

Housing Sub Committee

Monday, 4 July 2022

Present: Councillor A Newman (Chair)
Councillors A Percy, J Walker, E Parker-Leonard,
L Bartoli, L Ferasin, M Fox, G Madden, R O'Keefe and
O Scargill

HO1/22 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitute members reported.

HO2/22 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest reported.

HO3/22 Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting on 21 March 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

HO4/22 Overview of Housing and Property Services and Cabinet Member Discussion

The Director of Housing and Property Services and the Cabinet Member for Housing were in attendance at the meeting to provide an overview of housing related services and current priorities. It was noted that the Cabinet Member for Housing has responsibility for Housing Strategy, Housing Management, Housing Investment and the Affordable Homes Programme.

Members were informed that Housing and Property Services had a service plan which was linked to the Our North Tyneside plan. The plan contained a number of priorities and actions needed for delivery. This included responding to the Housing White Paper, which included a clear drive from central government to engage with and listen to tenants. It was acknowledged that the Housing Sub-committee formed part of the governance arrangements around tenant engagement. Another key priority area related to protecting and supporting the most vulnerable residents. This would be achieved through a new Homelessness Action Plan as part of the Housing Strategy and re-establishment of the homelessness forum.

A further priority was to have a fit for purpose housing stock which supports a thriving, secure and green borough. This priority was designed to ensure that Council homes were maintained to Decent Homes Standard and meet tenants' priorities. During 2022/23 various works would be undertaken to help meet this priority, including the external redecoration of 2,114 properties and 971 boundary wall or fence replacements.

Councillor John Harrison, Cabinet Member for Housing, set out his priorities for his portfolio area. These included providing homes with affordable rent; developing the Council's housing stock and working closely with tenants on the management of homes. Councillor Harrison highlighted that he was keen to work with the sub-committee in addressing key challenges going forward.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided.

HO5/22 Housing White Paper

The sub-committee received a presentation in relation to the Housing White Paper. Members were informed that the white paper was in response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy in June 2017. An inquiry was launched to understand the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire. Whilst the full findings of the inquiry are yet to be published, there was a strong narrative that tenant voices were ignored. In 2020 the UK Government published *The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper*, setting out its proposals for change.

The white paper set out 7 themes for improvement and presented proposals for how the sector will continue to be regulated. The 7 themes were:

- Theme 1: To be safe in your home
- Theme 2: To know how your landlord is performing
- Theme 3: To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- Theme 4: To be treated with respect
- Theme 5: To have your voice heard by your landlord
- Theme 6: To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- Theme 7: To be supported to take your first step to ownership

The sub-committee was informed that a gap analysis had been undertaken to identify where the authority would expect to be compliant with the requirements to come out of the white paper and where further improvements may be needed. Tenant service development groups had been re-established and recruitment had commenced for an Engagement Manager to work directly with housing tenants. It was noted that the Customer First Office had been launched on 11 July 2022 as a primary contact for all complaint activity.

It was noted that early work was being undertaken to fill any gaps in meeting the requirements of the white paper. A revised Engagement Plan for tenants was being produced, as well as the roll out of carbon monoxide detectors to homes and the roll out of customer service training to all staff and involved tenants.

In relation to satisfaction, a member of the sub-committee asked when tenants are asked for feedback. It was explained that whenever any service was carried out in the tenants home, a satisfaction card is passed to the tenant in order for them to provide feedback. It was suggested that the data gathered from these feedback cards could be monitored by the sub-committee going forward. It was indicated that this could be included in the work programme going forward.

It was **agreed** that the contents of the presentation be noted.

HO6/22 Cost of Living

The 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, in North Tyneside, around 1 in 10 residents live in areas ranked the most deprived in England. The southern areas of the borough had the highest levels of deprivation, however there were pockets of deprivation in many wards. There were 7,300 children or young people in the borough entitled to free school meals.

Since June 2020, the Poverty Intervention Fund and other grant funding from Government had helped to alleviate the financial, social and health impacts of poverty for families and individuals across the borough. This had included providing supermarket vouchers directly to families eligible for free school meals during the school holidays and support for school uniform or clothing.

