

## **Secure Sub-committee**

**Monday, 20 November 2023**

**Present:** Councillor A Newman (Chair)  
Councillors R O'Keefe, G Bell, L Bell, L Bones, D Cox,  
J Kirwin, J Mudzingwa, O Scargill, J Walker and  
M Wilson

**In attendance:** Councillor J Harrison, Cabinet Member for Housing

**Apologies:** Councillors J Cruddas and J Johnsson

### **S13/23 Appointment of Substitutes**

Pursuant to the Council's constitution the appointment of the following substitute member was made:

Councillor L Bones for Councillor C Johnsson.

### **S14/23 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations**

Councillor O'Keefe declared a non-registerable personal interest in Item 5: as she is a North Tyneside Council tenant; and in Item 6: as an employee that worked for a provider who had received the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.

### **S15/23 Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 September 2023 be agreed and signed by the Chair.

### **S16/23 Tenancy and Financial Support Project 2023 – 2026**

The Secure Sub-committee received an update briefing note which provided an overview of the support packages available to Council tenants included in the Tenancy and Financial Support Project 2023-2026.

The sub-committee was informed that in response to the ongoing issues that were impacting on the financial circumstances of North Tyneside Council

tenants, Cabinet had agreed a financial support package (Tenants Support Fund) covering the three-year period 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26. The package totalled £3.00m over the three-year period (£1.2m first year, £1.00m second year & £0.77m third year). This generous package recognised the impact that the current cost of living crisis was having on the Authority's tenants. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) would be funding the package, so it was specifically for Housing tenants only.

There was a clear policy commitment in the Our North Tyneside Plan to tackle inequalities and the Equally Well Strategy provided a framework for doing this in relation to providing a healthy standard of living for all. A key factor in supporting tenants, and their families, to deal with the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and in creating sustainable tenancies was to improve the financial capability and confidence of tenants to enable them to live and flourish in their homes.

The Authority knew from experience that by taking the time to engage with and gain the trust of customers, by having an honest discussion with them, the Authority could identify the underlying issues that were impacting on their ability to sustain their tenancy and thrive in the current economic climate. Once this was done, the Authority could collaborate with the tenants to help improve their money management and budgeting skills, maximise their income and help them make the right decisions for their housing and financial circumstances.

This briefing note and its appendices described how the Authority was going to use the Tenants Support Fund to help target those in most need through - Existing Support; The Business Approach; Targets; Debt Management; Tenancy and Financial Support Service; Tenancy Support, Financial Inclusion, Money, and Debt Management; and Additional Specialist Support including - Energy Efficiency, and Specialist Debt Management.

In addition to the help and support available to all residents that was detailed on the Council's website via the web link below; the Authority's Tenancy Support Service worked with housing tenants to help sustain their tenancies:

<https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/category/1652/cost-living-support>

During discussions, Members examined a number of areas, including:

The processes in place for tenants seeking support by contacting the Authority, Housing officers, Ward briefings, GPs etc.: It was explained that people in need of support should be brought to the attention of housing teams who will have a proactive approach involving an Initial triage and how an individual's circumstances could be addressed e.g., debt worries. Next steps included identifying the relevant skills and knowledge of staff in order to build a rapport with tenants. Other support options for consideration could be a door knocking process and referrals such as cost of living type enquiries.

Contingencies in place by the Authority in cases of people not able to pay, also when the voluntary system was exhausted: It was explained that the Authority had added a pre-used goods and free of charge furniture facility to its corporate social values, provided on a case-by-case basis through tenant support resources. It was noted that the Cost-of-Living Support report included on this agenda provided details of wider issues and ways in which tenants were supported. It was also explained that In the borough and nationally, all voluntary sections were becoming significantly reduced in terms of providing people with basic essentials for the home e.g. white goods, furniture etc.

Members raised concerns about the continuing rise in energy and fuel costs in relation to debt poverty. This was particularly relevant with regard to pre-paid meters and tenants struggling to pay. In relation, Members asked whether as landlord, the Authority was in a position to instruct energy companies to remove pre-paid meters or to not install them in certain circumstances: It was explained that the scope of the Authority to offer help to tenants depended on debt, individual circumstances and financial ability to pay. It was explained that North Tyneside Council, as landlord, did not own the meters in its properties and therefore had no legal authority regarding installations.

It was suggested that it may be useful if officers could find out how/when pre-paid meters were being installed and whether the Authority could ask energy companies to remove meters, as a sensible approach in order to help stop tenants getting/staying in debt. Also, to look at the impact on the wider issues of 'poverty and energy' and identifying the number of tenants using smart meters to establish energy usage as a comparison as a helpful way forward; noting that standing charge tariffs were higher in the north east.

It was **agreed** that the report be noted.

### **S17/23 North Tyneside Council Cost of Living Support**

The Secure Sub-committee received a report which provided an overview of the support available or planned for residents and tenants to help address the current cost of living increase.

The sub-committee was informed that since June 2020, the Authority's Poverty Intervention Fund and other grant funding from Government (Covid Winter Grant and the Household Support Fund) had helped to alleviate the financial, social and health impacts of poverty for families and individuals across the borough through:

- Tackling holiday hunger by continuing to provide supermarket vouchers directly to families who are eligible for free school meals during every school holiday since December 2020 – this is £15 per week per eligible child going directly to families; and
- Support for school uniform or clothing through increased the number of schools which have been supported to develop their uniform policies to encourage more recycling and swapping with nineteen schools now on board. A list of schools including those involved in these schemes were available on the cost-of-living pages on the North Tyneside Council website.

School staff had reported that they wanted to learn more about what opportunities there were out there to help families. To support this work, the Authority held its first Uniform Summit in March 2023 to share good practice between schools. Poverty proofing the School Day was a programme designed to identify barriers faced by children living in poverty when engaging with school life and to help alleviate these. As of May 2023, 34 schools in North Tyneside had completed this process. The support around schools had continued and contributed toward the North of Tyne Combined Authority Child Poverty Prevention Programme.

Since Easter 2021 the Authority's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme had supported children and young people eligible for income related free school

meals to have access to meals and different activities delivered through a broad range of voluntary and community sector partners across the borough. During summer 2023, match funding of £46,000 expanded the reach of HAF to allow more children to access the programme from low-income households who would have been otherwise ineligible. Over £500,000 funding was given to VCSE organisations to deliver activities within the community. 2048 children had taken part in the summer programme.

Direct financial support to people who struggled to pay their bills was provided through the Council Tax support (CTS) scheme which helps around 16,000 household pay their Council Tax bill; a Hardship Payment reduction of £25.00 for pensionable age claimants and £150.00 for working age claimants of CTS against their Council Tax bill; support for housing costs via Housing Benefit and Discretionary Housing Payments; Healthy Start Scheme vouchers for pregnant women and children under four in eligible low income families – to be used on milk, baby formula milk and certain foods as well as free vitamin supplements; Household Support Grant payments to support the costs of food and utilities plus items linked to these costs; and the welfare assistance scheme to provide help with the food (via the food bank) or utility costs.

Support for those in financial hardship or crisis through our Adults and Childrens Services was supported through section 17 payments which under the Childrens Act 1989 could be made to provide financial assistance to address needs to safeguard and promote a child's welfare. The budget for 2022/23 was £93,441, actual expenditure for 2021/22 was £227, 478.

The Authority was committed to supporting its residents, and local businesses, especially those most affected. Working with North Tyneside Council Comms team work was being undertaken to develop a space on the Council's website to signpost residents who needed support during the cost-of-living crisis and find advice from relevant organisations.

In order to tackle food poverty and food insecurity – A food strategy for North Tyneside had been drafted which has a focussed strand on food insecurity, some of the actions were to support the development of affordable food provision within communities across North Tyneside which addressed lack of access, skills and equipment to make nutritious food in local areas which had been identified as considerable risk of food insecurity.

A network of affordable food clubs, pantries and community shops were developing across North Tyneside which were focussed on making nutritious food accessible in local communities. This included the Bread-and-Butter Thing, delivering food to up to 480 residents across six locations weekly. The hubs run in Whitley Bay, Collingwood Ward, Shiremoor, Longbenton, Howdon and Fordley with support from VCSE organisations and schools locally. In addition to this, there was a growing number of community stores supported by the Community Food Grant.

The Warm Welcome Programmes within VCSE locations over the winter would have a food focus with up to ten venues delivering community cooking as part of the offer. Open access to a warm safe space for residents would become the basis of other wraparound services including equipment and skills to prepare nutritious meals at home.

North Tyneside had been awarded £3,219,996.00 in government funding to support vulnerable households. This must be used by 31 March 2024. This grant was very similar to the previous Household Support Fund in that it must be used to support financially vulnerable households with food and fuel and expenses linked to these. There is much more flexibility in how the funding can be used for different groups of residents.

With the above in mind the following proposals were to be delivered: -

- Continue to tackle holiday hunger through funding £15.00 per child per week of each school holidays.
- Through an application process online or telephone (Condition of grant to provide application-based support most of the year, if not all) £1,200,000.00.
- Increased Crisis Support payments (immediate help) £100,000.00.
- Community led Warm Welcomes £75,000.00.
- Staffing costs around £129,000 to manage administration.
- Remaining funding used for other projects identified throughout the year.
- Welfare Support team to distribute grants as previous with an application process (with referrals from partners only) and using the fund for crisis payment support.
- Other projects that reduce inequalities identified through the PIF work or wider.

During discussions, Members examined a number of issues including:

The Authority's Plans and Strategies and how they were linked to homelessness, also the processes to enable homeless people to receive money: It was noted that the report did address the issues around homeless prevention and that grants were received for this purpose. Assessment processes were in place to identify those people in need of financial support; however, the Authority did intend to look at rising numbers as part of a financial support opportunity through as part of the forthcoming Devolution Deal (as Manchester and West Midlands) to be put into place in this region.

The Authority could also look at how to identify and secure grants/other support in the future. In addition to the data on homeless prevention, increasing activity in seeking face-to-face' communications was another way in getting to know potential homeless residents and tenants of the borough in need of support. It was noted that there was also a mechanism with regard to the Household Support Fund via the North Tyneside Council website.

In response to a Member's query regarding automatic enrolment of the Household Support Fund by the Authority (as Newcastle City Council): It was explained that only families who were legible to free school meals were entitled to automatic enrolment. It was noted that criteria for automatic enrolment was in place and submission of an application to deliver this was a condition of grant.

The sub-committee acknowledged that this was not just a universal credit, it was how the Authority informed people 'squeezed' and those not on credit aware of the support available.

The sub-committee was informed that, as a result of the Authority's funding allocation, the HAF programme this year had been very successful in the way in which residents had benefitted.

It was **agreed** that the report be noted, and further work be considered for inclusion in the 2023-24 work programme.

## **S18/23          Work Programme 2023-24**

The Chair encouraged Members of the sub-committee to put forward any ideas they may have for suggested topics for inclusion in the work programme for the remainder of the year.

**S19/23      Date and Time of Next Meeting**

6.00pm on Monday 29 January 2024.