



**MINUTES OF THE BUDGET TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR
CHILDREN’S AND EDUCATION SERVICES
SESSION 2 - 17 JANUARY 2021 held using the Zoom platform**

Attendees:

Cllrs: Mark Pengelly, Richard Levell, Wendy Brackenbury, Scott Brown, Jim Hakewill, Ken Harrington, Larry Henson, Ian Jelley, Anne Lee, Steven North, Malcolm Ward

Executive Members/Officers: Cllr Lloyd Bunday and Scott Edwards – Ann Marie Dodds, Assistant Director - Education, Cathi Hadley, Director – Children’s Services

Finance Officers: Mark Dickenson, Claire Edwards, Janice Gotts and Yoke O’Brien

Northamptonshire Children’s Trust: Colin Foster and Andrew Tagg

Raj Sohal, Democratic Services Officer and Emma Robinson, Democratic Services Support Officer.

1. Overview of presentation

- I. The task and finish group began the meeting by reflecting on questions raised at the previous session, put to the Children’s and Education service.
- II. Following this, the group considered a presentation by Colin Foster, Chief Executive – Northamptonshire Children’s Trust, which outlined the work and key priorities of the Trust, as well as the ongoing budget-setting process with the local authority. This information had previously been circulated to the task and finish group.

2. Summary of questions and comments including responses

- I. Responses to questions from previous session

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- Members acknowledged a press release, which had recently been put out by the local authority, regarding a ‘circuit break’ in SEND provision.
 - The Executive Director of Children’s Services assured members that this was being investigated to ensure that families would have suitable provision and support.
- Members emphasised that the Council budget must be balanced between the services it offered and that action should be taken if funding levels were not sufficient to maintain strong and effective services. Those members maintained that the group would require an in-depth understanding of the Council’s financial reserves, as an outcome from the meeting.
- Regarding SEND provision, it was questioned whether there was any guarantee in place that care providers were vetted.
 - The Executive Director of Children’s Services explained that families chose whether they wished to receive direct payments, to be able to source their own support through providers, who should be able to demonstrate that they operate within legal boundaries.
- It was queried how many social workers were in full-time positions, as opposed to agency staff. Members expressed concern that vacancies within this service would affect the budget allocation, resulting in an underspend.
 - The Executive member for Education explained that the authority had sought to reduce its dependence on agency staff and that a large-scale recruitment campaign was underway, to achieve this aim. Nevertheless, the shortage of full-time social workers was a national issue.
 - Similarly, the Executive Director of Children’s Services assured the group that the authority regularly monitored key performance indicators of the Children’s Trust, to determine dependency on agency staff and sought to achieve a fine balance.
- The Vice Chair questioned whether, following analysis of movements between this year’s and next year’s budgets, the Executive was satisfied with the 2021/22 budget. He expressed concern that scrutiny had not yet looked at the Council’s income, the biggest portion of which had come from Council tax.
 - Claire Edwards stated that additional funding information would be made available to the task and finish group at the second enabling services session.
- Members queried which budget areas most concerned portfolio holders.
 - Councillor Bunday explained that uncertainty surrounding demand-led services, such as adult social care and children’s services, had remained causes for concern but that the most significant area one going forward, would be the inter-authority agreement with West Northamptonshire Council, which still needed to be finalised. Regarding Council tax-setting,

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central government had predicated its financial settlement, based on the fact that local authorities would levy Council taxes at the highest level, as North Northamptonshire Council had done.

- The group then looked to Council income from fees and charges for things such as car parking and country parks.
 - Finance officers explained that income from fees and charges was being analysed and taken into consideration for budget-setting. Factors such as inflation adjustment and the wider national economy were also to be considered.
- The authority’s position regarding the closing of accounts of previous years from the legacy authorities was also questioned.
 - Finance officers explained that accounts for East Northamptonshire were almost resolved that that the accounts for Corby would take slightly longer but were also progressing.

II. Children’s Trust presentation and questions

- The task and finish group queried what the representatives from the Northamptonshire Children’s Trust meant when they referred to a ‘culture change’, which they posited was required within the Trust.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust explained that previous changes in officer leadership within children’s services had presented challenges, as the workforce had, at times, felt unsettled. He assured members that the Trust had sought to build confidence, so that workers could better manage risk and provide stronger support to families. A culture of ‘empowerment’ was desired.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust also explained that social work academies had been successful in providing regular cohorts of incoming, new social workers. 16.6% of social workers employed by the Trust were agency staff, which had decreased since the previous year.
 - Regarding international recruitment, the Trust was in the process of interviewing candidates and stated that there had been a strong field of applicants. 10 offers had been made to international applicants, to start in September 2022.
- Members questioned whether officers of the Trust were comfortable with the agreed sum of funding, to be received from the local authority.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust stated that while he was satisfied with the agreed contract sum, challenges could arise in complex cases. He explained that with additional complexity would come an increased risk of placement cost. Nevertheless, placements for children was a national challenge and the biggest pressure.

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- Regarding the reported underspend, concerning vacancies within the “strengthening families and young people’s service”, members queried why the authority had not sought to invest this funding in potential partner volunteer organisations, such as ‘Home Start’, to work in tandem with the Trust in the early help arena.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust explained that the underspend in this area had been offset in other areas within the legacy budget. Early help had been an under-developed partnership in the past however, if the council was to invest in this partnership, the Trust would welcome it.
 - Similarly, the Executive member for Education expressed support for the work of volunteer organisations, such as Home Start, across North Northamptonshire and that future work with such organisations in the early help arena, would be explored.
- The Chairman of the task and finish group questioned whether there existed a desirable model, which other Trusts had achieved success by, that the Northamptonshire Children’s Trust had based itself upon.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust explained that inspiration had been taken from the Birmingham Children’s Trust’s model, in the inception of the Northamptonshire Trust. He continued by acknowledging that the Northamptonshire Trust was unique, in that it was the only Trust in the country set up to work in partnership with two unitary authorities. The two fundamental themes of the Trust going forward would be an emphasis on strong partnerships and transparency.
- Members expressed concern that the two scrutiny committees of North Northamptonshire Council did not have an opportunity to thoroughly scrutinise the contract negotiations between the authority and the Trust. The Chair acknowledged that going forward, scrutiny would need to operate within the timescales of budget negotiations, if it was to have a meaningful impact upon such contractual agreements.
- The Chair also queried what key financial pressures the Trust would face.
 - The Chief Executive of the Trust explained that the most significant financial pressures would be placement costs, staffing - recruitment/retention and partnership contributions to the placement pot.
- Members posited that a significant outcome of scrutiny would be to look at building costs, to create provision for children within North Northamptonshire and reduce dependency on out of county placements.
 - The Executive member for Education agreed that it would be beneficial for the authority to create such provision locally but that this should also be most suitable for placements for children. An additional 3 schools, with SEND provision, were planned for establishment across North Northamptonshire.

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- The Chief Executive of the Trust also concurred that it would be beneficial to create additional provision within North Northamptonshire but that at the time of meeting, many out of county placements were required to meet children’s needs. Discussions were being undertaken with providers to carry out partnership work in new buildings with the trust. The challenges faced regarding out of county placements were in-line with the national picture.
- To conclude, members suggested that there should be allocation within the budget to allow for the construction of a new children’s home in Northamptonshire.
 - The portfolio holders assured the task and finish group that the possibility of this was to be explored and would require partnership with West Northamptonshire Council.