
OVERVIEW OF HOUSING PORTFOLIO

1. The following were the main areas of work under my Housing Portfolio:-

Housing Benefits and Supporting People

2. The Community Legal Services' Quality Mark for general help and advice has been attained for both the Supporting People and Housing Benefits Service. The Quality Mark is the quality standard that underpins all Community Legal Services, so that members of the public who need legal information, advice and other help can rely on receiving a quality assured service. This includes:
- Diagnosing clients' problems;
 - Giving information and explaining options;
 - Identifying further action the client can take; and
 - Giving basic assistance, e.g. filling in forms, contacting third parties to seek information.
3. Since April 2004 Housing Benefits have been particularly successful in respect on Benefit Fraud with 5 sanctions having been undertaken already, comprising 2 formal cautions, 2 administrative penalties and one successful prosecution. The person prosecuted owned his property, but had created a fictional tenancy with a resident landlord in order to fraudulently claim Housing Benefit. A 150 hours community punishment order and repayment of the money claimed was given.
4. The continued work of the Housing Benefit investigators underlines Darlington's commitment to take action against benefit cheats and to stamp out fraud in the benefits system.

Maidendale House

5. Neighbourhood Management on Firthmoor has recently been enhanced with the opening of the new Community Centre, Maidendale House and the relocation of local Housing Officers into this impressive new facility. Housing Officers provide arrears management, void management, property lettings, tenancy management, estate management and repairs ordering.

The benefits of this move are that:

- Customers can access a broad range of services under one roof.

- It assists with the development of co-ordinated effective responses to socio-economic issues on the estate eg Credit Union, Firthmoor into Work, Health, Community Education, Youth Club, Neighbourhood Management Team.
- It is located in the centre of the estate, on a bus route, to make accessibility as convenient as possible.
- It has level access and is fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Regulations.

Further Assistance for Homelessness

6. The Council has been successful in obtaining a grant of £26,000 for 2004/05 in order to improve the services we provide for homeless people. These additional resources will be used to :
 - Introduce a nationally accredited mediation service to work with young people and their parents as well as with private landlords and tenants, with the aim of allowing young people to remain in their existing accommodation for a longer period, and thus avoid homelessness.
 - Establish appropriate temporary accommodation within the Council housing stock for homeless families who would otherwise have to use Bed and Breakfast accommodation.
 - Work with First Stop to support rough sleepers, in order to organise ways of getting them involved with partner agencies and housed in mainstream accommodation.
 - Undertake outreach work with schools to help children plan their routes into accommodation and avoiding the spiral into homelessness often caused by substance misuse.
 - Promote the homeless and housing options service.
 - Support First Stop to work with clients and Bed & Breakfast accommodation to improve standard of accommodation and placements of homeless people.

Neighbour Nuisance and Anti Social Behaviour

7. Housing Officers continue to work closely with the Police and Community Safety to address complaints of nuisance and anti-social behaviour. In recent months two Anti-Social Behaviour Orders have been obtained to which were attached Parenting Orders. These have had the positive benefit of reducing nuisance.

8. A new computer system has been implemented that records and manages nuisance and anti-social behaviour and this information will be shared with the Police and Community Safety to further enhance joint working. One of the difficulties of dealing with complaints is often that there is a lack of quality information to support the complainant and some rapid deployment video equipment has recently been purchased to assist with information gathering. It is important that we successfully communicate with people living on our estates that the Council is taking a pro-active approach to anti-social behaviour and a two page article in the last edition of Hot News was dedicated to explaining to tenants how they can receive assistance from the Council and the action we have taken.

Councillor Bill Dixon
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Housing