

Housing Sub Committee

Monday, 23 November 2020

Present: Councillor A Newman (Chair)
Councillors L Darke, John Hunter, A Percy, M Thirlaway,
J Walker, L Bell, E Parker-Leonard, F Weetman and
M Wilson

HO19/19 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitutes reported.

HO20/19 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Erin Parker-Leonard declared a registerable personal interest in Item 6, Homelessness, as her wife works for Shelter.

HO21/19 Minutes

It was **agreed** that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

HO22/19 Budget Update - Impact of Covid

The sub-committee received a presentation in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on the Housing Revenue Account. This had been a topic identified by Members in prioritising items for the 2020/21 work programme.

It was explained that on Wednesday 18th March 2020 the Government announced a complete ban on evictions and new possession cases during the coronavirus emergency. The Government took early steps to introduce legislation that required landlords to give three months' notice of their intention to seek possession of a property as opposed to the standard four-week notice. In August 2020 further changes to the regulations saw this time frame extend to six months, except in the more serious cases.

In North Tyneside, action was taken to stop new cases going to Court and any that had dates set for a hearing the courts were asked to adjourn or suspend. Arrears letters that made reference to court action or eviction were suspended and new letters to send out were drafted. Work was done to ensure that data was captured on all cases where tenants had informed of financial difficulties due to Covid-19. This helped gain an understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on rent arrears.

The sub-committee was informed of a range of support that was available for tenants including Discretionary Housing Payments, the Poverty Intervention Fund and the Water Rates Discount Scheme. There was also support available from the Employment and Skills Team in relation to employment opportunities and increasing skills. Referrals could also be made to other organisations including Citizens Advice Bureau and Armed Forces Charity Support.

As was expected, rent arrears had gone up as a result of Covid-19. Members were

informed that there was an influx of Universal Credit cases at the beginning of lockdown. There was also an initial impact of rental loss due to not being able to let void properties, unless it was related to homelessness or domestic abuse.

The sub-committee was presented with graphs that illustrated the numbers of tenants in arrears in November 2019, March 2020 and November 2020. The graphs showed data under the following categories: full payer, universal credit and housing benefit. The graph showed a reduction in the number of full payer tenants in arrears between November 2019 and November 2020. This trend was also demonstrated in the data for those tenants in receipt of housing benefit. For those in receipt of universal credit, the data showed an increase in the number of tenants in rent arrears.

It was noted that the Government furlough scheme which covered 80% of wages was continuing to operate. The notice seeking possession process had resumed in order to encourage tenants to engage with the Council to make arrangements for repayment of rent arrears. This was particularly targeted at those tenants that were 6 months or more in arrears. It was noted that evictions would not be enforced whilst national restrictions were in place and no evictions would be enforced by bailiffs until 11 January 2021 at the earliest, except in the most egregious of cases such as anti-social behaviour.

Members were also informed that there were some tenants that were able to pay rent but were choosing not to throughout the pandemic. These tenants were also being targeted and it was explained that the Council would take all the steps it could to support and work with tenants to manage arrears rather than escalating the issue to court. In response to questions in relation to support available to tenants, it was noted that support was provided through the role of the tenancy sustainment officer. This included support provided by the Council and referrals to other organisations.

The Chair thanked the officers for the information provided.

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

HO23/19 Homelessness

The sub-committee received a presentation which provided an update on the homeless service. Members received data in relation to the number of homeless presentations, placements to temporary accommodation and rough sleepers in the period March to November 2019 compared to March to November 2020. There was an initial peak in homeless cases in April/May 2020 and this started to rise again during the Autumn. From March to November this year the Authority placed 227 people in temporary accommodation, an increase from 145 in the same period last year. The Council had been quick to respond to the situation following lockdown and offered a wide criterion for those that would qualify for a placement in temporary accommodation. During May to November 2020 47 rough sleepers were identified, an increase from 7 during the same period in 2019. This was attributed to people not being able to share accommodation with friends and family during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was noted that the number of people that present as homeless does not mean that they will become homeless, for some people it might mean requiring advice to prevent themselves becoming homeless. It was explained that there were 7 grant funded posts aimed at supporting those that present with housing related problems. Funding was available through the Homeless Prevention Grant to prevent homelessness by paying rent arrears, securing accommodation by paying a rental deposit or providing transport to return to family. The Next Steps Accommodation Programme awarded £32k revenue to support rough sleepers in emergency accommodation.

In relation to the access to support that customers had, it was noted that a frontline service

continued to be delivered at the North Shields Customer First Centre and that this was by appointment only. A freephone number had recently been introduced and a 24 hour 'out of hour' service was in place. Referrals could be made from partner organisations.

In relation to the dispersed accommodation that was available, Members were informed that the number of units had increased from 29 to 37. The criteria used for assessing need for this accommodation was lenient and the number of units available continued to be reviewed. Bed and breakfasts, both in North Tyneside and outside of the area, were used to provide some temporary accommodation.

The presentation detailed the practices that were put in place by the housing service to deliver support during the pandemic. A specialist post was in place to work with rough sleepers and this support would continue for 6 months where a tenancy had been secured. Personal Housing Plans were developed for each person that presented as homeless and these were centred around the individuals' needs. A personalisation pot was available which helped with setting up bank accounts, rent deposits and buying train tickets. Rough sleepers were provided with wellness packs containing masks, hand sanitiser and food. Mobile phones were also provided so that individuals could keep in touch with officers in housing and the services and support that was available.

The sub-committee was informed of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) that was operational between 1 November and 31 March and any other periods where there is severe weather. There was no strict definition of severe weather but this was considered to be excessive rain, high winds, snow and frost or where a weather warning was in place in North Tyneside. The protocol was activated when the actual or 'feels like' temperature is forecast to drop to zero degrees or below for 3 consecutive nights or severe weather forecast. The weather is monitored by the Housing Team and all rough sleeps have the opportunity to access shelter during severe weather. Every effort was made to engage with rough sleepers to provide them access to the support they needed.

The presentation provided details of the 'sit up' service that had been delivered by Whitley Bay Street Pastors and volunteers for the last 5 years. This provided shelter at a local hall along with food and refreshments. As this provision was no longer able to be ran due to Covid-19, revised arrangements were in place to verify rough sleepers and to provide single person occupancy provision, generally at bed and breakfast establishments.

Members recognised that throughout the pandemic there had been a lot of new guidance issued and asked how it was ensured that housing staff were kept up-to-date with the latest developments. Officers explained that housing teams had daily catch ups to update on cases and share any changes to processes and practices. A longer weekly team meeting was also held to provide any necessary training and more detail on new guidance.

The importance of being able to sustain tenancies after initial support was raised and it was asked what measures were taken to ensure tenants were supported to engage in a successful tenancy. It was explained that the temporary accommodation officer would refer the individual to where additional support could be provided in relation to looking for employment opportunities and identifying any skills gaps.

A Member of the sub-committee asked if the pandemic had highlighted hidden homelessness and sofa surfing. It was explained that, whilst the data showed 47 rough sleepers between March and November 2020, only 14 of these were actually rough sleepers and the rest were sofa surfers. Covid had prevented these people from staying with friends on an informal basis as households were unable to mix. These individuals were therefore picked up as a result of Covid and placed in temporary accommodation.

The Chair thanked the officers for the information presented to the sub-committee.

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

