

COUNCIL
18 JULY 2019

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. The Public Health team have initiated a re-procurement exercise for the Substance Misuse Service and public consultation is underway. Feedback is being gathered from service users, stakeholders and members of the public until mid-August and comments will be used to inform the new service specification. This will then be used to test the market with potential providers.

Health and Well Being Board

3. The Health and Wellbeing Board held on 4 July 2019 focussed on 'Starting Well: Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life', with a presentation given on 'Healthy Lifestyle Survey'. A number of updates were also provided including Darlington Child Health Profile and the Children and Young People's Plan 2017/2022.
4. Other issues considered at the meeting included a verbal update by the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group on the Integrated Care Systems and an update on the governance arrangements.

Darlington Partnership

5. The Best of Darlington 2019 awards were the most successful to date. 260 nominations were made this year, far more than any previous year. In addition 440 people attended at the Awards ceremony of 14 June, again larger than any previous year.
6. The Festival of Ingenuity of Friday was held on 12 and Saturday 13 July. 600 school children participated on the school focused Science Technology Engineering and Maths activities on the Friday and the event was well attended by on the Saturday. Again the event was well supported by local businesses this year who have committed significant staff time and resources.
7. Activity is being progressed towards the Fairer Richer Darlington programme. The work of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, which has been exploring how public sector bodies in Darlington can spend more locally and maximise the benefit of that spend, is due to report in July.

Housing Services

Universal Credit

8. We are closely monitoring the impact the roll-out of Universal Credit is having since the full service started in Darlington in June 2018, and in particular the impact on rent arrears for our own Council Tenants.
9. As expected, rent arrears have increased, but is mainly in line with our projections and compares similarly to other housing providers. On average, Council Tenants receiving Universal Credit are 6.5 weeks in arrears with their rent, compared to 5 weeks in arrears for those on Housing Benefit. One of the main reasons for the increase is in the way Universal Credit is paid; Housing Benefit is paid weekly in advance whilst Universal Credit is paid monthly in arrears.
10. The majority of Council Tenants receiving Universal Credit are paying their rent, once they receive their monthly Universal Credit payment. However, we should not underestimate the challenge Universal Credit brings. Approximately 27 per cent of our working age tenants on low incomes are receiving Universal Credit and 84 per cent of these are in rent arrears.
11. We have recruited additional rent collection staff for our Housing Income Team and we have arranged for our Tenancy Sustainment Officers to offer an appointment for assistance and support to every tenant who claims Universal Credit.
12. We will continue to monitor the situation and provide regular updates on progress.

Star Survey

13. An independent organisation, The Leadership Foundation (TLF), has been appointed to carry out a satisfaction survey of Council Housing services. This will provide information on how tenants and leaseholders view the Council's performance on a range of services.
14. The survey will be telephone based and will run through July. TLF will conduct a sample survey intended to obtain responses from 1000 Council tenants and leaseholders. This is about 18 per cent of all tenancies and will ensure dependable results. The survey will take between 10 and 15 minutes. A telephone based survey was chosen because it provides better quality responses, as the contractor can seek clarification of responses. It is also a more efficient method. The survey results will be analysed and anonymised by TFL with a final report provided in September 2019.
15. To support the survey and encourage participation the Council will provide information about the survey through a number of media channels including social media, the tenant's newsletter, Housing Connect and the Council Website.

Local Authority Data Review

16. We are participating in the trial of a new information gathering system that is being set up to support the work of the Social Housing Regulator (SHR). The SHR was established when the Government established Homes England as the replacement agency for the Homes and Communities Agency. They separated the regulator function from the investment function of Homes England to establish an independent regulator. The Government has signalled that it intends to increase the role of the regulator in relation to Council Housing. At the moment only the Customer Standard of the Regulatory Framework applies to Councils. However, the Government intend to extend this to the Rent Standard and in preparation for this are trialling a new data gathering system with the intention of the system going "live" in 2020. They have also issued a consultation document on rent setting standards that will form the new standard for rents. This includes confirmation that the year on year rent reduction will come to an end. From 2020 rent increases will be CPI plus 1 per cent.

Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

17. A new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy has recently been approved by Cabinet. The strategy is a statutory document that sets out how the Council will address homelessness and rough sleeping. The Strategy builds upon the robust systems and procedures already in place, in addition to, the strong partnerships we have in place with both the statutory and voluntary sector. It is heavily influenced by the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and the national Rough Sleeping Strategy, the key aim of which is prevention.
18. A new multi-agency monitoring group has been set up to help with the delivery and monitoring of the strategy and action plan. We will be closely monitoring progress to ensure we continue to provide a comprehensive and good quality range of services and support for those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Municipal Journal Award Winners: Best Social Housing Initiative

19. We have recently won the Best Social Housing Initiative in The MJ Local Government Achievement Awards which is a great recognition for the Council and in particular for our in-house teams in Housing, Building Services and Capital Projects.
20. Our new-build programme has already seen more than 250 affordable homes, including both houses and apartments, designed and built in-house and there are plans for 100 more properties each year for the next ten years.
21. I am keen to build more affordable homes for rent to meet the needs of local people and continue with our vision to build strong and balanced communities, making sure properties are available for working families as well as older people and those most in need. Demand for all the developments is extremely high. The MJ particularly commended us for being a small authority with big ambitions when it comes to delivering housing and a great example of what can be achieved

22. Work is currently underway on three more sites at McMullen Road, Fenby Avenue and Wordsworth Road where a range of properties, including apartments and three and four-bedroom houses, should be ready for tenants to move in later this year.

Councillor Lorraine Tostevin
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Housing, Health and Partnerships