

Northamptonshire Children's Services Commissioners' report

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Overview

We were appointed on 17 October 2019, as the Commissioners for Children's Services in Northamptonshire, replacing the previous commissioner, Malcolm Newsam. This is an update on progress towards the establishment of a Trust and improvements being made in children's services in Northamptonshire.

Mr Newsam provided a thorough handover and portrayed a number of concerns that prevented progress with service improvement and Trust set-up. In summary, he concluded that there was a lack of progress in the improvement of children's services due to capacity issues and because of the scale of savings being required of children's services. In Mr Newsam's view, upfront investment was required to enable improvement to happen and without this investment, the service would continue to deliver poor value for money with an over-reliance on high cost placements and agency staff. We have taken his concerns into account.

Since we were appointed, we have spent time in the services, understanding the operating systems and engaging with key staff members. We have met the Director for Children's Services (DCS) on a weekly basis to provide support and scrutiny of the delivery of the Council's improvement plan, as well as advice on further improvements to services and on key appointments. We have also spent a lot of time building relationships following feedback that those between the previous commissioner and some of the key players, including the senior leadership team, and elected members, had virtually broken down. We have received a warm welcome from all those parties and the Chief Executive has been helpful and ensured we have the information and support required.

Service Improvement

When we first arrived in Northamptonshire, we identified four points of concern. First and foremost were the high number of unallocated cases; secondly, the high number of agency staff and difficulty in recruiting permanent staff; thirdly, the concerns highlighted by Ofsted; and finally, the leadership vacuum. Ofsted's concerns included: children in care who are living in unregulated placements that are unsafe and unsuitable; a small cohort of care leavers who were identified as vulnerable and homeless; and worries about how contact and assessment (the 'front door') was functioning. In the space of a month between September and October, there were a number of key changes in senior management of children's services in the Council. The Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Assistant Director (AD) left in quick succession and the children's commissioner then resigned. The Council responded swiftly to our findings, in ways which we describe in more detail below.

With our agreement, a new DCS and a new AD for Safeguarding and Early Help were quickly appointed. We have spent substantial time with both the DCS and AD, as well as attending various meetings, including performance clinics – where the AD and her team go through the weekly stats to understand the status of cases and whether any are unallocated. We can see that this is a new and inexperienced leadership team, but one that is dealing with the issues with great energy, working cohesively as a team, paying attention to detail in the service, and one that has an understanding of what the key issues are. For example, when we first arrived in Northamptonshire, there were over 300 unallocated cases. This is now down to zero and has remained so for the last month and a half. The team have a clear understanding and grip of what needs to improve in the service and are making the relevant changes to ensure improvement happens.

Oversight of individual team performance is improving and cases of concern are escalated more often than was the case. There is some evidence of improved culture and behaviours and that staff are feeling more positive and enthusiastic. But these signs of improvement are at an early stage and not yet well embedded.

Ofsted carried out their first monitoring visit on 14 and 15 January, which has provided a helpful analysis of the Council's position. They focused on Northamptonshire's arrangements for the 'front door'. Ofsted found that progress of improvement had previously been too slow following their focused visit in October 2018 and the full inspection in June 2019. However, following this recent monitoring visit, they said "The pace has begun to accelerate in the last three months. The newly appointed senior leadership team has increased workforce capacity and improved staff morale. Senior

managers have appropriately prioritised stabilising the workforce and creating conditions to improve the quality of social work practice. Although some of the priority actions raised at the focused visit with regard to the workforce have yet to be fully implemented, risks to children are being better identified at the front door and children are now being seen more promptly.”

Ofsted felt the Council knew themselves well and did not find any children at risk. This is a move in the right direction and demonstrates that progress has been made in the short period of time the new leadership team has been in place.

Progress with the establishment of the Trust

From the outset, it has been clear that progress of the Trust set-up had been slower than originally expected and that key milestones have been missed. Since arriving, we have advertised the Trust Chair, Chief Executive and Non-Executive Director (NED) roles. We have interviewed for the Chair role and with the previous minister's approval, we have appointed Ian Curryer, current Chief Executive of Nottingham City Council and their previous DCS. We have ensured that a memorandum of understanding between the Department for Education and Council has been agreed and signed-off and the preparation of the Service Delivery Contract and Articles for the Trust is underway.

We have engaged well with the Council's Cabinet and Leaders of the District and Borough Councils who have been keen to work with us on set-up of the Trust. We have also met with other elected members and provided briefing to the Scrutiny Committee and we are speaking to full Council towards the end of February. This engagement has proved very positive thus far and we will continue to place a high priority on it going forward.

Northamptonshire brings with it the unusual complexity of splitting into two new unitary authorities – scheduled to happen in April 2021. As a consequence, the Trust will be servicing two authorities rather than one. These two authorities will be in 'shadow' form from May this year and it is of paramount importance that the leadership team of the Trust manages this complexity carefully to ensure it services both authorities effectively.

The current plan is for the Trust to 'go live' in July this year. Given the scale of preparation work still to be done, we have concerns that a July deadline may not provide enough time for the necessary actions to have happened for the safe and effective set-up of the Trust. We are in discussions with the Council and the MHCLG commissioners about the timescale.

Mr Curryer, of course, supported by the Trust Chief Executive, will need to be confident that the Trust can deliver when it goes live. We anticipate that by the end of March we will be in a position to take a firm decision about the 'go-live' date. The complex challenges, competing priorities and scale of wider change in Northamptonshire is likely to continue to test the Council's capacity to make the necessary arrangements in good time. Previous experience has shown that it usually takes a minimum of 12 months for the safe set-up of a Trust. That said, given the particular circumstances of

Northamptonshire, it is our view that there cannot be much further delay to the start of operations for the Trust.

The key appointments of the Chief Executive, Executive Directors and Non-Executive Directors still need to be made and it is important that we appoint the right people for the job. Led by the Chair, these individuals will make up the Board. This Board will need to be content that the Trust is set up in a way which gives it the best possible chance to succeed in providing the right services for the vulnerable children and young people of Northamptonshire.

Current budget

The financial situation in Northamptonshire is improving, but still fragile. The Council's current forecast financial position, as at the end of December 2019, shows an underspend of £29k against the approved budget of £417.7m. They have reached this position by savings made in Adult Social Services, Corporate Services, Technical Finance and Place Services, as well as funding received from central government. These savings were offset by overspends on Children's Services and non-delivery of savings on corporate budgets. The Children's Services budget is currently forecasted to be overspent by £7.5m.

The five key service areas that are driving costs in Children's Services are:

- Staffing and agency costs
- Placement costs
- Insufficiency of various types of placements for children in care
- Social care transport
- Legal demand to support casework

The Council reports that in recent months, identified forecast overspend for 2019-20 has stabilised and gradually reduced, due to the considerable effort of Council Officers in gripping the financial issues identified early in the financial year and containing and reducing expenditure where possible.

Staffing and recruitment in children's services remains one of the Council's greatest challenges, where they are currently forecasting £2.9m of non-delivery of staffing related savings proposals. There are issues with particular teams having a concentration of agency staff. Ninety six percent of the staff in Duty and Assessment are agency workers. Overall, 20% of vacancies remain unfilled by permanent staff within the service (a reduction from 30% in March 2019). To manage this the Council are over recruiting in some teams. They have also commissioned managed service teams in Duty and Assessment to fill vacancies and meet increased demand, funded by the Business Rates Retention pilot and the Department for Education.

The setting of the budget will be a key part of Trust contract negotiations in the coming months. We are working closely with the MHCLG commissioners who have been supportive and informative. Given the budgetary pressures facing the Council, it is crucial that the budget works for the two new unitary Councils, as well as the Trust.

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