

## Ward councillor's report (Barby & Onley) July 2023

### West Northants Council Cabinet meeting agenda 11<sup>th</sup> July 2023

A large number of reports are coming to the Cabinet meeting this week, which include:

**1** recommendations for the draft Housing Allocation Scheme which will be issued for public consultation during the summer. WNC is currently operating different housing allocation schemes inherited from the former Daventry and South Northamptonshire District Councils and Northampton Borough Council.

**2** Revenue monitoring - WNC's provisional outturn position against its 2022/23 budget. The provisional forecast is an overspend of £0.3m after use of £10.1m of budget contingencies, set aside for risks that have materialised in the current financial year. The cost pressures during this financial year have been severe with inflation reaching a 40 year high of 14.2% and increasing demand from Adult and Children's Services. Other reasons for increasing financial pressures are the staff pay award which is greater than that anticipated when the budget was set and an increase in homelessness and the use of expensive nightly temporary accommodation.

**3** SEND Strategy. This report acknowledges the need for WNC and local partners to have a joint understanding of the needs of children with SEND locally and a joint approach to delivering services, which they currently lack. Communication and transparency (two of the 5 values informing the new Strategy) within the existing services were severely criticised recently. A new unit for children with autism attached to Hunsbury Park school was due to open in September. Parents of Reception children due to start at the school were only recently informed by WNC that the unit will not be ready for the start of the new term and will open in October (no specified date given). The unit was intended to accommodate children throughout the primary school years, it will be limited to KS1, meaning these vulnerable children will have to change schools half way through their primary school education. There are 23 families affected by this decision and many more SEND children in the area left without any educational provision.

Since this announcement the opening of another SEND school has been delayed. There are calls from Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors for the Cabinet member for Children and Education, Cllr Fiona Baker, to resign, given the number of failures she is overseeing.

**4** Home to School Transport. WNC received 1460 responses to its recent consultation on this issue. This includes proposals to help simplify the current policy and make it clearer for parents and schools as to the criteria for entitlement to free home to school transport. The last 2 years has seen an increase in demand and operating costs.

The review of the current policy has identified that WNC provides an enhanced level of provision above and beyond its legal requirements for example, by offering subsidised concessionary seats scheme to some pupils who do not meet statutory eligibility criteria for free transport. A new Spare Seat Scheme will mean that parents are no longer guaranteed a seat as these will only be offered where the Council has spare capacity available on its existing contracted services. To mitigate the impact of this change, students who are currently guaranteed transport under the current non-entitled scheme will continue to be guaranteed a seat until they either cease attending the school or after they complete Year 11.

All councils have a legal duty to provide free transport to a child's nearest school with places available when the relevant distance criteria are met, however WNC's current policy provides an enhancement to this and includes free travel assistance to a child's nearest or linked school. 785 responses to the consultation objected to the proposal to remove this assistance to linked schools, particularly as regards the impact on families living in rural areas, which the Equality Impact Assessment also identified. As a result WNC will continue to provide free home to school transport to a child's nearest or "Geographically Associated school" (the new name for Linked Schools) where this is over the statutory walking distance, or where the walking route is deemed unsuitable. Many other details about the new proposals can be read in the report: [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Cabinet, 11/07/2023 18:00 \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

**5 Library Strategy.** In West Northants there are 9 council run libraries and 9 community managed libraries as well as other types of library provision. The report recommends a new draft strategy for the next 4 years which will go out for public consultation.

**6 Anti Poverty Strategy** This Strategy was published in April 2022 and the report includes a review of outcomes so far.

### **Carer's Leave Act 2023**

This new Act gives employees a statutory right to a week's unpaid leave to care for a dependant. At last month's meeting of Full Council I seconded a motion to convene a round table over the summer with local MPs, a cross-party group of councillors, officers, unpaid carers and voluntary groups to raise awareness of the Act and explore how to give more support to unpaid carers. While the motion was not supported the proposal is going to be considered by the Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee.

### **Barby Meadow Woods**

Congratulations to all involved in securing the lease and forming the new charity for this exciting project. I would be very pleased to volunteer for tree planting in November. The 6,500 new trees planned will exceed the total number of trees planted in 2022/23 by WNC (115) and either planted or pledged by the Queens Green Canopy Initiative (5,661). These figures are published WNC's Annual Report as part of the scorecard for its "Green and Clean" corporate priority: [Annual Report | West Northamptonshire Council \(westnorthants.gov.uk\)](#)

Cllr Rosie Humphreys

10<sup>th</sup> July 2023