



Cabinet Member Report for Housing and Wellbeing

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 19th June 2017

Civil Penalties and Rent Repayment Orders

On 26th and 27th April 2017, the Private Sector Housing Team held three landlord focus groups to consult with landlords, managing agents and other stakeholders on the Council's plans to update its Housing Enforcement Policy and adopt a Private Sector Housing Civil Penalties Policy.

Officers explained how the use of Civil Penalties and Rent Repayment Orders – two of the key measures in the Housing & Planning Act 2016 – will support the Council's efforts to tackle criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords and managing agents, and ensure that offenders (rather than good landlords and local council taxpayers) pay for the cost of housing enforcement.

Everyone who attended the focus groups expressed support for the Council's approach to Civil Penalties and Rent Repayment Orders, and was pleased that most of the extra income that is generated from Civil Penalties and Rent Repayment Orders is likely to be used to increase the number of Officers employed to improve standards and hold landlords and agents to account.

The proposals will be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 19th July 2017.

Multi Agency Rough Sleepers Workshop

In order to build on the success of the Nightshelter and focus on the achievement of the other nine objectives in 'TOGETHER we change lives' (our multi agency strategy for ending the need to sleep rough in Northampton) a half day workshop has been organised for 13th July 2017.

One of the biggest challenges we are facing at the moment is what to do with those people who are sleeping rough but are resolutely refusing to engage with local services or come off the streets. Although the Street Outreach Workers are very persistent and continue to work very well with the support of the Park Rangers and Neighbourhood Wardens, everyone has a responsibility to do everything they can to actively discourage people from sleeping rough.

Earlier this month, the Nightshelter launched a public appeal for more Volunteers, especially those who are in a position to cover night shifts (10.30pm – 7.00am) once a fortnight. Anyone wishing to support the Nightshelter (by becoming a volunteer or making a donation) should visit the Northampton Nightshelter webpage on the Council's website:

www.northampton.gov.uk/northamptonnightshelter

Housing Strategy 2018-2021

Work has started on the development of an overarching Housing Strategy that will set out Northampton's ambitions for place-based growth and regeneration, investment in new and existing housing, the provision of affordable housing and higher standards in the private rented sector.

Workshops, involving a wide range of stakeholders, are scheduled for July 2017 and, after being signed off by Cabinet, the new Housing Strategy is due to be published by December 2017.

Social Lettings Agency

Guildhall Residential Lettings (the Council's Social Lettings Agency) will support the Council's efforts to improve housing standards and management in the borough's private rented sector, bring empty homes back into use, prevent homelessness and reduce the number of homeless households living in Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

Since the approval of the Business Case in January 2017, a substantial amount of work has been undertaken to develop the services, products and procedures needed to ensure that Guildhall Residential Lettings is successful, effective and sustainable.

One of our priorities has been to ensure that Guildhall Residential Lettings is successfully integrated with the other parts of the Housing and Wellbeing Service and that, where appropriate, its working practices – and the technology it uses to encourage and support self-service – are fully utilised by the whole of the Housing and Wellbeing Service.

The Social Lettings Agency's approach to empty homes, for example, mirrors the Housing Standards Team's intelligence-led, risk assessed, targeted approach to HMOs. The condition of the empty property, the nature and frequency of any complaints about anti-social behaviour, and outstanding debts to the Council are key indicators of priority and formal enforcement action will be taken, wherever possible, if the owner is unwilling to co-operate or fails to resolve the problem.

Likewise, the software that Guildhall Residential Lettings uses for inventories and inspections could be used by the Housing Standards Team (to produce reports on unlicensed HMOs and to document written and photographic evidence) and to manage temporary accommodation.

In order to reduce the Council's reliance on Bed & Breakfast accommodation, Officers have prioritised the development of the private sector leasing scheme. A comprehensive lease agreement has been developed and approved, and Officers are currently in discussions with a number of property owners, housing suppliers and investors who are interested in leasing their accommodation to the Council for up to seven years.

Regular meetings are taking place with Northampton Partnership Homes to ensure the successful and timely handover of 28 tenanted properties that NPH has been managing, for the Council, as part of an HCA-funded Empty Homes Scheme.

Consideration is also being given to the merits of making fundamental changes to the way in which the stock of council-owned temporary accommodation is managed and maintained, as this may help to reduce the Council's use of Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

The logo and branding of Guildhall Residential Lettings has been approved, and the interactive website (designed to support self-service) will be up and running by August 2017. By then, the Social Lettings Agency will have finalised its terms of business and be in a position to start advertising its services and seeking to attract properties that it is able to let and manage for a fee.

Northampton Partnership Homes

Excellent progress continues to be made on the regeneration of Spring Boroughs. St Katherine's Court is being refurbished, 18 family-sized council homes are being built on two former garage sites, and the flats in Little Cross Street are in the process of being demolished to make way for 18 new council flats and maisonettes.

A programme of improvements to the Council's blocks of flats (including new security doors and fencing, and the decoration of communal areas) is also well underway, with the works to blocks in Eastfield now nearing completion and the works to blocks in Kings Heath expected to be completed by the end of August 2017.

I am delighted to report that the reconfiguration and refurbishment of Eleonore House (an older persons' housing scheme) are now complete and that, as well as improving the internal layout of the existing flats, the works have enabled another six wheelchair accessible flats to be built. On 16th June 2017, I visited Eleonore House to view the improvements and attend a celebration event.

More than 175 council houses in Far Cotton are benefiting from external wall insulation. The houses have solid walls and were difficult to heat, but the insulation of the walls has improved the thermal efficiency of the homes and will help to reduce tenants' fuel bills.

With the agreement of the Council, Northampton Partnership Homes will now be tendering its own grounds maintenance contract. Tender documents are due to be sent out at the end of June 2017.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing