
OVERVIEW OF HOUSING, HEALTH AND PARTNERSHIPS PORTFOLIO

Purpose of the Report

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the main areas of work under my Housing, Health and Partnerships Portfolio were as follows:-

Public Health

2. A Darlington multi-agency Suicide Prevention Group was established in November. The Group was attended by Darlington Clinical Commissioning Group, Police, Samaritans and Mind. The Group is a beneficial forum to support the implementation of the Darlington Suicide Prevention Plan and will meet quarterly. Further representation primary care and the TEWV Mental Health Trust have been invited to the next meeting of The Group scheduled for February 2018. The Group will report into the Darlington Mental Health Network.
3. The consultation on the Sexual Health service re-procurement has now come to an end. Work is being undertaken in line with procurement timelines to ensure that a robust tender package is placed onto the portal in February 2018 for suitable providers to bid.
4. The Council supported World Aids Day in December 2017 by lighting up Darlington Hippodrome red. We feel this visible support raises awareness of the ongoing need to prevent HIV.
5. Congratulations to those of you who have had 25 alcohol free days this January so far! Dry January is led by Alcohol Concern with the aim of reducing the harm caused by alcohol.

Darlington Partnership

6. Darlington Cares, the initiative that the Partnership helped establish has enabled local employers to make a significant contribution to the communities of Darlington.
7. During 2017 Darlington Cares achieved the following :-
 - (a) 978 of its volunteers participated in projects;
 - (b) It delivered 4800.5 hours of volunteering;
 - (c) Organised 99 projects; and

- (d) Its membership grew to 26 employers.
8. The Partnership is busy planning activities for 2018 including :-
- (a) A Volunteer Fair to be held in the Dolphin Centre Sports Hall on 1 February between 2.00pm and 6.00pm. All are welcome at this event which is a repeat of the 2017 event where over 100 new volunteers were recruited;
 - (b) Best of Darlington: a call for nominations is now open and nominations can be made through the following link: <http://www.onedarlington.org.uk/best-of-darlington-2018/>; and
 - (c) The Festival of Ingenuity for 2018 will be held on 13 and 14 July.

Welfare Rights

9. A number of changes to Universal Credit (UC) have recently been announced, including:
- (a) The abolition of waiting days – from February 2018 new claimants will no longer have a seven day waiting period;
 - (b) Increased advances – From January 2018 new claimants will be offered an advance of up to 100 per cent of their first payment, which will be repayable over the next twelve months. Currently new claimants can only apply for a 50 per cent advance, repayable over six months;
 - (c) Support with housing costs – new claimants already in receipt of Housing Benefit will receive a transitional payment of two weeks' support, an average of £233;
 - (d) Alternative Payment Arrangements for Landlords – from December 2017 claimants from the Private Rented Sector who have managed payments for Housing Benefit have been offered this option; and
 - (e) Temporary accommodation housing support – the Council will be able to recoup 80 per cent of the costs of its expenditure on temporary accommodation from Universal Credit, compared to 50 per cent currently.
10. To allow these policy changes to be implemented, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has not accepted any new claims for the Live Service from December 2017 and implementation in Darlington of Full Service has been delayed from March 2018 to June 2018.
11. The Council is looking to undertake a benefits take-up campaign prior to the implementation of Full Service Universal Credit, to encourage residents to check their eligibility for benefits and tax credits and register online if they are already claiming to ensure continuity if, and when, they are transferred to Full Service. This campaign will seek to maximise income and tackle poverty in the Borough, it is estimated that £25.7m in income is lost each year in Darlington as a result of

residents not claiming benefits they are entitled to.

12. In addition, this campaign will seek to ensure that households likely to be affected by Universal Credit are able to maximise their income prior to the roll out of Full Service, that they are informed of the upcoming changes and they know what to do.

Housing Services

Universal Credit - Council Tenants

13. For the 95 Council Tenants who are currently receiving Universal Credit (UC), Housing Services has managed their rent arrears successfully, considering the national issues with UC payments delays. However, the accelerated roll-out of UC from June 2018 is likely to increase arrears and impact on collection rates, in line with other housing providers operating with a full UC service. Typically collection rates in these areas have fallen from around 98 per cent to 94 per cent.
14. For Darlington Borough Council, the level of arrears for current Council Tenants is around £588,000 as at November 2017. Based on the UC cases we have seen so far and the average increased level of arrears for those tenants on UC, we estimate that these arrears could increase to £1.54m by the time UC has fully rolled out in 2022.
15. However, some of these arrears will be artificial given that our rents are charged weekly in advance and UC is paid monthly in arrears. The level of arrears will therefore change depending on the date in the month the tenant receives their UC payment (which will be different for every person). This makes it difficult for the Council to accurately identify the genuine level of rent arrears (as opposed to tenants waiting for their next payment of UC before they can pay their rent).
16. In preparation for the full UC service, a number of changes to the Housing Income Service are being considered including:
 - (a) Changes to job descriptions to reflect the challenges of the roll-out of UC;
 - (b) Directing more staffing resource to the collection of current rent arrears; and
 - (c) Creating additional staffing resource to provide more advice and support to tenants during the transition to UC.
17. In addition, the Housing Income Management Team are also trialling a new suite of system reports to enable staff to monitor rent arrears for tenants receiving UC to ensure that any recovery action reflects individual UC payment cycles.
18. From June 2018, the Housing Income Management will aim to:
 - (a) Undertake an affordability check for all prospective new Council Tenants;

- (b) Ensure every Council Tenant who migrates to UC is contacted and offered personal budgeting support to ensure they can manage their monthly UC payments and ensure they budget for their rent; and
- (c) Consider applying for Alternative Payment Arrangements for tenants in arrears or at risk of being in arrears.

Homeless Reduction Act

- 19. The Government has published a consultation on the Guidance to support the changes being introduced as a result of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. The Act extends the range of duties to applicants including extending the 'at risk' period to 56 days, increased advice to applicants and in some circumstances a possible increase in the use of temporary accommodation. Guidance sets out details of how the changes should be implemented and creates a foundation for planning to deliver the new responsibilities from April 2018.
- 20. For a number of years the Council and its partners have focused on prevention as the key to addressing homelessness. Consequently the changes compliment this policy direction. However, the Act introduces a number of new administrative tasks alongside the extension of duties that will have resource implications and these are currently being assessed with a planned testing of the new procedures over the coming months.

Lifeline Services - Herbert Protocol

- 21. Lifeline services are now delivering the Herbert Protocol. The Herbert Protocol is a national scheme and is named after George Herbert, a veteran war hero who managed to survive the Normandy landings and went on to live with dementia later on in his life.
- 22. George became lost due to his dementia and it was a period of days until he was located which sparked a multi-agency approach to find a way of ensuring that there was a way to access relevant information about a person within the 'golden hour'. The 'golden hour' is the length of time that it is said to take a person to disappear from their community/town boundary making it much more challenging to locate them due to cross boundary communication, information sharing and distance. Scheme Managers and Response Officers identify potential clients and gather the required additional information on them which can be shared as appropriate to improve response rates.

Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) Conference

23. The Housing LIN is a national network for professionals interested in specialist housing and care. It recently asked to hold its regional conference in Darlington focusing on the Healthy New Towns project. The conference which was well attended covered all aspects of the project. A presentation by the residents of Red Hall about their role in the future development of the community was particularly well received. At the end of the conference delegates visited Red Hall to see some of the physical improvements.

Local Lettings Policy – New Build Housing

24. Cabinet approved the introduction of a new Local Lettings Policy for new build Council housing in order to ensure that a mix of needs are met within new developments.

25. The Lettings Policy will help to address the aims as set out in One Darlington, Perfectly Placed, to enable 60 per cent of applicants to be in employment to encourage a positive impact on the economic and social development of the community.

26. Local Letting Policies are supplementary to the Common Allocations Policy and provide the opportunity to address local needs. The new Local Lettings Policy would seek to address the needs of a broader range of people seeking affordable housing for rent.

27. New properties would still be let in the usual manner, with an additional criteria to ensure that 60 per cent of tenants were economically active. The majority of people applying for Council housing are generally employed in low paid work.

28. An Equality Impact Assessment had been undertaken on the proposals which have been considered by, and have the support of, the Tenant's Customer Panel.

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