The Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships highlighted some of the work his team had undertaken working with Adult Social Care to improve the data being used by decision makers and planners within that service. This included looking at commitment data for social care packages and building some interactive dashboards to view that data, back to vesting day, to be able to see the overall trends in services. Additional capacity, particularly analytical capacity has also been provided. The team were also working hard on the demographic forecasts for adult social care in preparation for this year's budget. It was unfortunate that due to timing, we did not have population forecasts for North Northamptonshire, but we have worked on combining the forecasts of the legacy councils to understand the prevalence rate of adult social care usage amongst our residents. There has been a lot of work in that area to fine tune assumptions about what the growth demand was going to be.

- **Query 6:** Members highlighted that previously they had been told that the Council could be seriously affected by any business rates rebased, due to being successful in attracting businesses to North Northamptonshire.
 - **Response:** The Executive Director of Finance and Performance advised that officers had made assumptions that within the 2026/27 funding envelope business rates would be rebased. For 2025/26, we had assumed around £115m, and with our assumptions on being rebased this would go down to around £88m, so we would lose out significantly, however those assumptions could change. Those assumptions also show that we would gain in the income coming back for social care funding, and overall, we would be a net gainer of about £5m.

- **Query 7:** Members highlighted the rationalisation of the Council's buildings and questioned what impact that would have on enabling services.
 - **Response:** The Chief Information Officer advised that the workplace transformation project had already factored in a lot of this, and significant savings have already been made. Work is taking place to look at what buildings we will be keeping. The conversations the various work streams are having means that ICT is effectively supporting those buildings. The Assistant Chief Executive also advised that some pre-planning has taken place and because of the new contract for the Wide Area Network and the work happening to install a new local area network, this has helped to reduce costs.

- **Query 8:** Members questioned what was happening with the ICT Value for Money Scrutiny Review and when would a report or briefing come to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee.
 - **Response:** The Assistant Chief Executive advised that the membership of the group had now been agreed and there was a need to set up a number of meetings as soon as possible. It was acknowledged that the deadline for the report was soon.

5. Key Discussion Points:

- **Financial Stability and Outlook:** Members welcomed that we were giving strong consideration to contingency budgeting. We are in very uncertain times politically and later this week we would be looking at the possibility of further local government reorganisation.

- **Budget Scrutiny Process:** Members felt comfortable with what had been considered today and felt that officers were fully aware of the impact of the budget on their service areas. The proposed budget seems solid, stable and under control. Members acknowledged that this year's budget scrutiny process was greatly improved from past years. Information which had been requested had been received promptly which allowed for more effective scrutiny – this early engagement needs to continue in future years. In addition, it was felt that it would be helpful if the Enabling and Corporate Services session was the last one held, due to the impact of those services on other service areas.

6. Executive Member's Priorities and Challenges

As recommended by the Panel during Phase 1 of the budget scrutiny this year, the Chair invited the Executive Member for Finance and Transformation, Cllr Lloyd Bunday, to highlight his top portfolio priorities and challenges. The Executive Member made the following points to the Panel:

Top Three Priorities:

- **Transformation of the organisation to deliver the Medium-Term Financial Plan:** The Panel heard that the Council had a balanced budget for 2025/26 which had been done without reducing frontline services or utilising reserves. The Council have significant budget challenges going forward and these need to be addressed by continuing the transformation journey.
- **Bringing ICT back in-house:** A lot of lessons have been learnt since April 2021 and he believed that the Council needed to deliver key services ourselves.
- **Improving the customer journey and experience:** When interacting with the Authority – this includes creating new channels so that those who want to can communicate with us in different, more efficient ways, whilst creating the capacity for those that need to use more traditional methods. It was about getting the right balance and making a more modern customer focused council.

Challenges:

- **Uncontrollable Pressures and Demand-led Services:** The biggest challenges are the pressures which are beyond our control, such as children's services, adult social care and inflation. Effective management of our demand led services was needed.
- **Transformation and Resources:** The Executive Member highlighted that the Council was creating a resources project team to help transformation and disaggregation of our services, by ensuring that there were adequate resources, in a timely manner, to deliver change. The Executive Member mentioned that he would be happy to report back to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on how that is moving forward.
- **Uncertainty of Finance Settlement:** An area of concern was that the Council still only had a one-year settlement and a multi-year settlement would help us to plan the Medium-Term Financial Plan more effectively. Next year's business rates reset will inevitably create new challenges. Also, the One Council project means that all areas of the organisation need to own their part of the budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan and to encourage our staff and partners to live within their budgets.

7. Resolutions and Recommendations

1. The Executive Member for Finance and Transformation to attend a Corporate Scrutiny Committee by September 2025 to provide an update on the Resources Project Team and its impact in delivering transformation.
2. That in future years budget scrutiny process, the Enabling and Corporate Services session should be the last one held, due to the impact of those services on other service areas.

3. While appreciating efforts to prepare a balanced draft budget proposal, there was a need for effective monitoring to ensure efficient and timely delivery.

8. Actions and Follow-Up:

- Members to be supplied with a breakdown of loans held by North Northamptonshire Council. **(Action by: Assistant Director of Finance and Accountancy – 21 January 2025)**
- The Panel to be provided with the details of the impact the rationalisation of the Council's buildings will have on enabling services costs **(Action by: Chief Information Officer – 21 January 2025)**
- Meetings for the ICT Value for Money Scrutiny Panel to be set up to enable a report from the Scrutiny Panel to be considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee **(Action by: Assistant Chief Executive – 11 February 2025)**

9. Date of Next Meeting:

- **Date:** Thursday 9th January 2025
- **Focus/Agenda Items:** Scrutiny of Place and Economy Services Draft Budget Proposals

Notes Prepared by: Louise Tyers

Date Prepared: 7 January 2025

Template and edits by Kunwar Khan

Budget Scrutiny Panel – Phase 2 Meeting

Session Title: Place and Economy

Session Number: Session 7 of 11

Date of Meeting: 9 January 2025

1. Attendance and Apologies:

Panel Members:

- Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
- Cllr Scott Brown (Vice Chair)
- Cllr Paul Marks
- Cllr Steven North
- Cllr Russell Roberts

Executive Members:

- Cllr David Brackenbury (Executive Member – Growth and Regeneration)
- Cllr Harriet Pentland (Executive Member – Climate and Green Environment)
- Cllr Matthew Binley (Executive Member – Highways, Travel and Assets)
- Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Executive Member - Finance and Transformation)

Observers:

- Cllr Anne Lee
- Cllr Graham Lawman

Officers in Attendance:

- George Candler, Executive Director of Place and Economy
- Graeme Kane, Assistant Director Highways & Waste
- Jonathan Waterworth, Assistant Director, Assets
- Iain Smith, Assistant Director, Regulatory Services
- Dean Mitchell and Carolyn Bland, Finance Officers
- Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Committees/Members)

Apologies:

- Cllr Andy Mercer
- Cllr David Howes
- Cllr Mark Rowley
- Claire Edwards, Executive Director of Finance
- Mark Dickenson, Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy
- Kunwar Khan, Interim Scrutiny Manager.

2. Purpose of Meeting:

The purpose of the meeting was to scrutinise the budget proposals for the Place and Economy Service area to include the four key areas of, growth and regeneration, assets and environment, highways and waste and regulatory services.

3. Place and Economy Presentation

Presented by: George Candler, Executive Director of Place and Economy

Introduction:

- The executive director explained the areas covered within his service and provided details of the opening financial position, the MTFP, pressures and savings, along with details of the proposed budget for 2025-26 and the percentage changes to the budget.
- He further explained the proposed expenditure details and any expected income giving further details of the net budget.
- The presentation detailed the draft budget for 2025-26 along with projections to 2028-29.
- He further referenced the responses to the queries raised after the Phase 1 session relating to the Green Budget. Regeneration and Growth, Assets, Sale of Assets, Kettering Library and Play Equipment. Graeme Kane, Assistant Director Highways and Waste gave a verbal update in relation to the query over the difficulties in recruiting to planning. He explained that there was a national shortage of planning officers. This had been exacerbated by delays in recruitment whilst awaiting the outcome of the Pay and Grading policy. The advert for the position of Head of Development Management and Enforcement was currently on the website and it was hoped that an appointment would be made in the coming weeks. He also explained that three apprentices had joined the council as alternative ways of 'growing our own' planners had been encouraged, which was through the LGA scheme sponsored by MHCLG. They were doing a great job with support, and each is undertaking a Masters degree.
- GC also referenced the capital programme for 2025-26 and the long-term programme to 2028-29. This was made up through different funding sources from Capital, Discretionary, Grants & Section 106 monies.
- Reference was also made to the draft development pool with the main expenditure being for the Isham By-pass, Sywell Dam and the Estate Stock amongst other items totalling £14,723 for 2025-26.

Summary Overview:

The service area had a draft net budget of £78.383m in 2025/25 equivalent to 20% of the overall budget. Details of the pressures and savings for each directorate can be found on the table below for the period from 2025 to 2029:

Summary by Directorate	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
Place & Economy				
Opening Budget	71,928	78,383	81,166	86,151
Growth & Regeneration - Pressures	(21)	0	0	0
Growth & Regeneration - Savings	(86)	0	0	0
Assets & Environment - Pressures	2,246	(1,457)	362	250
Assets & Environment - Savings	(699)	(507)	(131)	(100)
Highways & Waste - Pressures	7,281	4,214	4,813	5,154
Highways & Waste - Savings	(2,195)	634	(59)	(54)
Regulatory Services - Pressures	97	29	0	0
Regulatory Services - Savings	(168)	(130)	0	0
Directorate Costs - Pressures	0	0	0	0
Directorate Costs - Savings	0	0	0	0
Closing Budget	78,383	81,166	86,151	91,401

Executive Lead member Cllr Brackenbury introduced the medium-term financial plan for Growth and Regeneration and for Regulatory Services and detailed the three top priorities, current challenges and expectations and the areas of concern and focus for the service. He commented on the complex transformation programme that was taking place in regard to the planning service, the development of a single case management system for the service area and the updating of many policies and procedures. Work had been ongoing with the licensing service and harmonisation of fares and zones for hackney carriage and private hire drivers. The updated policy would be presented to the Licensing and Appeals Committee next week. Income from planning applications was less as fewer applications were being submitted. Income was still received for burials and cremations and a new policy had been agreed late last year. Pressures were noted in regard to the Traveller Unit. Other areas of concern related to the enforcement service area.

Councillor Harriet Pentland, Executive member introduced the medium-term financial plan for the Green Environment. Her three top priorities were around the Carbon Management Plan, Climate Change Strategy and Implementation of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. There would be financial challenges as implementation of many aspects of the plans and strategies would be expensive. Some external funding would be available and focus would be put on finding this additional funding.

Councillor Matthew Binley, Executive member introduced the medium-term financial plan for Assets & Highways and Waste. The top three priorities were around asset rationalisation, the investment estate and traffic enforcement. With challenges around the financial aspect of decarbonisation of assets such as council buildings and the council's fleet, the workplace transformation project to ensure that employees worked in relevant and appropriate fit for purpose buildings, and receipt of funding from government decisions. With regard to highways and waste the implementation of food waste collections had been approved to commence in April 2026. There were still administrative challenges around the garden waste collection service, take up had been good and continued to increase. Work was ongoing with securing the on-going operation of the Corby HWRC for when the current lease expired. Most of the waste streams across NNC are now harmonised with the only

principal difference being that food waste was collected in Corby and the East Northants area. Changes to government targets would also include the introduction of the collection of 'soft plastic' waste as part of the recycling mix.

Challenges continued with highway repairs and the need for more funding to enable proper road surfacing to be carried out rather than patch repairs. Cllr Binley confirmed that less than 1% of repairs were temporary and where that was the case, it was scheduled to be made permanent as soon as possible.

A further challenge for the service related to Home to School Transport. There was a large demand on this service area with year on year increases particularly around the provision of SEND transportation with a 25% increase this year. This formed a significant part of the budget.

Each assistant director detailed their service area budgets, challenges, income and savings along with proposals for the forthcoming years.

4. Key Lines of Enquiry:

- **Query 1: The cost of Household Waste Containers.**
 - **Response:** Officers explained that North Northamptonshire was a high growth area and the containers were required for new properties and to replace existing containers that had a shelf life of around 10 years.
- **Query 2: Disabled Facilities Grant** – it was noted that the projections indicated a year-on-year reduction and this was queried.
 - **Response:** Officers clarified that monies were provided via top-up grant funding. An updated policy had been through scrutiny and was awaiting the approval of the Executive.
- **Query 3: Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits** – it was noted that there was funding for 2025-26 but nothing projected for future years.
 - **Response:** Mr Candler would clarify this with the officer.
- **Query 4: Haylock House** - it was noted that some of the current tenants had exercised a break-clause contained within their lease to leave. This had resulted in space being made available for council teams to be relocated to these officers.
 - **Response:** Whilst this would result in a loss of income it had enabled the transformation project to consider other options for the relocation of employees.
- **Query 5: Highway Funding** – it was noted that the government settlement proposal was not as expected. It was also noted that criteria for funding streams was changing and more detail was awaited. The chair asked if Mr Kane could provide an update as soon as possible.
- **Query 6: Highway monitoring** – It was asked how the contract with Kier was monitored.

- **Response:** It was clarified that there were weekly, monthly and quarterly meetings with Kier, and the contract was being well managed with targets being met.
- **Query 7: Highway Repairs** – Members were concerned that temporary repairs were not adequate and that full repairs that were more durable be carried out immediately.
- **Query 8: Flooding** - Concern was expressed over the continuing issues with flooding across North Northamptonshire. Some members considered this was due to over development of certain areas. There were also issues around surface water.
 - **Response:** Officers clarified that they were aware of growing concerns and there was ongoing work taking place through planning and with discussions between ourselves and the Environment Agency and Anglian Water. Members considered that developers need to ensure that they were taking flooding seriously.
- **Query 9: Isham By-pass** – it was noted that a planning application had been submitted for the bypass and there was ongoing work taking place with funding being provided to progress investigation work.
- **Query 10: Food Waste Collection** – it was noted that this was included. Members considered that there would need to be a good education programme to run alongside implementation.
 - **Response:** Officers clarified that this was a compulsory government scheme to be introduced across the whole of the country. Some grant funding from the government had been allocated for this. Officers confirmed that an education programme would happen.
- **Query 11: Bus Gates – Corby and Wellingborough** – both were operational and bringing income.
 - **Response:** The changes in Corby had been in full operation for two months and more data would be available in the coming weeks.
- **Query 12: Newland Street** traffic restrictions.
 - **Response:** Officers confirmed that a provision for new enforcement schemes had been made in the development pool for 2026/27. The Newland Street scheme is being explored but the complexity of the access arrangements means a quick solution is not possible and this would take time to implement and make the relevant Traffic Regulation Orders.
- **Query 13: Town Centre Shopping** – There had been considerable change to the way in which people shopped and where they chose to spend their money. This was of concern as town centre shopping was poor. This was noted.
- **Query 14: Home to School Transport** – Concern over the considerable increase in spend on transport, which was expected to increase.

- **Query 15: Lack of Enforcement** - there was concern expressed over the 900 planning enforcement cases which were still unresolved. It was considered that due to the lack of enforcement planning issues were not being enforced under any circumstances.
 - **Response:** Officers were aware of this concern and seeking to address it with the current resources within the team. The proposed restructure seeks to further enhance the resources focused on planning enforcement to reflect the concerns of Members.
- **Query 16: Recycling Education:** We have a team that carries out awareness and education in relation to waste presentation and recycling. If successful, this can reduce the costs to the authority. There is a financial adjustment in the budget to reflect the decreasing cost in disposal because of improved compliance with the Council's recycling policies. This does not reduce the funding available for the waste enforcement and education activities. Further funding is expected from Government to support the roll out of food waste collections, which will include significant education and awareness raising.

5. Key Discussion Points:

- **Financial Stability and Future Outlook:** Members considered that the budget was balanced but expressed particular concern over highways maintenance, planning enforcement and home to school transport costs.
- **Workforce Planning and Service Delivery:** Members considered that the restructures and emphasis on recruiting additional employees was making good progress. They were conscious though that some teams were small with a considerable amount of work to get through. It was also felt that the Waste Education Team should be reinstated, as this would bring savings benefit now and for future budgets.

6. Resolutions and Recommendations:

1. Details of the final government settlement be provided to the panel, particularly in relation to potholes, LTP Maintenance and Incentive maintenance once discussions with government have concluded.
2. That funding be included for the Waste Education Team, as this was considered a good investment in the long term.
3. That funding for both traffic enforcement and planning enforcement measures be included in the budget and that the 900 outstanding planning enforcement cases be prioritised.
4. That within the highways area there be further narrative included in the final report breaking down each element of expenditure on potholes, LTP Maintenance and Incentive Maintenance.
5. That home to school transport be added to the scrutiny workplan for a deep dive on how the service can be managed in the future

7. Actions and Follow-Up:

- Nene Valley Gravel Pits – why no costings for after 2025-26 (**Action by: Executive Director of Place and Economy, following clarity from Stacey Wylie**)
- Details of the Kier Inspections to be circulated to Panel (**Action by: Assistant Director of Highways, Waste and Growth/Executive Member for Highways, Travel and Assets**)
- Details of a briefing report in relation to the rationale for completing Temporary repairs, be sent to the Panel (**Action by: Assistant Director of Highways, Waste and Growth/Executive Member for Highways, Travel and Assets**)
- Details of the final government settlement update for highways be circulated to the Panel. Panel (**Action by: Assistant Director of Highways, Waste and Growth/Executive Member for Highways, Travel and Assets**)

8. Date of Next Meeting:

- **Date:** 14 January 2025 at 2pm – Budget Scrutiny of Children’s Services

Notes Prepared by: Carol Mundy

Date Prepared: 10 January 2025.

Template by Kunwar

Budget Scrutiny Panel – Phase 2 Meeting

Session Title: Scrutiny of Children's Services

Session Number: Session 8 of 11

Date of Meeting: 14 January 2025

1. Attendance and Apologies:

Panel Members:

- Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
- Cllr Paul Marks
- Cllr Andy Mercer

Executive Members:

- Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Executive Member – Finance and Transformation)
- Cllr Scott Edwards (Executive Member – Children, Families, Education and Skills)

Observers:

- Cllr Graham Lawman

Officers in Attendance:

- David Akinsanya – Senior Finance Business Partner
- Fran Cox – Assistant Director of Education
- Claire Edwards – Executive Director of Finance and Performance
- Callum Galluzzo – Scrutiny Officer
- Yoke O'Brien – Strategic Finance Business Partner
- Dean Mitchell – Assistant Director of Finance and Accountancy
- Charisse Monero – Executive Director of Children's Services
- Rajvir Sohal – Scrutiny Officer
- Chris Stephenson – Scrutiny Manager

Apologies:

- Cllr Anup Pandey

2. Purpose of Meeting

The session focused on the 2025/26 budget for Children's Services (excluding the Northamptonshire Children's Trust). The discussion included a thematic deep dive into the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), highlighting key pressures, mitigations, and strategic priorities.

3. Children's Services Presentation

Presented by: Charisse Monero, Executive Director of Children's Services

Summary of Key Points:

General Fund Overview

- The Children's Services budget included £89 million, focused on four key areas led by assistant directors for education, transformation, inclusion, and partnerships.

Summary by Directorate	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
Children and Education				
Opening Budget	85,644	89,208	91,390	93,363
Assistant Director of Education - Pressures	571	197	161	15
Assistant Director of Education - Savings	0	0	0	0
Assistant Director of Transformation - Pressures	316	18	4	(71)
Assistant Director of Transformation - Savings	1,314	0	(298)	0
Assistant Director of Inclusion - Pressures	1,842	(241)	(102)	0
Assistant Director of Inclusion - Savings	(1,250)	0	0	0
NCT - Pressures	3,489	2,208	2,208	2,208
NCT - Savings	(2,718)	0	0	0
Closing Budget	89,208	91,390	93,363	95,515

Budget Pressures and Allocations

- Key pressures arose in the Assistant Director for Inclusion's portfolio, including Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) and the Education Psychology Service.
- Measures included reducing reliance on interim staffing and enhancing permanent structures to manage demand.

DSG and High Needs Block Pressures

- The DSG was allocated into four blocks (schools, central services, high needs, early years).
- The High Needs Block faced the highest pressure, with a cumulative deficit of £25 million, driven by rising demand for specialist independent sector provision.

Mitigation Strategies

- A high needs delivery programme was addressing high-cost placements and implementing early intervention through family hubs and partnerships.
- Alternative education resources were being developed on school sites to reduce reliance on independent sector placements.

Transformational Activities

- Officers introduced early help multidisciplinary squads in schools to support children at earlier stages, reducing escalations into statutory services.

- Strategic partnerships with colleges were strengthening post-16 SEND education pathways.

Capital Programme

- Investments were being made in school expansions and SEND sufficiency planning to accommodate increasing demand while mitigating revenue risks.

4. Key Lines of Enquiry

- **Query 1:** Impact of COVID-19 on Special Needs Growth: Members queried whether the rise in special needs, particularly ADHD and autism, could be attributed to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Response:** Officers confirmed that the pandemic had significantly contributed to the surge in complexity and volume of SEND needs. Lockdowns had exacerbated mental health issues, including anxiety, and increased diagnoses of conditions such as ADHD and autism. It was noted that children impacted during this period were likely to experience long-term effects throughout their educational journeys. A detailed analysis of referrals to independent sector provisions during the pandemic was planned as part of the wave two evaluation.

Members also suggested that the impact of the pandemic could persist for up to 15–20 years, creating long-term financial and service pressures. Officers acknowledged this and emphasised that early help interventions were critical in mitigating future demand.

- **Query 2:** Post-16 SEND Education Pathways: Members expressed concern about the limited focus on post-16 SEND provision, highlighting challenges faced by young people transitioning to further education.
 - **Response:** Officers reassured the Panel that post-16 provision was a priority within the SEND transformation programme. Strategic partnerships were being developed with local colleges, including Tresham College, to create pathways for SEND students. Pilot programmes for alternative resource provision on college campuses were underway, alongside efforts to support students earlier (at age 14) to ensure smoother transitions. Multidisciplinary squads would include transition workers to provide targeted support.
- **Query 3:** Predictive Analytics for Demand Forecasting: Members asked why predictive analytics were being outsourced, given the council's existing investment in data capabilities.
 - **Response:** Officers explained that while the council had strong data systems, there was a gap in expertise for long-term forecasting and predictive modelling. External expertise was being commissioned to provide detailed insights into trends over the next 5–10 years, enabling more effective financial and service planning.
- **Query 4:** Risks Identified: Members queried the key risks associated with the proposed transformation programme.

- **Response:** Officers identified financial sustainability as the primary risk, with particular reference to the DSG deficit and reliance on high-cost independent sector placements. Additional risks included the unpredictability of central government funding policies and the potential for migration-driven demand growth. Officers also stressed the risk of not investing in early help, noting that failing to act would likely lead to escalating costs and pressures.
- **Query 5:** VAT Impact on Independent Sector Placements: Members asked about the financial impact of VAT on independent sector placements.
 - **Response:** Officers clarified that independent sector placements referred to specialist educational provisions, not private schools, and were not subject to VAT changes.
- **Query 6:** Reinstating Youth Services: Members suggested exploring opportunities to reinstate youth services, such as youth clubs, and leveraging partnerships with the voluntary sector to provide community-based support.
 - **Response:** Officers agreed that enhancing local partnerships was vital for the early help model. They highlighted that the proposed early help framework aimed to integrate community-based approaches and collaborate with the voluntary sector to create a more comprehensive support network for children and families.

5. Resolutions and Recommendations

1. The Panel supported the development of the early help multidisciplinary squads and alternative provision plans.
2. The importance of prioritising predictive analytics and robust financial planning was emphasised.

6. Actions and Follow-Up

- Officers to conduct deeper analysis of COVID-19 impacts on SEND referrals. **(Action by: Executive Director of Children's Services – February 2025)**
- Provide a detailed breakdown of post-16 SEND strategic partnerships. **(Action by: Executive Director of Children's Services – January 2025)**
- Explore feasibility of expanding voluntary sector collaboration for youth services. **(Action: Executive Director of Finance – March 2025)**

7. Date of Next Meeting:

- **Date:** Friday 17th January 2025
- **Focus/Agenda Items:** Scrutiny of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing Services Draft Budget Proposals

Notes Prepared by: Rajvir Sohal
Date Prepared: 14 January 2025

Budget Scrutiny Panel – Phase 2 Meeting

Session Title: Scrutiny of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing Services

Session Number: Session 9 of 11

Date of Meeting: 17 January 2025

1. Attendance and Apologies

Panel Members:

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)

Cllr Paul Marks

Cllr Andy Mercer

Cllr Steven North

Cllr Russell Roberts

Executive Members:

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Executive Member - Finance and Transformation)

Cllr Gill Mercer (Executive Member - Adults, Health and Wellbeing)

Cllr Mark Rowley (Executive Member - Housing and Communities)

Observers:

Cllr Graham Lawman

Officers:

Evonne Coleman-Thomas (Assistant Director - Strategic Housing, Development and Property Services)

Claire Edwards (Executive Director - Finance)

Samantha Fitzgerald (Assistant Director - Adult Services)

Maria Idoine (Strategic Finance Business Partner)

Matthew Jenkins (Assistant Director - Commissioning and Performance)

Dean Mitchell (Assistant Director - Finance and Accountancy)

Raj Sohal (Scrutiny Officer)

Chris Stephenson (Scrutiny Manager)

David Watts (Executive Director - Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing)

2. Purpose of Meeting

The session focused on reviewing the proposed 2025/26 budget for Adults, Health Partnerships, and Housing Services. The meeting examined financial pressures, key savings and strategic approaches to service delivery.

3. Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing Services Presentation

Presented by: David Watts, Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing

Summary of Key Points:

The Executive Director provided an overview of the proposed budget for Adults, Health Partnerships, and Housing, amounting to £148 million, representing approximately 39% of the Council's General Fund.

Summary by Directorate	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
Adults Health Partnerships and Housing				
Opening Budget	148,326	164,268	177,462	192,997
Commissioning & Performance - Pressures	336	346	356	0
Commissioning & Performance - Savings	(116)	0	0	0
Adult Services - Pressures	23,353	17,848	19,929	22,252
Adult Services - Savings	(6,951)	(4,500)	(4,750)	(5,000)
Safeguarding & Wellbeing - Pressures	0	0	0	0
Safeguarding & Wellbeing - Savings	(180)	0	0	0
Housing - Pressures	0	0	0	0
Housing - Savings	(500)	(500)	0	0
Closing Budget	164,268	177,462	192,997	210,249

The presentation highlighted:

- **Key Pressures:** Including contractual inflation, demographic growth in demand for adult social care and challenges in housing provision.
- **Savings Initiatives:** Focused on enabling independence, optimizing transport arrangements and reducing temporary accommodation costs.
- **Strategic Focus Areas:** Addressing changes in care models, supporting aging populations and ensuring robust debt recovery processes sensitive to vulnerable adults.
- **Future Planning:** Work underway to manage long-term care contracts and potential transitions from external partnerships, such as the Shaw Healthcare Public Private Partnership (PPP).

4. Key Lines of Enquiry

- **Query 1: Housing and Long-Term Care Contracts**

Members queried the flexibility of the Shaw Healthcare PPP contracts and whether they were adaptable to current care needs, given that the contracts were based on care hours rather than bed occupancy.

Response: Officers acknowledged that the contracts required adjustments to align with evolving care demands and maximise efficiency. The contracts were originally designed for lower acuity care, but most current users require high-acuity support. This limited the Council's ability to fully utilise the available beds. Officers outlined ongoing negotiations to unlock additional care hours and improve contract efficiency.

- **Query 2: Planning for the Expiration of Shaw Contracts**

Members raised concerns about the Council's preparedness for managing services post-expiration of the Shaw Healthcare contract in 2034, emphasising the need for a comprehensive strategy.

Response: Officers assured Members that planning for the contract's expiration was underway. Preparations were underway to explore future options for care service delivery post-2034. Officers highlighted the need for early, high-level option modelling but noted that specific financial projections would depend on assumptions around costs and demand closer to 2034.

- **Query 3: Transport Policy and Independence**

Members sought clarification on measures to improve transport services and encourage independence, particularly for younger adults.

Response: Officers outlined the review of the current transport policy, which aimed to prioritise cost-effective and independent transport solutions. A new policy draft was under review, with consultation and implementation planned in the next financial year. Additionally, an enablement initiative was being developed to help younger adults use public or community transport rather than Council-funded options.

- **Query 4: Demographic Growth and Service Pressures**

Members questioned how demographic growth and associated service pressures were being modelled to support budget planning.

Response: Officers described the integration of local population data with national Office for National Statistics (ONS) projections to refine forecasting. Significant growth in demand was noted, particularly for older adults, requiring adjustments in modelling to reflect these trends. Officers emphasised that understanding these trends was crucial for long-term strategic planning.

- **Query 5: Financial Impact of High-Cost Placements**

Members expressed concerns over the financial burden of high-cost placements, especially for younger adults transitioning from children's services.

Response: Officers revealed that some cases involved significant costs due to complex care needs, underscoring the importance of proactive commissioning. Efforts were being made to reassess these packages, negotiate with providers, and explore alternative models to reduce costs. Officers highlighted the importance of proactive commissioning to prevent such high costs in the future.

- **Query 6: Contingency Planning for Volatile Demand**

Members asked about the contingency measures in place to manage unforeseen financial pressures resulting from volatile demand.

Response: Officers confirmed that the Council has set aside contingency reserves to manage financial risks associated with volatile demand. Sensitivity analyses were conducted regularly to monitor financial risks. However, officers cautioned that individual high-cost cases could significantly impact the budget.

- **Query 7: Localised Needs and Rural Challenges**

Members raised concerns about addressing localised needs, particularly in rural areas with aging populations and limited service availability.

Response: Officers explained ongoing efforts to tailor services to rural communities. Examples included enhanced domiciliary care and the development of extra care housing models, which provided cost-effective, community-based care solutions.

- **Query 8: Future Care Models and Investments**

Members queried the Council's strategy for future care models to reduce reliance on residential care.

