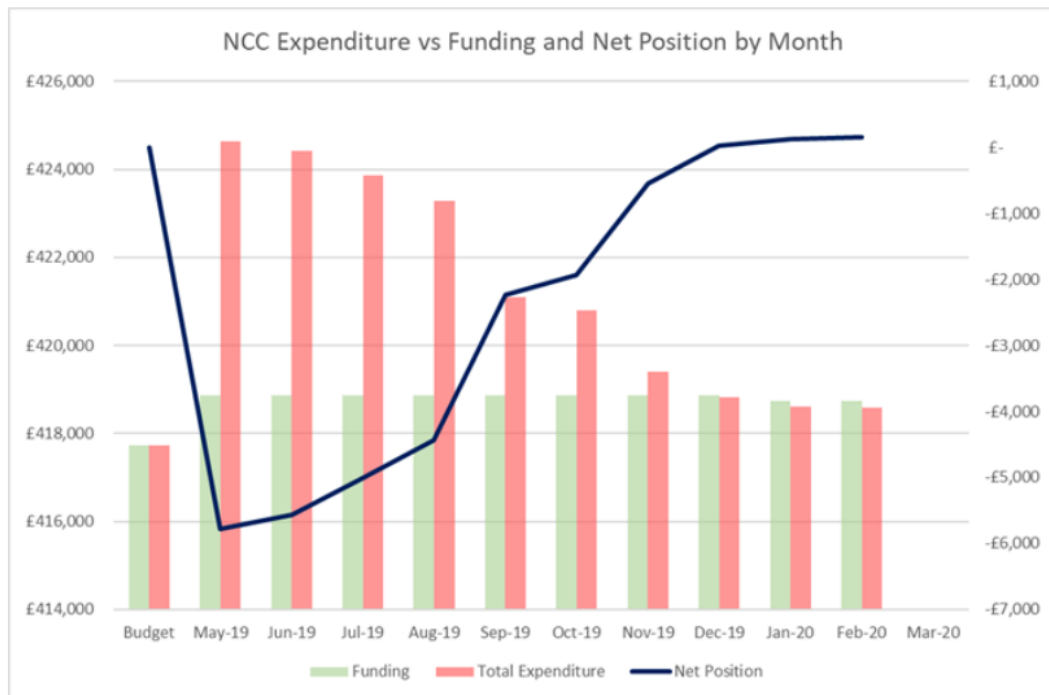


County Council Report
Rebecca Breese

Please read this report in conjunction with the LGR report in the South Northants Council Annual meeting notes you will have received. I wrote that report in early February against a very different national landscape. I am Portfolio Holder for Local Government Reform at SNC.

I first wrote a County Council report some weeks ago before I was due to head to New Zealand for a series of significant family birthdays. Due to leave on the 12th March I put off and put off buying a ticket because of the news coming out of China. I didn't go and now my report is torn up and I'm starting again.

My previous missive was about the work that has gone on in the County to bring costs to heel, balance a difficult budget and drastically improve services, as well as the changes in Local Government in Northamptonshire. As I look back, the budget for the last year has seen reductions in spending vs revenue.



The financial year was in balance, the budget for this next year is in balance, significant service improvement was seen in the performance in Children’s Services and Adult Social Care and work was beginning on the improvement required on still underperforming services. Of particular note was the dramatic increase in the number of interim (or agency staff particularly social workers) staff being transitioned to full employees of the council. The cost saving is estimated at £25,000 per employee.

I have decided to give just that brief overview of what was achieved in the last year. Although significant progress on the County Council financial position and performance in delivering key services was achieved, so much unprecedented change, particularly on the domestic and global economic front has made the recent past seem very distant. Therefore I will focus on the structure of local government in Northamptonshire over the next year.

While all that day to day work was going on the effort going in to what we refer to as LGR (Local Government Reform), representing for the public the dissolution of the existing District and Borough Councils, the County Council and the creation of a new West Northamptonshire Council, consuming many hours of officer and councillor time. As Portfolio Holder for LGR in South Northamptonshire many hours each week were occupied with officers preparing for the creation of the Shadow Council after the elections in May 2020 and then the new Council in May next year.

After much delay, at the end of February, the Statutory Instrument (SI) that set out the structure of the new Authority was laid before parliament, nearly a year later than expected. Within days that SI became largely redundant when the government cancelled the May local elections and the country headed towards lockdown. Since then we have been drip fed information about what the Government intended to do and it was only on Friday, 17th April that clarity was achieved and new legislation was laid before parliament which confirmed that all Councillors from South Northants, Daventry, Northants Borough and the County Council will now make 134 Shadow Councillors with the Leader of South Northants Council as the new Leader of the Shadow Council (by virtue of being Deputy Chair of the Leaders Oversight Board (LOB)– a committee preparing the existing Councils for Unitary (the Chair of the LOB being a Councillor from the North)), a position he will hold until a new Leader is elected after the Local Government elections next year.

As expected all existing services will continue to be delivered by the SNC and the County Council until vesting day on the 1st April 2021 with the exception of Children's Services. This service is being transferred into a Children's Trust ostensibly on the 1st of July this year, but in tune with the times, that now looks in doubt because of

the sudden early departure of the interim chief executive to Tower Hamlets and the difficulty in a new search.....

The Shadow Authority's role over the coming 11 months will be to recruit a permanent Chief Executive and Senior Management Team, make decisions on major areas of policy that need to be harmonised on vesting day and prepare a budget. There will also be other ad hoc technical decisions to be made but not the delivery of services. Shadow Councillors will not be paid any allowances for this role.

And so, with all of the above, NCC, as are all councils, having to step into the unknown of SARs-Covid-19. The local response is being led by the Northamptonshire Strategic Coordination Group (NSCG) which comprises senior executives from NCC, other local government, NHS, Military, and the Police and Fire Service. They receive all the latest national and local briefings, respond as appropriate and cascade information down to Local Resilience Forums, voluntary groups etc. In order to support the Northamptonshire Response, some NCC services have had to be stepped down (for example Tourism support) and staff redeployed elsewhere to provide critical support. NCC is overseeing the local volunteers supporting self-isolating, vulnerable and shielded citizens and those wishing to volunteer or needing help can access the system via NCC's webpage:

<https://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/coronavirus-updates/Pages/default.aspx>

or by calling 0300 120 1000, then option 5.

This of course is placing another unprecedented strain on local government, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) have just announced a further £1.6 billion of support for Local Government across the UK.

I could keep writing another 10,000 words on LGR and the impact of Covid-19, but I have decided just to keep it to the above. Of course, any residents reading this, if they want more information can ask but I think this is long enough.

And so to end on a good note: In August 2018 I persuaded SNC to use some of its reserves to kick start technical preparation work for the much wanted A422 Farthinghoe Bypass. This has gained a life of its own and last month, NCC agreed to commit a further £1.4m to complete the detailed technical preparation, after which there will be an 'oven ready' plan to submit for infrastructure funding from appropriate sources. There is now an awareness of the importance of the bypass in central government and I am almost optimistic....

Kind regards to everyone and if you persevered to the end – you must have a keen interest in local government, or time on your hands!

Rebecca Breese

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