Since Easter 2021, the Holiday Activities and Food 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. Work had been done to tackle digital exclusion through the provision of devices such as laptops and access to wi-fi for schools, children and young people to ensure ongoing learning throughout the lockdown periods of the pandemic.

The sub-committee was informed of direct financial support available to people struggling to pay bills and ways in which support could be accessed through Adult and Children's Services for those facing financial hardship or crisis.

Members were informed that the Bread-and-Butter Thing was launched in April 2022 as a way to tackle food poverty and food insecurity and was delivered through local community hubs. This provided a new way for people to have easy access in their local area to affordable food and help reduce reliance on food banks.

Officers informed Members of progress with the administration of the £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate, which an estimated 91,000 households were eligible for. As of 20 June 2022, automated payments had been made to the majority of direct debit payers. For households that do not pay Council Tax via direct debit, an online application process had been launched. The closing deadline for applications was 31 July 2022. To support people to make claims, there was an assisted claim appointments in the customer service centres, drop in sessions in libraries, as well as telephone appointments.

It was explained that on 31 March 2022 North Tyneside received notification that it had been awarded £1.6 million in government funding to support vulnerable households. This had to be used by 30 September 2022 and the grant was very similar to the Household Support Fund in that it had to be used to support financially vulnerable households with food and fuel and expenses linked to these.

A member of the sub-committee highlighted that school uniforms, especially where schools required items to be bought from one supplier, could be very expensive and asked how this could be overcome. It was explained that, for those families eligible for support with uniform

costs through the Poverty Intervention Fund, the £45 provided (per child) would be split, with £20 to the uniform supplier and the rest for spending on uniform items available in supermarkets. It was noted that new statutory government guidance on uniform meant that, from the Autumn 2022, schools need to take steps to make uniform more affordable, including keeping the use of branded items to a minimum. The local authority was working with a number of schools to re-write uniform policies in line with the guidance.

The Chair of the sub-committee thanked the officers for all the hard work that was being undertaken to support vulnerable residents.

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

HO7/22 Work Programme Report

Members received a report which presented suggestions received for inclusion in the 2022/23 Housing sub-committee work programme. Members were invited to submit any further ideas they had for topics that the sub-committee could investigate.

Members were reminded that the role of Overview and Scrutiny, as described in the Council's Constitution, was as follows:

“Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development involves councillors of all political parties, as leaders of their communities, examining the delivery of services and influencing decision makers to ensure that they meet the needs, and improve the lives, of people in North Tyneside.

It does this by:

- a) reviewing and challenging the impact of decisions and actions taken by the Elected Mayor, Cabinet and partner organisations;
- b) carrying out investigations into services and policy areas of interest and concern to communities in North Tyneside;
- c) involving communities in its work and reflecting their views and concerns; and
- d) supporting and assisting the Elected Mayor, Cabinet and partner organisations in the formulation of their future plans, strategies and their decision making by making evidence-based recommendations to them on how services can be improved.”

The Housing sub-committee had responsibility to perform these roles in relation to the following areas:

- Housing
- Community Safety

All Elected Members and senior officers had been invited to submit ideas for inclusion in the 2022/23 work programmes. The suggestions received in relation to the remit of Housing sub-committee were as follows:

- Carbon reduction and green policies within the Housing Service
- The impact of the cost of living on Council tenants
- Update on the work of the Police and Crime Commissioner
- To review the Tenancy Agreement

- To examine the Homeless policy and front of house support
- To look at how the authority engages with developers
- Updates on Rechargeable Repairs; Communal Area Cleaning project; Empty Home Waste Removals; Customer Satisfaction for New Tenants
- Housing White Paper
- Domestic Abuse Policy
- Asylum and Migration including Homes for Ukraine
- Tenant Involvement
- Unified ICT system

Members of the sub-committee were invited to raise any other topics that they felt should be included in the work programme. It was noted that topics would be scheduled accordingly in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chair.

The Domestic Abuse Policy, long term voids, tenant satisfaction, tenant engagement and rent arrears were identified as priority areas for the sub-committee to focus on.

It was **agreed** to note the report and for the Chair and Deputy Chair to finalise and schedule work programme items.