Response: Officers outlined initiatives such as developing extra care housing to enable older adults to remain at home for longer, reducing demand for residential and nursing care. This approach aligned with both resident preferences and financial sustainability goals.

- **Query 9: Addressing Data Gaps in Forecasting**

Members sought assurances on the accuracy of demographic forecasts and whether data gaps from legacy councils were being addressed.

Response: Officers acknowledged historical data gaps but noted progress in developing comprehensive forecasting tools. They highlighted collaborative efforts with public health teams to create accurate, North Northamptonshire-specific demographic models, helping to refine service planning.

- **Query 10: Balancing Financial and Service Pressures**

Members asked about the balance between achieving savings and maintaining service quality.

Response: Officers emphasised that savings initiatives focused on improving efficiency rather than reducing frontline services. Examples included renegotiating contracts and promoting independence through enablement

programs. However, officers acknowledged the ongoing challenge of managing demand-led services like adult social care.

- **Query 11: Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Benchmarking, Performance and Standards**

Members queried the Council's approach to managing the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), particularly whether benchmarking against neighbouring authorities or national standards was possible and how the Council was addressing regulatory requirements. They also sought clarification on efforts to optimize HRA spending to ensure compliance with emerging regulatory standards.

Response: Officers explained that benchmarking HRA performance was inherently difficult due to significant variations in factors such as property profiles, local housing demand, and the age and condition of housing stock. These variations meant that comparing the Council's performance to others would provide limited actionable insights. Officers noted that no national benchmarking framework currently existed to support such comparisons.

Officers further noted that the Council had prioritised regulatory compliance as part of its housing strategy. The Housing Improvement Board was actively monitoring progress on meeting new regulatory standards, which included safety, quality and service expectations set by national regulators. Future updates on these efforts were planned to be reviewed by the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee to provide members with further assurance.

Additionally, officers emphasised that managing HRA spending effectively was a core priority. Investments were being made to address historical underinvestment in areas such as property maintenance and housing standards, while simultaneously seeking efficiencies through procurement and contract management. The Council was also exploring opportunities to address housing demand through innovative approaches, such as developing partnerships and considering different housing models

5. Resolutions and Recommendations

1. **Future Planning for Shaw Healthcare Contract:** Officers to develop a high-level options paper outlining potential strategies for managing the PPP contract post-2034, including cost implications and service models.
2. **Transport Policy Update:** Officers to provide an update on the progress of the transport policy review and enablement initiatives.
3. **Demographic Analysis:** Further detailed demographic modelling and trends analysis to be presented to aid strategic decision-making in subsequent sessions.

6. Actions and Follow-Up

1. **High-Level Options for Shaw Contract:** To be presented by June 2025.
(Action: David Watts)

2. **Transport Policy Consultation:** Final policy to be shared by September 2025. (*Action: David Watts*)
3. **Detailed Demographic Trends Report:** To be prepared by the Public Health and Performance teams by October 2025. (*Action: David Watts*)

7. Date of Next Meeting:

- **Date:** Monday 20th January 2025
- **Focus/Agenda Items:** Scrutiny of Public Health and Communities

Notes Prepared by: Rajvir Sohal

Date Prepared: 17 January 2025

Budget Scrutiny Panel – Phase 2 Meeting

Session Title: Scrutiny of Public Health and Communities

Session Number: Session 10 of 11

Date of Meeting: 20 January 2025

1. Attendance and Apologies:

Panel Members:

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)

Cllr Scott Brown

Cllr Paul Marks

Cllr Andy Mercer

Cllr Steven North

Cllr Russell Roberts

Executive Members:

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Portfolio Holder - Finance and Transformation)

Cllr Helen Howell (Portfolio Holder – Sport, Leisure, Culture and Tourism)

Cllr David Howes (Portfolio Holder – Rural Communities and Localism)

Cllr Gill Mercer (Portfolio Holder - Adults, Health and Wellbeing)

Observers:

Cllr Leanne Buckingham

Cllr Graham Lawman

Officers:

Jane Bethea (Director of Public Health)

Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy)

Maria Idoine (Strategic Finance Business Partner)

Dean Mitchell (Assistant Director of Finance and Accountancy)

Shirley Plenderleith (Assistant Director for Public Health)

Kerry Purnell (Assistant Director of Housing and Communities)

Raj Sohal (Scrutiny Officer)

2. Purpose of Meeting

The session focused on scrutinising the Public Health and Communities budget for the 2025/26 financial year. Discussions examined funding sources, pressures and strategic initiatives.

3. Public Health and Communities Presentation

Presented by: Jane Bethea, Director of Public Health

The Director of Public Health introduced the directorate's budget context. Key points included:

- **Budget Overview:** The Directorate operated primarily on a ring-fenced public health grant (£19m) and additional revenue streams totalling £8.94m.

Public Health & Communities				
Opening Budget	9,413	9,605	9,605	9,726
Public Health - Pressures	0	0	0	0
Public Health - Savings	0	0	0	0
Communities - Pressures	311	0	0	0
Communities - Savings	(119)	0	121	500
Closing Budget	9,605	9,605	9,726	10,226

- **Funding Challenges:** There was uncertainty around the public health grant allocation for the next year, with hopes for an uplift given national prevention priorities.
- **Key Priorities for 2025/26:**
 - Mobilisation of new contracts for sexual health services.
 - Substance misuse funding, incorporating a mix of grant and supplemental funding, though only secured until March 2026.
 - Recommissioning of weight management services and implementation of a new health improvement team.
 - Implementation of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy focusing on smoking cessation, financial resilience, and mental health initiatives.

Challenges identified included funding uncertainties, cost pressures and the realignment of spending to meet emerging priorities.

4. Key Lines of Enquiry

- **Query 1:** Members raised concerns about the sustainability of funding for substance misuse services given the temporary nature of some grants.
 - **Response:** Officers acknowledged the uncertainty and emphasised contingency planning. Long-term strategies involved advocating for stable funding streams.
- **Query 2:** Members queried how the directorate was addressing public health grant uncertainties and inflationary pressures.
 - **Response:** Officers explained a cautious financial planning approach, aligning spending with critical priorities. Reserves were utilised judiciously to cover staffing and contract costs.

- **Query 3:** Members expressed concerns about the rise in vaccine avoidance post-COVID.
 - **Response:** Officers described initiatives including vaccination buses, healthy schools' teams and catch-up programmes for unvaccinated children. Collaboration with NHS colleagues remained central to combating misinformation and improving vaccination uptake.
- **Query 4:** Members sought clarification on the contingency plans for potential pandemics and disease outbreaks.
 - **Response:** Officers confirmed the maintenance of a £2 million contingency reserve for emergencies. Regular reviews were conducted to ensure alignment with projected needs.
- **Query 5:** Members inquired about the directorate's partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCSE).
 - **Response:** Officers highlighted the Aspire NN collaboration, which consolidated six VCSE organizations. The new infrastructure contract was designed to strengthen VCSE capacity.
- **Query 6:** Members questioned the adequacy of mental health services for young people, particularly around waiting lists.
 - **Response:** Officers outlined plans under the new 0-19 service contract to enhance mental health support provisions through partnerships with the NHFT and REACH.
- **Query 7:** Members asked about the directorate's ability to address local health inequalities and provide services in rural areas.
 - **Response:** Officers discussed tailoring services to rural needs, including investment in domiciliary care, family hubs and integrated support systems.
- **Query 8:** Members emphasised the need for increased public education regarding self-care and prevention.
 - **Response:** Officers described the promotion of NHS health checks and preventive initiatives under the Health and Wellbeing Strategy to encourage proactive health management.
- **Query 9:** Members raised concerns about the management of reserves and the inclusion of inflationary adjustments in contingency planning.
 - **Response:** Officers explained the use of reserves for targeted projects and confirmed discussions with finance about indexing contingency funds to inflation.
- **Query 10:** Members emphasised the importance of integrating resident feedback into partnership strategies.

- **Response:** Officers acknowledged this as a future step in the development of local area partnerships (LAPs) and Integrated Care Systems (ICS).

5. Resolutions and Recommendations

1. Funding and Financial Planning Assurance

- **Explore Additional Funding:** Investigate new funding sources for substance misuse programs beyond March 2026. This will require budget allocation for research and potential grant applications, ensuring the sustainability of these services.
- **Adjust for Inflation:** Integrate inflationary adjustments into financial contingency plans. This will affect budget planning and reserve allocations, ensuring financial stability amid public health grant uncertainties and inflationary pressures.
- **Update Projections:** Incorporate updated demographic projections and budget scenarios up to 2029/30. This will require resources for data analysis and scenario planning, ensuring preparedness for potential future crises and maintaining a £2 million contingency reserve for emergencies.

2. Health and Wellbeing

- **Combat Vaccine Misinformation:** Implement enhanced communication strategies, including Member briefings and public education campaigns. This will require budget allocation for communication efforts and materials, addressing the rise in vaccine avoidance and improving vaccination uptake.
- **Address Rural Health Inequalities:** Maintain collaborative efforts with VCSE and health partners, tailoring services to rural needs through investment in domiciliary care, family hubs, and integrated support systems. This will involve budget considerations for partnerships and service delivery, addressing local health inequalities.
- **Mental Health Service Improvements:** Present progress on mental health service improvements under the 0-19 contract at the next meeting. This will require budget allocation for service enhancements and partnerships, addressing concerns about the adequacy of mental health services for young people.

3. Community Engagement

- **Engage Residents:** Include residents in LAP and ICS discussions to improve service design and responsiveness. This will require budget for engagement activities and feedback integration, ensuring that resident feedback is incorporated into partnership strategies.
- **Resident Engagement Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive strategy for resident engagement within partnership frameworks, promoting NHS health checks and preventive initiatives under the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. This will involve budget considerations for strategy development and implementation, promoting increased public education regarding self-care and prevention.

4. Tourism, English Heritage and Economic interconnectivity:

- Chester House and heritage assets sustainability ensures these investments provide tangible community and economic benefits.

6. Actions and Follow-Up

- Updated budget scenarios to include 2029/30, accounting for potential future crises.
- Progress on mental health service activities under the 0-19 contract to be presented at the next meeting.
- Development of a comprehensive strategy for resident engagement within partnership frameworks

Notes Prepared by: Rajvir Sohal

Date Prepared: 20 January 2025