

NCC Middleton Cheney Division Report

It has been a challenging time to be a councillor at NCC. Being elected just as the whole organisation was being pilloried by parliament, press and public and the subsequent fallout has been quite an experience. It was pretty obvious to many for some time that things were not right and so it has proved to be.

Over the course of the year the aim of the members has been to work with the Commissioners, Improvement Board and others to help place NCC's finances and its services in the best possible position ahead of the expected transition to a two unitary local government structure in Northamptonshire.

A year after the shockwaves went through the council and a tremendous amount of work the Improvement Board, noted in a report to cabinet on the 9th April 2019

'The capitalisation dispensation approved by the Secretary of State has provided a means to fund the deficit (still subject to audit) which is expected to carry forward from 2017/18. It has also provided the means to establish a general reserve to support the Council's 2019/20 budget, a critical factor in relation to the robustness and viability of that budget. In parallel the Council has been able to improve its way of working, in particular by introducing more effective financial controls and disciplines. As a consequence there is now a good prospect that the financial outturn for 2018/19 will be close to breakeven, and cautious optimism that the approved budget for 2019/20 represents a realistic and well tested plan which can be delivered on target.'

This is a dramatic turnaround for a council that was subject to two Sec 114 notices that severely limited its ability to spend money and now reports a potential underspend against budget!

The restoration of the council's finances has been the primary focus over the past year, while maintaining more than just statutory services, and working with the the 7 District and Borough Councils as we head towards two new Unitary Councils.

Pressure on demand for services is unrelenting, particularly in adult social care and children's services. Being demand led services it is not a choice whether NCC spends money in those areas, but what became apparent last year was the cost of the services that NCC provided.

Childrens services work out at an average of £160,000 per child to deliver, against an average cost in other county areas of rather more like £120,000 - the number of agency staff and interims causing costs to soar as well as the need to place children out of county because of a shortage of appropriate foster carers. Focus on the employment and retention of permanent staff as well as a foster parent recruitment drive have started to show rewards. In adult social care a key indicator in performance has been Delayed Transfer of Care (bed blocking) out of the acute hospital environment to community care. This has been unsatisfactorily high in Northamptonshire for a number of years and was a reflection of the inability of a council to either assess residents for care packages quickly enough or to fund a satisfactory package. The knock on effects are serious to both the operation of an acute hospital, the local authority and the individual. It is pleasing to note that rates of DTOC have halved in the last few months per head of population, and in the last couple of months have fallen to just a handful of days rather than weeks. An additional focus now is on prevention work as in Northamptonshire 55% of additional Adult Social Care demand is through admission and then discharge from the acute hospital system compared to a national figure of 25%. This costs NCC £25m per annum and could be drastically reduced.

Across all areas of council activities a detailed study of contracts has identified areas where considerable savings could be made or performance enhanced within the same envelope and some areas where appalling contracts have been drafted in the past without sufficient attention to detail and the council is suffering financially or in delivery or often, both.

While the commissioners and members have been concentrating on living within the budget and are now doing so, attention is being turned to service improvement and every department is being studied in detail. There has been much attention on Adults and Children but service delivery in other areas like Trading Standards, Environment Health and Highways needs to improve.

Finance

Body	2018/19	Increase	Increase Amount	2018/19
NCC ¹	£1,146.63	4.99%	-£0.25	£1,146.38
NCC Adult Social Care ²	£89.72	0.00%	£0.00	£89.72
PCC ³	£221.04	11.00%	£24.00	£245.04
Fire Service ⁴			£60.76	£60.76
SNC	£185.78	2.99%	£5.55	£191.33
Total	£1,643.17	5.48%	£90.06	£1,733.23

In order to balance its budget NCC was given specific permission by central government to use the capital receipts from the sale of One Angel Square to fund its revenue deficit in the last financial year. There was also an exceptional decision to allow NCC to charge an additional 2% on top of the maximum council tax increase of 2.9% without triggering a referendum and these have enabled the council to propose a balanced budget. Although the figure above shows NCC as having increased its precept by 4.99 and still showing a negative increase, the Fire Service has been removed from that figure and given its own row. Despite the increase NCC's Band D is still very low. In 2019-20 60% of authorities in England will have a Band D council tax that is between £1700 and £1900.

NCC did not increase the Adult Social Care element as it took full advantage of the limit available last year.

Unitary Preparation

As we wait for the final decision of the Secretary of State (at the moment James Brokenshire) at MHCLG on whether he is minded to accept the August proposals of the the 7 authorities, work continues on the presumption and clear guidance given by senior civil servants that it is a given.

A Joint Committee has been set up incorporating representatives of each of the 4 authorities in what will become West Northamptonshire. I sit as a representative of South Northants Council on this committee but am very mindful that I have a shared responsibility at the County Council. This committee is making decisions on how the 'Shadow Authority' will operate prior to the establishment of the new Unitary. The Shadow Authority is a Statutory requirement pre Unitary and will agree such things as the new constitution of the Unitary, oversee the appointment of the Chief Executive and other senior officers and start to make decisions on harmonisation of policies across the existing authorities.

The County Council is working with Daventry, South Northants and Northampton Borough Council providing data / existing policies / information on assets and contracts / HR information / legal and financial information - a vast piece of work that will require the disaggregation and then recreation of service areas. The default presumption is that all services will be split into two, to

reflect the belief of Max Caller, the author of the Best Value report last year, that only a completely new way of working will provide the transformation and fresh start that Northamptonshire needs.

My Work

I deal with case work for my division which generally covers the usual range of issues - schools, special needs, concerns by individuals over the funding of care packages, lack of public transport and particularly in the last year the closure of the A422 and repair of potholes.

I sit on the Adoption Panel which recommends adoption and long term fostering matches and is a very life affirming role. I am consistently amazed at the wonderful people who are taking on children from very difficult backgrounds and offering them a home and environment in which they can thrive.

Rebecca Breese