

Housing Sub Committee

Monday, 21 November 2022

Present: Councillor E Parker-Leonard (in the Chair)
Councillors John Hunter, M Thirlaway, J Walker, L Bartoli,
L Ferasin, M Fox, G Madden, R O'Keefe and C Johnston

Apologies: Councillors A Newman and O Scargill

HO14/22 Appointment of Substitute Members

Pursuant to the Council's Constitution the appointment of the following substitute member was reported:

Councillor C Johnston for Councillor O Scargill

HO15/22 Declarations of Interest

Councillor M Thirlaway declared a non-registerable interest in Item 6 - Cost of Living – as his father works for North Tyneside Council.

HO16/22 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2022 be agreed.

HO17/22 Refreshed Approach to Tenant Engagement

The sub-committee received a brief verbal update in relation to the refreshed approach to tenant engagement. It was noted that the refresh was at the beginning stages and the principles to date had been shaped by desk top research of best practice. There would need to be some engagement on the planned activities, asking current tenants what works well and what could be improved.

The sub-committee was presented with a diagram that provided an overview of current tenant engagement and ideas for future improvements. Activities that currently ran included estate walk abouts, service development groups and traditional and digital methods of communication. Whilst these were useful tools for engaging with tenants, it had been noted that these methods did not result in engagement with a very representative group, and it tended to be the same people that contributed.

Members were informed of ideas that had been proposed for future engagement, which included task and finish groups, health and well-being sessions, Have Your Say marketing materials and a refreshed digital engagement offer. It was noted that climate change was an issue of concern to residents and a task force dedicated to this may attract a wider group of representatives.

It was noted that an increase in social media interactions was needed, along with the use of a wider variety of platforms. It was highlighted that there needed to be a range of opportunities both online and in person for people to engage in. In person interactions also needed to take place at evenings and weekends, along with some sessions during the day, to ensure that there is greater opportunity for people to attend around work and caring commitments.

It was explained that the intended outcomes of a refreshed approach to tenant engagement would be an increased awareness of opportunities to get involved, increased transparency and ability to hold the Council to account and more tenants having a voice to influence positive change.

It was **agreed** to note the information presented in relation to the refreshed approach to tenant engagement.

HO18/22 Cost of Living - Impact on Rent Collections

The sub-committee received a presentation in relation to the cost of living and the impact that this was having on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and on Council tenants.

It was explained that there was a requirement to have 30-year HRA Business Plan in order to be able to project forward and maintain council stock. The policy priorities of the HRA included maintaining the decent homes standard of existing stock, affordable homes and maximising income collection whilst supporting tenants to avoid falling into rent arrears.

The sub-committee was informed of potential risks in relation to the delivery of the business plan. The Government was consulting on a rent increase between 3 and 7% which was well below current inflation. The Pay Award 2022-23, along with any future pay awards, would put pressure on the cost base and the increase in cost of materials and sub-contractors also put pressures on the business plan. These pressures would impact on the Repairs Budget and Investment Plan, with less scope for major works and a likely reduced resource available for new build affordable homes.

Members were presented with details of how the cost-of-living increases were impacting on rent collections. It was noted that at present there was no significant increase in the overall arrears or the number of tenants in arrears. The overall arrears for Council tenants were £88,651 higher than the same time last year; less than the figure projected. There were 48 less tenants in arrears than there were at the same time the previous year, though the average arrears per tenant was £16.50 higher than it was last year.

Members were informed that the number of tenants that were ending their tenancy had increased. The number of terminations where 'financial difficulties' was cited as the reason doubled from 2020/21 to 2021/22. Throughout 2022/23 this number had remained relatively stable. Bankruptcy among council tenants was increasing significantly, with the average bankruptcy debt increasing 16.06% since the previous year.

Data from the Citizens Advice Bureau demonstrated the increased use of food banks, and it was noted that housing teams would work with tenants on a long-term basis, looking where

possible to manage and sustain tenancies. Members were informed of the support and one-off payments available to residents to help with the increased cost of living. It was noted that the Welfare and Tenancy Support Team would help tenants to review income and expenditure, with the option to see if all benefit entitlement was being claimed. Work would also be undertaken in relation to employment and skills to help tenants improve money matters, interview skills and job opportunities.

