



CABINET

11 DECEMBER 2018

REPORT BY THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Subject:	Scrutiny of Children First Northamptonshire
Recommendations:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) That the Cabinet notes that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee is reassured that Children First Northamptonshire is taking action to understand and address children’s services budget pressures, although the Committee remains concerned about how this may affect the outcomes delivered. 2) That the Cabinet agrees to consider the potential to take further action to enhance access to information about fostering and adoption in Northamptonshire, on an invest-to-save basis. 3) That the Cabinet agrees that written responses to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee’s recommendations above be provided in accordance with the process set out in paragraph 5.2 of this report.

1. Purpose of report

1.1 The report is intended to present recommendations by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee concerning Children First Northamptonshire, which was scrutinised by the Committee at its meeting on 28th November 2018. These recommendations are presented in line with the Committee’s role to provide ‘critical friend’ challenge that contributes to the Council’s response to its current priorities and pressures.

2. How this decision contributes to the Council plan

2.1 The Council’s vision is to make Northamptonshire a great place to live and work. This is achieved through increasing the wellbeing of your county’s communities and/or safeguarding the county’s communities.

This initiative helps the Council to deliver this vision through the following strategic priorities outlined in the Council Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children and young people are safeguarded and vulnerable children are protected from harm. • Keeping communities and individuals safe and supported to be healthy and stay independent. • Effective commissioning to ensure good care at the right time for the best price, which supports people in achieving their outcomes. • Maximising the use and value of our assets to support safe and efficient service delivery.

3. Background

3.1 Northamptonshire County Council adopted a new model for Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) in September 2018 based on a single O&S Committee. At the direction of the commissioners appointed to improve the finance, governance and O&S functions of the Council, the work of the O&S Committee shall focus on:

- Major savings proposals and their implications, including equalities implications;
- Major risks to the Council, the community and to the wider area, as identified by the Council and its partners;
- Making substantive recommendations to feed into the in-year and 2019/20 budget proposals;
- Engagement, alignment and support for the Council's improvement plans;
- Other statutory functions associated with the O&S Committee's function.

4. Scrutiny of Children First Northamptonshire

4.1 The O&S Committee on 28th November scrutinised the in-year budget position of Children First Northamptonshire, its key risks and pressures and actions being taken to mitigate these. This topic was selected for scrutiny as an existing area of high priority and high risk for the Council, ahead of the findings of the Ofsted inspection of Northamptonshire children's services and the appointment of the children's commissioner. The O&S Committee received briefing information on the directorate's current position and had further discussion on this with the acting Director of Children First Northamptonshire and the Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education. The remainder of this report sets out a short summary of this scrutiny, which is intended to provide context for the recommendations being presented to the Cabinet.

4.2 The O&S Committee was advised that considerable recent work had been done to get a better understanding of Children First Northamptonshire's cost base. Two key factors were driving costs in Northamptonshire: pressures on the children's social care permanent workforce and use of agency staff; and the increase in the number of children in care since 2013 and the cost of placements. Action was being taken in each of these areas. Building up in-county provision such as in-house foster carers was a focus of current service development work and the Council had 40 more in-house foster carers compared to 12 months ago. A range of factors were affecting social worker recruitment and retention. The Council now aimed to get to a position where it could offer social workers a good working environment that enabled them to focus effectively on their primary role. Current work on how Council buildings were used and on professional practice would support this aim.

4.3 The O&S Committee considered risks that could affect the ability to control cost pressures. It sought reassurance that the Council had effective commissioning arrangements in place in relation to care placements and the use of block contracts. The Committee was also satisfied that the Council was co-operating with other social care authorities on common challenges and engaging with care agencies who could contribute to meeting the needs of Northamptonshire children. Members highlighted the risk that reductions in other public services

would increase demand on children's services, although the Committee was advised that early intervention and prevention was a key focus area in the Northamptonshire Sustainability & Transformation Plan. The Committee also discussed the gap between the government funding provided to Northamptonshire to support unaccompanied asylum seeking children and the actual cost of provision. It was suggested that the government should meet the full cost of what was a national demand. However, it was also highlighted that the Council would be in a better position to make this case if it could demonstrate that it was providing support as cost-effectively as possible.

4.4 The O&S Committee discussed the scope for the Council to take further action to support in-house foster care provision. The Committee was advised that good progress had been made on this. Recruitment capacity had been strengthened. Further opportunities to improve the recruitment process from initial enquiry to completion would be considered. There was also scope to build on the Council's current marketing strategy. The Council needed to ensure that it had a prominent presence in the response to on-line enquiries about fostering. Councillors could also be given an enhanced role in outreach campaigns. The Committee recognised the attention being given to this area but it was suggested that more could usefully be done – for example on improving access to information about fostering and adoption – as this would represent invest-to-save action.

4.5 The O&S Committee questioned how planned actions to address service pressures and deliver the 2018/19 budget would be affected by the outcomes of the Ofsted inspection and the need to respond to the areas for improvement it identified. The Committee was advised that a service improvement programme was already in-place when the Ofsted focussed visit had taken place but had only been 6 weeks into implementation. The financial implications of this were built into the Medium Term Financial Plan. Mitigations had been identified for current in-year pressures, which should enable Children First Northamptonshire to come in on-budget for 2018/19. The Committee emphasised that alternatives would be required for any Stabilisation Plan measures that could not be delivered in-full. It was felt that issues relating to the effectiveness of children's services required further scrutiny and the Committee looked forward to working with the new children's commissioner on this.

4.6 The O&S Committee ultimately agreed the recommendations listed at the front of this report.

5. Cabinet's response to Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommendations

5.1 This report is intended to enhance the transparency of the Council's governance process by providing a means for recommendations from the O&S Committee to be clearly and formally communicated to the Cabinet. It has been agreed that recommendations to the Cabinet resulting from the O&S Committee's monthly meetings are reported in this way as standard practice.

5.2 The report is also intended to assist the Cabinet to give a clear response to O&S Committee recommendations in the interests of good governance. The Cabinet should consider and reach conclusions on the recommendations set out in this report at the current meeting. The relevant Cabinet Member(s) should then provide a short written response to individual recommendations, setting out

the Cabinet’s conclusions plus any supporting information that may be useful to explain or contextualise them. These written responses should be produced in time to be reported to the next following O&S Committee meeting. This gives the O&S Committee clear information about the Cabinet’s response to its recommendations and any resulting action.

6. Equality Screening

6.1 The recommendations from the O&S Committee are intended to feed into and help to inform service- and budget-planning and delivery in relation to Children First Northamptonshire. Equality Impact assessments would need to be completed as appropriate as part of this process.

7. Alternative Options and Risks Considered

7.1 The work of the O&S Committee is intended to assist the Council by suggesting and testing possible alternative options relating to the subjects scrutinised and by considering risks connected with actions underway or proposed.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 The financial implications of agreeing recommendations by the O&S Committee will need to be considered as part of work supporting the delivery of the 2018/19 Council budget and future service- and budget-planning.

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Background Papers:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee agenda and reports (28 th November 2018) https://cmis.northamptonshire.gov.uk/cmis5live/MeetingsCalendar/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/410/Meeting/3334/Committee/452/Default.aspx .
Does the report propose a key decision is taken?	NO
If yes, is the decision in the Forward Plan?	NA
Will further decisions be required? If so please outline the timetable here	NA
Does the report include delegated decisions? If so, please outline the timetable here	NA
Is this report proposing an amendment to the budget and/or policy framework?	NO
Have the financial implications been cleared by the Strategic Finance Manager (SFM)?	NA

Have any capital spend implications been cleared by the Capital Investment Board (CIB)	NA
Has the report been cleared by the relevant Director?	NA – Although the relevant Director was involved in the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting.
Has the relevant Cabinet Member been consulted?	YES – The relevant Cabinet Member participated in the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting and was advised of the resulting recommendations ahead of the presentation of this report.
Has the relevant scrutiny committee been consulted?	YES – Report by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Has the report been cleared by Legal Services?	NO
Have any communications issues been cleared by Communications and Marketing?	NO
Have any property Issues been cleared by Property and Asset Management?	NA
Have Procurement Implications been referenced in the Paper	NA
Are there any community safety implications?	None directly relating to this report
Are there any environmental implications:	None directly relating to this report
Are there any Health and Safety Implications:	None directly relating to this report
Are there any Human Resources Implications:	None directly relating to this report
Are there any human rights implications:	None directly relating to this report
Constituency Interest:	Countywide

