

WNC Highlights 2022/23

April-June 2022

-Cabinet members approved the Council's new Anti-Poverty Strategy, setting out how we will support people struggling financially, what we will do to stop people falling into poverty and how we will work to influence the Government and other national organisations to get the best deal for the people of West Northants. This crucial strategy has brought support to many families, being a collaboration between the council and all the relevant voluntary organisations.

-Work to support people coming to the UK as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme continued. There have been over 400 generous sponsors across West Northants, who between them have welcomed around 700 guests. WNC carried out home and welfare safety checks to ensure everything was in place for arrivals from Ukraine, and to arrange support such as the £200 payment that each guest receives for subsistence costs. Homes for Ukraine workshops for parish councils were held to advise villages and towns on how they could assist.

-WNC announced its new Highways contract with Kier which commenced in September 2022. The contract includes priorities and requirements specifically tailored to West Northamptonshire and a fresh flexibility to meet the changing priorities of the council and needs of our communities. We increased investment to the service by more than £1million per year, and put in place our own contract management team to monitor performance, which includes clear, strong goals for improving customer focus and providing value for money. For next year's contract we have included a further £1, aimed at fixing more potholes, in addition to which the Govt budget has given us an additional £1.8M

- Jane Carr was appointed as the Director of Communities & Opportunities, which brought together housing and communities services as well as a range of place-making services including libraries, economic regeneration and cultural services. These changes were made to bring our community-focussed services together and helping us join the priorities of these services more collaboratively.

-The Council organised and facilitated a huge number of events to mark the late Queen's Jubilee, as thousands of people turned out to enjoy a spectacular bank holiday weekend of events and activities. A number of commemorative beacons simultaneously lit across our area, including the Northampton Lift Tower becoming a 'virtual beacon' lit up in red, white and blue. On the Saturday the crowds turned out for a spectacular countywide pageant, which saw military and emergency services personnel, youth and community groups and businesses from across Northamptonshire parade through Northampton town centre, all ensuring a very fitting tribute.

-The Birmingham 2022 Queen's Baton Relay visited Northampton on Sunday, 10th July. Held in the run-up to the Commonwealth Games which took place in Birmingham, the Queen's Baton Relay provided an opportunity for communities to experience the excitement in the run-up to the big event.

July-September 2022

-WNC was given approximately £2.6million from the Department for Work and Pensions' Household Support Fund, to support those most in need of help to cope with the rising cost of living. Around a third of the money was used to support families with children, with more than 10,500 children receiving £20 per week food vouchers to use during the school summer holidays. Over 6,500 residents across West Northants who receive Pension Credit each received a £100 payment from the fund, while anyone who receives the Pension Credit Top Up for pensioners with severe disabilities received an additional £50 payment. Further allocations of funding were received later in the year to enable this much needed support to continue.

-A comprehensive review was launched into the way our council deals with Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in response to concerns, particularly in urban areas such as Northampton, where some people say they have a detrimental impact on local communities. The aim of the Council's HMO review is to thoroughly investigate the issues concerning housing of this nature within West Northamptonshire. It will include a robust analysis of current policies concerning HMOs in Northampton, alongside looking at ways we can use best practice from elsewhere in the country.

-Northamptonshire formally established its new statutory integrated care system on 1 July. This was a new legal requirement not just for our county, but for the whole of England across 42 local areas. An integrated care system is a partnership of local health and care organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined-up services and to improve the health of people who live and work in the area. Our integrated care system is called Integrated Care Northamptonshire. It replaces and builds upon the partnership work undertaken over the last few years by Northamptonshire Health and Care Partnership. This has subsequently led to the establishment of Local Area Partnerships across West Northants, a pioneering approach that has for the first time brought together council, health, police and other services to identify and meet the specific needs of local communities.

-West Northamptonshire joined the rest of the country and people around the world in mourning the loss of Queen Elizabeth II. Services in memory of the late Queen took place across the District and hundreds of people gathered outside All Saints Church in Northampton on Sunday 11th September for an historic ceremony, when The High Sheriff of Northamptonshire, Crispin Holborow DL, formally proclaimed the beginning of King Charles III's reign to the people of Northamptonshire.

October-December 2022

-The Council's new Highways contract came into effect. Kier set out its commitment to working with the Council on its sustainability goals to achieve net zero emissions by 2030, as well as increasing social value to the service to benefit the wider West Northants community and economy, such as supporting local disadvantaged groups and working with local sub-contractors.

-The budget for a new 250-place school for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) was given the go ahead. The Council will convert an empty facility in Tiffield near Towcester into a SEND school for children aged four to 18. The unit will cater for children who are on the autistic spectrum (ASC) and have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and those with severe learning difficulties (SLD). The plans come in addition to a £1.1 million expansion and the creation of 50 new specialist places at Hunsbury Park Primary School, which was given the go ahead earlier last year. A number of further school extensions to increase SEND capacity have subsequently opened or are currently under construction.

-Daventry Country Park, Abington Park, Bradlaugh Fields and Delapre Park all retained their Green Flag Awards - recognised as the benchmark for the management of recreational outdoor spaces around the world. There are plans to work towards achieving similar accolades for Towcester's Water Meadows and Hunsbury Country Park.

