



Cabinet Member Report for Housing and Wellbeing

Northampton Borough Council

15th June 2020

Northampton's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

On 20th May, Cabinet approved a multi-agency strategy and action plan that sets out how the Council and its partners will tackle homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough.

Northampton's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy has four strategic priorities:

- Creating effective and collaborative partnerships;
- Preventing homelessness through early and targeted intervention;
- Reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation and ensuring a sufficient supply of suitable housing for homeless households; and
- Reducing rough sleeping and enabling rough sleepers to thrive.

Implementation of Northampton's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will continue until it is replaced by a new Strategy for West Northamptonshire.

Protecting Rough Sleepers from COVID-19

On 27th March, Northampton's Emergency Nightshelter was closed, due to the high risk that COVID-19 poses to people who are sleeping in dormitory-style accommodation. On that day, all of the guests and dozens of rough sleepers were moved into two of the town's hotels.

Responding to the Government's call for "Everyone in by the weekend", the Council's Street Services Team of Outreach Workers and Rough Sleeper Navigators moved 71 homeless men and women into the hotels within 72 hours and, by 31st March, the number had 'peaked' at 90.

Everyone who is placed in the hotels has a double room, receives three meals a day, toiletries, fresh clothing, a fortnightly laundry service and access to a joined-up drug and alcohol treatment and support service that helps guests to address their drug and alcohol use.

Most of the rough sleepers who have been accommodated have thrived in the hotels, engaged well with the Street Services Team and made the most of the opportunity to address their drug and alcohol use, improve their health and wellbeing, and access the help and support they need.

By 3rd June, 40 of the people staying in the hotels had been helped to move out of the hotels and into settled accommodation. Half of these have moved into homes that are managed by the Northampton single homelessness charity, NAASH.

Although the Council's original 12 week 'block booking' arrangement with the two hotels comes to an end on 18th June, there is still much to be done and, as at 3rd June, 61 people were still being accommodated in the hotels. The hotels will now continue to be used until the end of June.

It is hoped that, by the end of June, a lot more of the rough sleepers in the hotels will have been moved on successfully into settled housing and that an alternative supply of emergency accommodation can be secured in order to prevent the rough sleepers from returning to the streets when they leave the hotels on 1 July.

I am very proud of the excellent, multi-agency work that is being done to keep rough sleepers safe and help them engage with services, rebuild their lives and achieve their full potential.

This has only been possible because of the strong and effective partnership relationships between the Council, Northampton Hope Centre, NAASH, Churches Together in Northampton and a wide range of other local services and organisations.

Private Sector Housing Civil Penalties Policy & Housing Enforcement Policy

Since the approval of the Private Sector Housing Civil Penalties Policy (20th April) and the updated Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy (20 May), the two policies have been published on the Council's website and officers are now working to them.

These policies support the Council's work in raising standards in Northampton's private rented sector, encouraging behaviour change and tackling criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords.

Multi-Agency Housing Enforcement

The intelligence-led, targeted, multi-agency housing enforcement undertaken in November, together with the work undertaken by the MHCLG-funded Special Operations Unit in January and February, is progressing with a view to prosecution for the more serious offences and civil penalties where the circumstances merit it and allow.

Anecdotally, this high profile housing enforcement activity is starting to have a positive impact on the number of landlord enquiries about HMO Licensing.

Northampton's Housing Enforcement Team and its partners – including the Police, Fire & Rescue Service, Trading Standards, Immigration, HMRC, the Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority and the Planning and Building Control teams – will continue tackling serious organised crime in a manner that is innovative, effective and can be replicated elsewhere.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Private Sector Housing Team

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Private Sector Housing Team.

Although the opportunity for members of the Team to undertake enforcement inspections has reduced, the demands on the team to support landlords needing advice and guidance on the impacts of coronavirus have increased. There has also been an increase in the number of enquiries and service requests relating to illegal eviction activity in the private rented sector.

The Team has been proactive in sending information (including links to Government information and guidance) to known private sector landlords. It is anticipated that, when the 'lockdown' is relaxed, the number of evictions (both legal and illegal) will increase.

Northampton Partnership Homes

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the borough's residents and, although many of NPH's day to day operations, priorities and pressures have changed as a result of the pandemic, looking after its staff and the Council's tenants and leaseholders has remained NPH's highest priority.

Wherever practicable, NPH staff have been working from home. Back office and support staff who are unable to undertake their normal duties have been redeployed to other roles in order to ensure that there is enough frontline support and all vulnerable residents are contacted.

I am very pleased to report that, during this extremely difficult time, NPH staff have contacted more than 2,000 tenants, delivered hundreds of food parcels, collected essential medicines and made weekly checks on more than 400 residents to ensure that they are coping.

Emergency maintenance and essential compliance, safety works

In order to ensure that safety issues are resolved and major damage to homes is prevented, NPH has reduced its maintenance service to an emergency repairs service. The repairs team have PPE and procedures in place to make sure that social distancing can be maintained.

Requests for non-urgent repairs are being recorded and will be programmed for completion once normal working procedures can resume. This will be a major task, as more than 2,500 non-urgent repairs requests have already been recorded. Non-urgent works outside of the home have already started where it is safe to do so.

Although the Health and Safety Executive has made it clear that it expects full safety compliance – including gas and lift servicing – many tenants have told NPH they do not want anyone to access their homes at this time. NPH has raised this with the town's MPs.

Neighbourhoods and housing services

Reports of anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and fly tipping have all increased.

Although housing surgeries have had to be put on hold and some of the enforcement measures normally used are not possible at the moment, NPH is dealing with reported cases of ASB as quickly as possible and it is working closely with the Police to keep the neighbourhoods safe.

In line with Government instructions, most evictions have been put on hold. NPH continues to undertake work on void properties but with social distancing in place. This means that, in many instances, only one person at a time will be working in the property.

All lettings are carried out with social distancing, and tenants will view properties unattended. This complies fully with the new guidance issued by MHCLG on 27th April 2020 requiring social landlords to proceed with essential moves that enable vulnerable people to move home.

New build development works

NPH has worked hard to keep its construction sites running – whilst ensuring safe working and social distancing – and maintain supply chains. It has continued to support the local economy wherever possible.

Work is continuing, as normal, to progress projects and develop proposals for new schemes, including a number of major development opportunities such as Beaumont House (the conversion of an office block into 60 apartments), Belgrave House (the conversion of an office block into 124 apartments) and Riverside House (the conversion of an office block into 60 apartments). All of these schemes have recently been approved by Cabinet.

Looking Forward

NPH has started to develop a COVID-19 “recovery plan” and business transformation plan which will include a staged return to business and a new way of working that includes, for some time, social distancing and increased protection and prevention measures.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing