
OVERVIEW OF ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Community Equipment Service

2. We received an update on the Community Equipment Service which is available to residents of Darlington through a service provided by Medequip. Members of our Scrutiny Committee have previously visited Medequip's premises in Newton Aycliffe to gain a greater understanding of how the service operates.
3. The contract which began in 2015 is commissioned under a joint commissioning arrangement between the Council, Durham County Council and the three local commissioning groups and is for a period of five years, with an option to extend for a further two years, subject to satisfactory performance.
4. We were advised that the contract was working well with regular monthly monitoring meetings taking place and performance against the contract being reported to the quarterly Partnership Board.
5. Any complaints are dealt with by the provider and are reported back to commissioners on a monthly basis, however, further work is to be undertaken to break down the complaints into geographical areas and to understand what the issues came under the 'other' complaints heading.

Review of Tenancy Sign-Up Process

6. We have received a report on the findings of a review undertaken by the Tenant's Scrutiny Panel into the way in which tenants sign up for their tenancy and four Members of the Tenant Scrutiny and Customer Panels attended our meeting to answer any questions.
7. Over recent years the sign up process for a Council tenancy has changed considerably and is quite a lengthy and complex process. The Tenants Panel has looked at this process and made seven recommendations to reduce the pressure on tenants and best support tenants, the majority of which has already been implemented.
8. In conclusion, the Panel found that all of the information that was made available to tenants was important but that by making changes to the point at which some information was gathered, the pressure on tenants during the sign-up appointment could be reduced. They also suggested a number of ways that the provision of

information could be improved by electronic means and prioritisation.

9. We thanked the Scrutiny Panel on its work and noted that the next phase would be to undertake a detailed review of the Tenants' Handbook.
10. We discussed the possibility of some of our Members becoming involved in the work of the Tenants Panel and this is something which we all think will be of benefit and will be looked into further.

Welfare Reforms Update

11. Officers have provided an update on the roll-out of Universal Credit in Darlington.
12. As Members will be aware, Universal Credit began its roll out in Darlington in November 2015 but has only been available to residents in limited circumstances. The full roll out will commence in June 2018 and will apply to any resident making a new claim for benefit or reporting a significant change such as a change in address. The migration of existing claims from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit will take place between 2019 and 2022, although this is still to be confirmed.
13. The issues with the administration of Universal Credit are well publicised and one of the main problems for new applicants has been the minimum 42 day wait for a first payment, however the Government have committed to ensuring that all new applicants are able to access advance payments within five days or, in some cases, within hours, however, these payments are loans which must be repaid within twelve months.
14. As at November 2017, there are 95 Council tenants currently receiving Universal Credit and Housing Officers have been managing their rent arrears successfully, however, the accelerated roll out from June 2018 is likely to increase arrears and predictions show that by the time Universal Credit has fully rolled out in 2022, the level of arrears for those tenants claiming could increase from £588,000 to £1.54 million.
15. Housing Officers will continue to monitor rent arrears and additional staffing resources will be required for the foreseeable future to ensure residents are supported through the application and transition process, whilst ensuring that Council Tax and rent arrears are kept to a minimum wherever possible.

Performance Indicators Q2 2017/18

16. We have received Quarter 2 performance information against the identified key performance indicators.
17. A number of highlights across performance within Housing and Building Services and Adult Social Care were included within the submitted report and Officers responded to Members' questions.

Housing Revenue Account

18. Cabinet has agreed to consult on proposals in relation to the revenue budget; rent levels and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2018/19 in the context of the HRA Medium term Financial Plan 2021/22 and the 30 year Business Plan and we have agreed to support those proposals.
19. We were advised that the proposals were in line with the Government's requirement for all social landlords to implement an average weekly rent reduction each year for four years from 2016/17 of one per cent, which would give an average weekly rent for 2018/19 of £70.88. It is however expected that, in 2020, the Government will allow Council's to increase rents, although this is not yet confirmed.
20. Cabinet is also proposing to implement a small inflationary increase in some service charges, however, we were advised that 70 per cent of tenants will have their rent and most service charges covered by benefit payments.
21. The submitted report also outlined the draft five year investment plan for Council housing and it was reported that, following the five year conditions survey which had recently been undertaken, a programme for the replacement of windows based on age would be included within that investment plan.

Medium-Term Financial Plan

22. As with all other Scrutiny Committees, we have looked at Cabinet's proposals in relation to the Medium-Term Financial Plan. We were supportive of the proposals and particularly discussed the proposed allocation within the Futures Fund of one-off funding towards Neighbourhood Renewal.

Work Programme

23. We have reviewed and updated our work programme. The Review Group to look at support services to adults living with autism in Darlington is continuing to meet and we will continue to provide updates to Council.

Visits

24. Following our visits to the 700 Club and DISC, where we were told about the good partnership working which is taking place amongst organisations who support residents who are homeless or on the edge of homelessness, some of our Committee visited First Stop. We were pleased to hear about its award from the Lottery Fund for prevention work with those who could become homeless. This project is to start in the New Year and will mean that extra staff will be able to be employed. Out thanks to the Chair and the Chief Executive Officer of First Stop for facilitating our visit.

Councillor Marjory Knowles
Chair of Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee