

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 DECEMBER 2020

THE NORTHGATE INITIATIVE

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report summarises the current position of the Northgate Initiative.

Summary

2. A multi-agency programme has been initiated in part of the Northgate ward to deliver a range of interventions, from support and advice to enforcement activities where required, in order to improve outcomes for local residents in all areas of wellbeing including economy, education and childhood, health, environment, crime and security, and social relationships.
3. Whilst it is expected that there will be some 'quick wins' it is also recognised that measurable improvement will take years to effect and the initial programme will be planned to 2024.
4. The emergence of Covid 19 effectively curtailed activity on the Northgate initiative but work has recommenced following the first lockdown. Specific actions have been outlined to achieve the ambitions of each of the five delivery workstreams which are environment, health, economy, childhood and education, and crime. (see **Appendix 1** 'Actions to Vision' attached)
5. Despite the hiatus significant progress has been made.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that this report is received for information and comment.

Paul Wildsmith
Managing Director

Background Papers

Northgate Initiative: Actions to Vision

Seth Pearson: Extension 6090

S17 Crime and Disorder	The initiative aims to improve community safety in the Northgate ward
Health and Well Being	The initiative aims to improve the health of the residents of Northgate ward
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	Home energy efficiency is a focus of the initiative
Diversity	No impact
Wards Affected	Northgate ward
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	Neighbourhood Renewal
Key Decision	none
Urgent Decision	none
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	
Efficiency	N/A
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

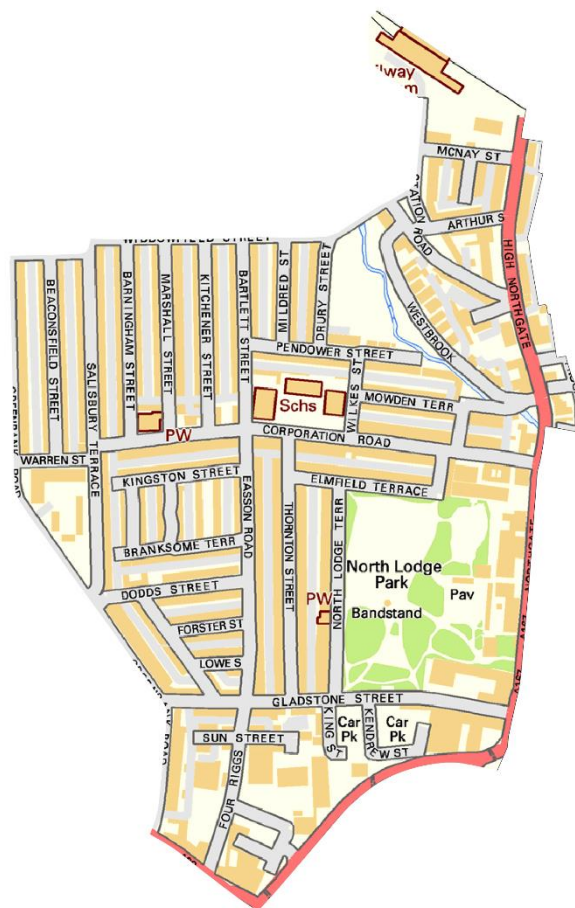
Background

7. The comprehensive evidence base that was compiled identified that many of the target group, younger deprived families, were living in private rented accommodation with a high prevalence in Northgate ward.
8. Separate to this, the private rented sector has been a growing area of focus for local and national government as a result of its rapid growth over recent years, increasing concerns around issues such as rogue landlords and the availability of effective support for tenants, and as our knowledge about the importance of good quality housing for health and wellbeing has advanced.
9. Council officers were keen to investigate what interventions might be able to be undertaken, given limited resources, to help support private tenants and address issues including environmental crime and antisocial behaviour which are consistently concentrated in areas with higher levels of private rented accommodation.
10. Research was undertaken to identify a focus area for the Private Sector Housing team to target with new pilot approaches to improve housing conditions. This data analysis found that Northgate ward was a key hotspot for many measures related to poor housing conditions, including fuel poverty, homes in poor condition and number of long-term empty properties. It also found, however, that Northgate is a hotspot for many wider measures relating to deprivation generally, including child poverty and households in receipt of welfare benefits, and for the incidence of households which correspond with the target group for Fairer Richer Darlington: deprived younger families.

11. In light of these findings, it was agreed that a broader, more holistic approach should be undertaken in order to maximise the likelihood of delivering meaningful and sustained outcomes working with partner agencies to address all the domains that collectively determine Northgate residents' wellbeing.
12. A multi-agency programme has been initiated to deliver a range of interventions, from support and advice to enforcement activities where required, in order to improve outcomes for local residents' in all areas of wellbeing including economy, education and childhood, health, environment, crime and security, and social relationships.
13. Whilst it is expected that there will be some 'quick wins' it is also recognised that measurable improvement will take years to effect and the initial programme will be planned to 2024.
14. The emergence of Covid 19 effectively curtailed activity on the Northgate initiative but work has recommenced following the first lockdown. Specific actions have been outlined to achieve the ambitions of each of the five delivery workstreams which are environment, health, economy, childhood and education, and crime. (see appendix 1. 'Actions to Vision' attached). This is a working document still in development which captures actions as they are developed to achieve the vision.
15. The ward Councillors, Cllrs Lister and Ali are leading work on community engagement.
16. Whilst it is recognised that to achieve the lasting transformation envisioned will take time, improvements are already being seen.

Area

17. Work will focus on the area identified in the maps below, specifically the area of Northgate ward to the west of North Road.



Vision

18. Northgate is a place where residents are empowered to take control of and improve their wellbeing and life outcomes, by helping deliver the following conditions:

- (a) Fairly paid, quality employment opportunities
- (b) Access to continuous learning
- (c) Enough information and support to get and stay healthy
- (d) A clean and green local environment that people can take pride in
- (e) A safe place to live
- (f) A community that cares for each other

Achievements to date

Housing

19. The Private Sector Housing Team have three main areas of focus in relation to the Northgate Initiative

(a) **Empty Homes**

- (i) To reduce the number of long-term empty homes (those over 2 years) by 10%*¹ by 2021 in the Priority area.
- (ii) To review the legislation in use to bring empty homes back into use.

¹ * Target to be determined

- (iii) To incorporate a risk-based approach in targeting problematic empty homes.

(b) **Energy Efficiency**

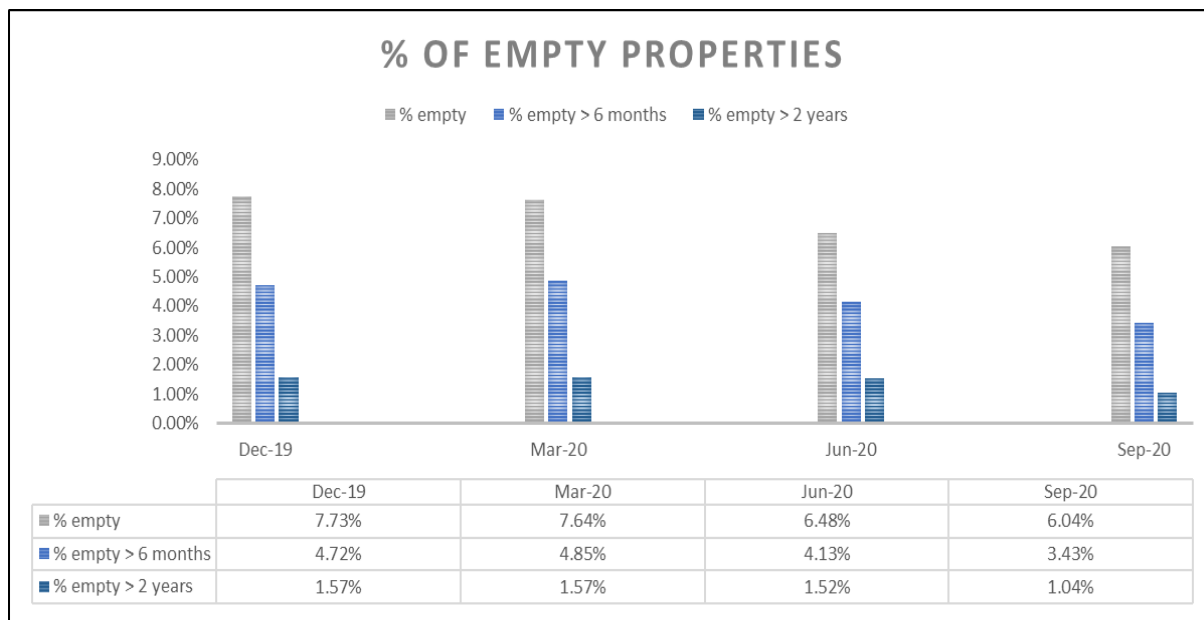
- (i) To improve all private rented properties in the Northgate area that have a current EPC rating of an F or G to a rating of an E or above, through enforcing new legislation which prohibits the letting of sub-standard properties.
- (ii) To identify any F or G properties with relevant exemption conditions and ensure they are on the National Private Rented Sector Exemptions Register.
- (iii) To identify all private rented properties in the Northgate area that do not currently have an Energy Performance Certificate.
- (iv) To identify vulnerable people living in fuel poverty and be able to offer information on the support that is available and advice on changing energy related behaviour.

(c) **Innovation and Enforcement Grant**

- (i) To be able to prioritise resources to be able to proactively inspect properties to improve housing conditions.
- (ii) To improve the knowledge of the Private Sector Housing officers in relation to enforcement.

Empty Homes

- 20. The Empty Homes Action Plan has three key objectives around reducing the number of long-term empty homes, using legislation to bring empty homes back into use and incorporating a risk-based approach in targeting problematic empty homes.
- 21. Various actions around training, council tax, inspections and prioritisation of empty home conversions has been completed.
- 22. There has been a reduction in the total number of empty properties from 177 (7.73%) in December 2019 to 139 (6.04%) in September 2020.
- 23. There has been a reduction in the number of empty properties over six months from 108 (4.72%) in December 2019 to 79 (3.43%) in September 2020.
- 24. There has been a reduction in the number of empty properties over two years from 36 (1.57%) in December 2019 to 24 (1.04%) in September 2020.



25. Private Sector Housing have provided support to a number of private landlords which has resulted in three properties returning to use, two properties pending development and one remaining empty.

26. There has been a 21% reduction in all empty properties since the start of the Northgate initiative.

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) “Next Steps Accommodation Programme”

27. Approximately 15,000 people who were sleeping rough, in unsafe communal settings or at imminent risk of rough sleeping have been placed into emergency accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

28. The MHCLG “Next Steps Accommodation Programme” makes available the financial resources needed to support local authorities and their partners to prevent these people from returning to the streets.

29. Darlington Borough Council submitted an application to MHCLG for funding to support a range of initiatives designed to provide a range of sustainable accommodation to protect those considered most vulnerable in society.

30. Part of the application will involve exploring the feasibility of purchasing and renovating five properties in the Northgate Ward to provide accommodation for 8-10 vulnerable people.

31. 25 property owners of long-term properties have been engaged though this initiative.

32. To date one empty property has been identified as being suitable this property is currently being purchased.

33. A further three property inspections are scheduled to be inspected week commencing 5th October 2020 of suitable properties to assess suitability of the property condition, purchase price and renovation costs. This work is being jointly

carried out by Private Sector Housing, Council Tax, Housing Options, Estates and Legal.

Energy Efficiency

34. The Energy Efficiency Action Plan has four key objectives around improving the current energy ratings through enforcement, collating information for inclusion in the National Private Rented Sector Exemptions Register, identifying private rented properties that do not currently have an Energy Performance Certificate and providing support to those people living in fuel poverty around energy related behaviour.
35. Work in support of the plan is currently being undertaken to identify properties in Northgate that do not meet the requirements with enforcement remaining an option within 18 months of the offence.
36. As at December 2019 there were 148 properties in Northgate with either an F or G rating, with 69 of these being listed as rented properties.
37. There has been an improvement in these figures as of June 2020, (the last set of issued figures) this has improved to 143 properties in Northgate being registered as being either F or G, with 30 of these being listed as rented properties.
38. The reduction in the private rented sector stock with the lowest EPC ratings is likely to be as a result of changes to legislation for private landlords. The Energy Efficiency (Private Rented Property) (England and Wales) Regulations 2015, commonly known as the **Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards**, or **MEES**, are a set of legal requirements that set a minimum energy standard of an EPC rating of "E" and above for residential properties for let in the private rented sector.
39. Work is now progressing on contacting the remaining properties where the EPC remains lower than the legal required minimum.
40. The Private Sector Housing team are also promoting two projects designed to improve EPC ratings across Darlington:
 - (a) Warm Homes Fund Project
 - (b) Green Homes Grant - Voucher Scheme
41. Two further Energy Efficiency schemes are currently being developed:
 - (a) Green Homes Grant - The Local Authority Delivery Scheme
 - (b) Local Authority EcoFlex

Warm Homes Fund Project

42. Approval was sought from Cabinet in early December 2019, to participate in a Tees Valley Partnership to deliver the Warm Homes Fund Project. Participation in the project will deliver energy efficiency improvements for qualifying residents in the Borough which will include the Northgate Ward.
43. The funding (£5,500,000 across the partnership area) will:

- (a) Install 1000 boilers and provide gas connections across the area.
 - (b) Install 200 Air source heat pumps - renewable heating provision in rural areas.
 - (c) Assist 10,000 households with fuel poverty issues.
- 44. The programme was re-launched in August 2020 after being on hold since March 2020 due to the pandemic.
 - 45. Our partners at CAB and Thirteen have continued to support vulnerable households with general advice and guidance from the start of the scheme and throughout the lockdown period in early 2020.
 - 46. The appointed contractor Marshall & McCourt have produced a set of Safe Working Practices in line with government guidance for their engineers to ensure a safe working environment in each property and have stated surveying properties for installation across the Tees Valley region.
 - 47. Stockton Borough Council are the managing agency for the scheme and their Contact Centre staff have been trained to receive / make onward referrals for Warmer Homes Fund measures and support via a dedicated phone-line. Referrals will also be made where assistance is not possible through the Warm Homes Fund such as boiler breakdowns.
 - 48. Partners at Communitas Energy have recently identified the potential to provide 167 properties over three streets across Darlington with a gas supply as part of an infill programme. The Warm Homes fund would then be able to provide gas central heating to those eligible under the scheme which could be up to 26 households. Other households in the area would also benefit from lower fuel costs.

Green Homes Grant - Voucher Scheme

- 49. The Green Homes Voucher scheme commenced on 30th September 2020.
- 50. A joint press statement has been prepared to advice of how to avoid fraudulent traders, this will be followed up by a social media campaign over the next six months (or until which time the scheme ends).
- 51. All property owners can access this funding therefore the scheme will also be promoted to landlords who are able to access up to £5,000 on behalf of their tenants.

Green Homes Grant - The Local Authority Delivery Scheme

- 52. £500 million funding will be delivered through local authorities by the Government between September 2020 and March 2022, to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households. This will help reduce fuel poverty and support the installation of low carbon heating.
- 53. The Local Authority Delivery Scheme (LAD) phase 1, this part of the scheme will run from 28-Sep-20 to 31-Mar-21 (6.0 months delivery) and overlaps the Green Homes Grant voucher scheme.

54. LAD Phase 2 a further £300m is planned to be allocated through Local Energy Hubs in 2020/21 for regional delivery. This part of the scheme will run from 21-Jun-21 to 31-Mar-22 (9.5 months delivery).
55. The primary purpose of the LAD scheme is to raise the energy efficiency rating of low income and low EPC rated homes (those with E, F or G). To result in the following outcomes:
- (a) tackle fuel poverty by increasing low-income homes energy efficiency rating while reducing their energy bills.
 - (b) support clean growth and promoting global action to tackle climate change.
 - (c) support economic resilience and a green recovery in response to the economic impacts of COVID-19, creating thousands of jobs.
 - (d) use learnings from the delivery experience to inform the development and design of further energy efficiency and heat schemes.
56. It is intended that a bid will be submitted for this funding as a consortium with either the Tees Valley or across a wider geographical area covering six energy hubs. This phase will operate until March 2022. The draft Sourcing Strategy was submitted to BEIS on 18th September 2020 this is due to be submitted on 9th October 2020 outlining how the Energy Hub plan to procure the regional frameworks to delivery energy efficiency improvements to low income households. Approval is anticipated 16th October 2020.

Eyes & Ears Project - Fuel poverty

57. Information and assistance has been provided by the Private Sector Housing team to assist in briefing employees and members in relation to fuel poverty to empower them with knowledge about the issues they are facing, as well as signs to look out for so you can spot if someone may need help.

Innovation and Enforcement Grant

58. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government awarded Darlington Borough Council £59,300 to support enforcement training and the completion of a Stock Condition Survey in Darlington.

Innovation and Enforcement Grant - Stock Condition Survey

59. The Stock Condition Survey will improve local knowledge of communities and housing standards in the private sector, enable intelligent targeting and proactive inspections to tackle unsafe and poor-quality housing and identify the worst landlords who will be challenged through effective and robust enforcement. This will provide improved and healthier living conditions for the most vulnerable across Darlington.
60. Since the initiative commenced Private Sector Housing have dealt with 92 cases in the Northgate ward (19% of all service requests).

Towns Fund

61. Darlington has been successful in securing a £22.3 million allocation of the Government's Town Fund which is aims are to drive the sustainable economic regeneration of towns to deliver long term economic and productivity growth.
62. Part of the funds focus will be improvements along the North Road corridor from the town centre up to and including the Railway Heritage Quarter site. Consideration is currently being given to how the benefit to the residents of Northgate can be maximised from the investment.

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

63. The Health Foundation and Local Government Association have launched a new grant programme - Shaping Places for Healthier Lives. The programme aims to create the conditions for better health by funding local partnerships to take system-wide action on the wider determinants of health. This new grant programme will support local cross-sector partnership action to create the conditions for better health at a local level.
64. An application has been focusing on improving the life chances and health outcomes of residents of Northgate by addressing the wider determinants of health with a specific focus on fuel poverty.
65. The application has been successful and has be selected to take part in stage 3 (the discovery phase) of the application process and will now receive an initial grant of £20,000.

Outcome of Consultation

66. The ward Councillors, Cllrs Lister and Ali are leading work on community engagement which informs and guides the workstreams.