-WNC approved a fresh strategy for improving housing for residents across West Northants while tackling issues including homelessness and the cost of living crisis. At the Cabinet meeting on 23rd September, members agreed to progress proposals for the new Housing Strategy, which focuses on four key objectives:

- Deliver homes people need and can afford
- Improve the quality, standard and safety of homes and housing services
- Support residents to live healthy, safe, independent and active lives
- Support thriving and sustainable communities

-Our Council increased payments for Homes for Ukraine hosts to £550 a month from December through to March 2023, with the additional £200 to help cover rising living costs.

January-March 2023

-A report confirmed that our new unitary authority has exceeded the original savings target we inherited when replacing the former Daventry, Northampton, South Northants and County councils on 1 April 2021. Savings of £84m were estimated from merging the eight councils across Northamptonshire into two new single-tier authorities, with £49m of these delivered before the abolition of the legacy councils prior to vesting day. This left our Council and our neighbouring new authority North Northants Council a requirement to deliver the remaining savings of £17.5m each in our first few years. The figures shared at the Cabinet meeting show we are on course to have exceeded these savings by the end of 2025/26, including an additional £16.4m as part of the transformation journey to bring together and improve services from the four legacy councils.

-In common with local authorities across the country, the Council has been facing severe financial pressures due to factors including the current economic climate, high inflation rates driving up running costs and an increase in demand for services, particularly around supporting children in care and vulnerable adults. Despite these pressures, the Council worked hard to balance the books and has set a balanced revenue budget for 2023/24 of £383.5m (excluding grant funded schools spending of £443.7m). The budget includes a Council Tax increase of 4.99%, well below current inflation rates and in line with the Government's allowance, crucially generating extra funding of around £12m – with 2% of the increase going towards funding adult social care. This represents an average increase on a Band D property of £80.50 a year, the equivalent of £1.55 a week. We are also pleased to confirm that in 2022/23 the council has managed its finances conservatively and is expected to report a very modest underspend when the figures are confirmed. This however is subject to the final costs of the Children's Trust which are demand led and are likely to exceed their own budget.

-The additional plans in the budget included investing an extra £1m in the year ahead towards repairing local roads and changes to car parking proposals include putting in place two hours' free parking on Saturdays and Sundays in Northampton's town centre off street car parks and a set weekend all-day charge of £2.20 for off street car parks, introducing free parking up to 10.30am on

Saturdays at Daventry and Brixworth country parks and reducing the proposed maximum daily charge at the two sites by a third to £8. In addition to this, the Council will be investing up to £215,000 in the year ahead towards bus services. This continues the funding allocated for the current year, while the Council shapes a new bus strategy and considers the most viable options for supporting and delivering the services in the future.

-WNC launched its plans to encourage Town and parish councils to get involved in a Bank Holiday weekend of special events being planned to mark the Coronation of King Charles III. His Majesty will be crowned at Westminster Abbey in London on Saturday 6 May 2023, the first of three days of celebrations as communities across the country are invited to come together to mark the historic occasion. Plans are under way to organise a packed weekend of festivities in West Northamptonshire from 6 to 8 May, including street party-style activities and big screens in Northampton town centre on the Saturday, a Big Lunch at Delapre Abbey on the Sunday and local volunteering opportunities for the Big Help Out on Bank Holiday Monday.

-Our Council presented its baseline emissions report for 2021-22, as we strive to meet our sustainability goal to be net zero by 2030. Sustainability is high on the agenda for our Council, with work underway to meet the Government's call for local authorities to support the delivery of the UK's sustainability agenda. Our baseline report provided a robust set of baseline CO2 emissions data for the Council's first year, April 2021 – 31 March 2022 and outlined our intentions to eliminate or reduce these. Establishing the baseline for our emissions will enable the Council to develop a detailed emissions reduction plan and monitor progress towards our targets.

-The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) released its proposals for new Council electoral boundaries, with draft recommendations for 76 members to represent 35 wards across West Northamptonshire. The LGBCE recommendations are out for consultation until 15th May.

-A new Assistant Director of Planning, Stephanie Gibrat, was appointed and is taking steps to implement the recommendations of an independent review of our planning services. One priority is being given to improving the way in which WNC handles section 106 agreements and getting payments to local organisations in a more timely fashion and another is communication with Parish Councils. In addition a programme of training and engagement with Parish Councils is being planned over the next year or so.

-Finally, we are very proud that West Northamptonshire Council is receiving widespread recognition for its work this year after being shortlisted for six national awards.

WNC is among only a small number of finalists out of hundreds of entries from councils across the country for two leading local government sector awards ceremonies, the LGC (Local Government Chronicle) Awards and MJ (Municipal Journal) Awards. We were delighted to learn that this is not just for one award, but for six awards!

The Council has two members of staff as finalists for both the LGC's and MJ's Rising Star categories, with its Customer Services Team also being shortlisted for LGC's Large Team of the Year. Its Sustainable West Northants initiative also beat off stiff competition to become a finalist for LGC's coveted Climate Response award, and as a leading partner for Integrated Care Across Northants the Council has also been shortlisted for both awards' health and social care categories.