

Housing Sub Committee

Monday, 22 March 2021

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

HO24/21 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitutes reported.

HO25/21 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Matthew Thirlaway declared a non-registerable personal interest in Item 6, Empty Homes Standard, as his father works for North Tyneside Council.

HO26/21 Minutes

It was **agreed** that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

HO27/21 Affordable Homes Programme

The sub-committee received a report which provided details of changes to the Affordable Homes Programme and an update on the delivery of affordable homes in 2020/21, along with plans for 2021/22.

Members were informed that a policy intention of the Our North Tyneside Plan was to deliver more quality affordable homes. At a meeting in October 2013, Cabinet set out a commitment to deliver 3,000 affordable homes over the following 10 years. The programme had been a success to date, with 1650 affordable homes expected to be delivered by the end of 2020/21, including over 500 homes directly delivered by the Authority. Delivery in the first 7 years of the Affordable Homes Programme was more than double the number of affordable homes delivered in the 10 years prior to the commencement of the programme.

Building on the success of the programme and considering the external challenges including the global pandemic, Cabinet, at a meeting in January 2021, approved a report 'Supporting the Ambition for the Borough through Housing Growth'. The plan provided an extension to the Affordable Homes Programme to align delivery to the Local Plan in 2032. The revised plan increased the delivery target from 3,000 homes to 4,000 new homes. The Cabinet also approved an ambitious 10-year delivery plan for the Council that would see a further 350 new affordable homes directly delivered or empty homes brought back into use and around £50.000m worth of investment.

In 2020/21, 90 new affordable homes will have been delivered. This figure was significantly lower than originally planned, due to delays to delivery caused by the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. A full breakdown of the overall delivery programme was appended to the report. This included the number of houses delivered: directly by the Council; working with registered/care providers; by the North Tyneside Trading Company and via Empty Homes.

The sub-committee was informed of the challenges to delivery that were in place. It was noted that the largest volume of homes within the programme were delivered by private developers who were subject to ever changing market conditions. The decision on when to bring forward large sites was not within the Authority's direct control and initial assumptions of when the strategic sites at the Murton Gap and Killingworth Moor had to be reprofiled with the planning application not coming forward as quickly as expected. Aligning the Affordable Homes Programme to the Local Plan would allow for greater certainty of delivery numbers by developers.

The unprecedented global pandemic had led to construction work halting across the country and there have been delays due to ongoing social distancing requirements on construction sites and problems throughout the supply chain. Whilst the construction sector had shown considerable resilience to the situation and housing market had rebounded due to pent up demand, it was likely that the economic volatility, high unemployment and continued uncertainty would make it difficult to accurately predict delivery in the short-term.

A member of the sub-committee asked the presenting officer how North Tyneside compared to its regional neighbours in the delivery of Affordable Homes. It was highlighted that it was difficult to make any direct comparisons as the Housing Revenue Accounts of local authorities differed, but that data could be circulated to members of the sub-committee setting out the numbers of Affordable Homes delivered by other local authorities within the region. Members also asked the officer to provide a breakdown of house types delivered by the Authority.

Following a question from a member of the sub-committee, there was some discussion around new methods of construction, i.e. prefabricated and modular and if these had been considered in the delivery of Affordable Homes. It was noted that these methods had been looked at but there was no indication that this would be more affordable to deliver, especially in dealing with sites with small numbers, as modular builds were more efficient with larger sites.

The Chair thanked the officer for their attendance and the information presented.

HO28/21 Empty Homes Standard

The sub-committee received a presentation which provided an update on the Moving in and Moving out standards and the impact that Covid-19 has had on the standards.

The officers had last attended Housing Sub-committee in relation to the Empty Homes Standard on 27 January 2020, when previous reviews of the Empty Homes Standard had been discussed. A further review took place during February and March 2020 and involved both tenants and Elected Members. This had involved pre and post inspections of

properties and a workshop event to look at data and propose changes going forward. The sessions had been well attended and well received by those involved.

The sub-committee was informed that the review group found during pre-inspections (tenants leaving property) that conditions in properties were poor, they did not meet the Moving Out standard and in some instances still contained the furniture of previous tenants. Key findings from the post inspections visit (once works had been completed following a tenant leaving) found that the properties met the Moving In standard, repair works had been completed to a good standard and the amount of decoration needed was overwhelming in some properties. It was also noted that there were too many tenant repairs that needed to be completed when new tenants moved into a property and that these had been missed during the repair works. It was acknowledged that there would always be some level of new tenant repairs but that more could be picked up and completed prior to a tenant moving in. Members were informed that repairs to doors and windows, live electrical tests and toilet repairs were the most common new tenant repair jobs. As part of the review, it was noted that by working more closely with housing management, damage to properties could be identified at an earlier stage if a council officer reports any damage they see when visiting a tenant at their property for any reason.

The review group also looked closely at the paint packs provided by the local authority to tenants when moving into a property. This was a high cost service that was not always well received by tenants and therefore it was suggested that something different be offered. The recommendations from the group were to reduce the paint pack offer to support decorating works to be undertaken prior to a tenant moving in. This included painting of any newly plastered walls and ceilings, painting of new timber (doors and skirting) and the removal or repair of damaged wallpaper. A further recommendation from the review group was to carry out additional cleaning of communal areas of buildings, to help improve the look and to also identify any necessary repairs.

The presentation also included information on the impact that Covid-19 had on the Empty Homes Standard. It was noted that repair works were suspended on 23rd March 2020 in line with the national lockdown. This resulted in a backlog of 93 empty properties and the average time to turn around an empty property rose from an average of around 13 days to 43. This performance was back to normal levels by Christmas. Overall, there was a reduction in the number of empty homes due to not many people moving homes and terminating tenancies, along with a ban on evictions. From March to May 2019 there were 210 empty properties compared to 83 properties in the timeframe March to May 2020. Works recommenced on 20th May 2020 following training on safe working practices for all operatives.

The sub-committee was informed that the Moving In Standard had been redrafted and circulated to the group for comments. In order to support the new decorating arrangements, 4 new painters and decorators had been recruited. It was noted that it was important to measure the success of the review. There had been a big reduction in the number of new tenant repairs and there had been positive feedback regarding the standard of decoration undertaken.

Following the presentation, Members of the sub-committee were given the opportunity to ask questions of the officers. Instances were raised where tenants had moved into a property and the repairs had not been carried out to the standard expected. It was asked how the repairs were quality controlled. It was explained that quality checks were

undertaken but, due to the high number of repairs, gas services and other jobs undertaken on the housing stock, it would not be possible to carry out a post inspection review following every job. There would be some occasions when work undertaken would not be up to the required standard the first time but that the vast majority of operatives worked to a high standard and that sending someone back to repair a job came at a cost to the repairs service.

A member of the sub-committee asked if a mystery shopper type system would be used going forward to monitor compliance with the Decent Homes Standard and if there was a platform available to tenants where they could share positive feedback. It was noted that spot checks of properties would continue to be undertaken and that the moving in/out standard was reviewed every two to three years. It was also noted that every tenant that used any of the housing services would be given the opportunity to provide feedback, positive or negative, through a web link.

A member of the sub-committee asked if the local authority was successful in reclaiming money for damages caused by tenants. It was explained that in the event of damage being caused monies owed would be chased. This would apply in the tenant moved out of the borough and debt collectors would be used if needed. If it was not possible to reclaim monies the debt may be written off but this would be noted on the tenants file and would be known if they tried to re-apply for a property in the area.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and for the information presented.