The resources available for rent collection was discussed and it was noted that carrying out the role of supporting tenants and collection of rent was becoming more challenging as a combined role. Work was being done to look at separating some of these activities, so that more time could be dedicated to considering the individual circumstances of tenants. The sub-committee discussed the importance of making sure tenancies can be sustained and it was highlighted that officers would work with tenants to try and identify a more affordable property if this was requested by tenants. Though it was noted that this would be down to the availability of appropriate properties. Tenants could also, following the correct process, rent out a room in their property in order to maximise income.

It was **agreed** to note the presentation and the information presented.

HO19/22 Homes for Ukraine

The sub-committee received a presentation providing information and an update in relation to the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The scheme was launched in mid-March 2022 to enable Ukrainian nationals (known as guests in the scheme) with no family connection to come to the UK.

The sub-committee was informed that eligibility criteria applied, and that sponsors and guests were responsible for matching with each other. Security checks were undertaken by the Home Office on potential sponsors, their households and the guests. The terms of the scheme were that sponsors had to provide rent free accommodation for a period of at least 6 months. Guests had leave to remain for 3 years and access to welfare benefits, work, education and health care.

Grant funding was provided by the Government to local authorities to administer the scheme. The funding had to be used to support families to rebuild their lives and to help with community integration. Funding was set at £10,500 per person for the first year; funding beyond the first year was unknown. Additional funding had been made available for education services. Sponsors were eligible for a 'thank you' payment of £350 per month for as long as the guest remained in the accommodation, up to a maximum of up to 12 months.

The sub-committee was informed of the duties local authorities were expected to coordinate, which included pre-arrival support to the sponsor and carrying out checks to ensure the property and sponsor are suitable. The local authority would assess the support needs of the guest and arrange for monthly contact to be made with the sponsor/guest. The scheme required that face-to-face contact was made every 6 months. The sub-committee sought clarification and it was confirmed that the sponsors and guests had the opportunity to speak independently of each other to a local authority officer so that any concerns they had could be raised if necessary.

To date, 258 Ukrainian guests had arrived in the borough. The majority of these were in May 2022. Guests continued to arrive in small number per month, with 4 arriving to date in November 2022. It was highlighted that over the coming months it was expected that a further 37 individuals across 19 households were expected to arrive in the borough. The majority of sponsors were hosting 2 guests; there was one sponsor in the borough that was hosting 7 guests. It was noted that the thank you payment of £350 per month available to sponsors was the same amount regardless of the number of guests that were being accommodated.

Members were informed that 56 of the guests that had arrived under the scheme had been hosted by their original sponsor for a period of over 6 months. There had been instances where the arrangement had not been working out and replacements had been found for these guests. The local authority was supporting sponsors and guests with future housing arrangements; many guests were still with existing sponsors, some have asked for a re-match and other guests have left the scheme. Some guests have applied for social housing, though it was acknowledged that the supply of appropriate housing was limited. It was acknowledged that the cost-of-living increase may change the position of sponsors to host guests and that funding from Government after the first 12 months was not yet clear.

It was **agreed** to note the update.

HO20/22 Victim Support Sub Group

The sub-committee received a report which provided details of an in-depth study that was due to be undertaken and an invitation to members of the sub-committee to contribute to the work.

The sub-committee was informed that the Police and Justice Act 2006 required local authorities to have one of its scrutiny committees assigned to consider matters relating to crime and disorder. In accordance with the Council's Constitution, this requirement fell within the remit of Housing sub-committee.

In accordance with its remit, the sub-committee may carry out in-depth investigations into topics that fall within its remit that are of interest and concern to communities in North Tyneside. In consultation with the Chair of Housing Sub-committee, it had been proposed that a short review take place in relation to the support available for victims of anti-social behaviour. It was intended that the review take place over one day, rather than a series of meetings. This would be split into a morning session looking at the number of people accessing victim support, the type of help available and best practice principles in relation to anti-social behaviour aimed to deliver the best possible outcomes for victims. An afternoon session would then be focused on hearing some case study examples of the support provided and identifying where any improvements could be made to processes and the support available.

The sub-committee was invited to agree the establishment of the sub-group and identify membership.

It was **agreed** that (1) a sub-group be established to carry out a piece of work in relation to

support for victims of anti-social behaviour; and (2) the membership of the sub-group comprise Councillors Newman, O'Keefe and Fox.