



Cabinet Member Report for Housing

Northampton Borough Council

2nd March 2015

Housing Stock Options Review

The Administration was elected with a manifesto commitment to explore the options for the future of the town's Council housing. The Housing Stock Options Review process was started in April 2012 to look at the potential options for the future ownership, funding and management of its Housing Stock, to examine which option would best deliver long term improvements needed to both homes and estates as well as improve the quality of services provided to its tenants.

Following the introduction of self-financing, in line with best practice, the Council produced a 30 year business plan which was approved by Cabinet on 24th January 2012. This first business plan, developed under the new self-financing rules, was used as the starting point for the financial analysis undertaken during the Housing Stock Options Review.

The engagement structure in the Review consisted of a Tenants' Panel, an Employee Focus Group, and a Housing Options Panel. The Tenants' Panel was also supported by its own Independent Tenants' Adviser.

The Housing Options Panel was made up of 5 tenants who were on the Tenants' Panel, 5 employees from the Employee Focus Group and 5 Councillors with representation from the three main political parties. The tenants and employees who sat on the Housing Options Panel were elected by members of their respective groups. The Housing Options Panel examined the key issues in the Review and functioned in a decision making capacity.

All tenants were kept informed of the process and were able to attend a number of events held throughout the process. Tenants were actively encouraged to participate by joining the Tenants' Panel, attend Area meetings, a tenant open day in July 2012 and Tenant Conferences held in December 2012, May 2013 and November 2013. Newsletters published by the Council and the Independent Tenants' Adviser were also sent to all tenants periodically throughout the Review.

Following the gathering of key evidence, the Employee Focus Group, the Tenants' Panel and the Housing Options Panel members were supported to assess five options to see which ones could best meet the Mission Statement goals for the Review. The result of this was that both the Employee Focus Group and the Tenants' Panel selected the establishment of an Arms Length Management Organisation to manage the Council's housing stock as being the option that most closely met the desired outcomes of the review. This was endorsed by Full Council on 9th December 2013 with cross party support.

I would like to thank all tenants, employees and councillors who took part in the Housing Stock Options Review and the officers involved in this process. It was a long but necessary process that required significant commitment from everyone involved which I am sure is what helped us to achieve the positive outcome in setting up the Arms

Length Management Organisation, known as Northampton Partnership Homes, which started work in January,

Northampton Partnership Homes

Since its launch earlier this year, the Administration has worked closely with Northampton Partnership Homes as the ALMO has started to take shape. The Leader and I were very pleased to officially hand over the keys to the Council's housing stock in January and we will both watch with pride as the organisation grows and develops in future years.

Decent Homes

The Decent Homes programme has carried out improvements to 5,392 homes with an investment of £49.6 million that has helped improve the lives of thousands of tenants and their quality of life across Northampton and the programme will be complete later this month.

Allocations Policy

The Administration reviewed the Council's Allocations Policy in January 2013 to take into account changes in national legislation but also to incorporate other Council policies like the Administration's commitment to the Armed Forces Community Covenant.

The Armed Forces Covenant for Northampton was agreed in October 2012 and, under the Allocations Policy, service personnel, veterans and their families now have the following benefits:

- Members of the Armed Forces are placed at the top of the priority list for Government-funded home ownership schemes
- Former personnel with urgent housing needs are always given high priority for social housing, and personnel who move from base-to-base will not lose their housing qualification rights
- The Council will work with specialist agencies to prevent homelessness amongst ex-service personnel
- The Council will provide Disabled Facilities Grant funding for home adaptations to help disabled service personnel to live independently

A revised version of the Allocations Policy came into effect on 1st December 2013.

Housing Revenue Account

Changes to the national financing for Council housing were complete in April 2012 which resulted in a Council buy-out of the Housing Revenue Account. As a result the Council now self-finances its stock of social housing and retains the rental income collected each year. Since January 2015, the housing stock is now managed by Northampton Partnership Homes, the Arms Length Management Organisation.

Homelessness

Oasis House opened in May 2012 and was officially opened by HRH The Duke of Gloucester on 3rd October 2013. The facility is a partnership between the Council and Midland Heart and consists of 48 accommodation units including 39 self-contained apartments, nine emergency units and four have dog kennels attached. There is also accommodation at Acorn House and the day-time drop in facilities at the Hope Centre.

The scheme also includes the base for Northampton Association for Accommodation for Single Homeless (NAASH), a day centre, IT suite, arts and crafts centre, housing advice service and training facilities.

Since it opened, the Gateway Service has been providing help and assistance to single homeless people at Oasis House and assesses all prospective tenants at Oasis House.

The Council and NAASH were awarded £226,000 in January 2012 for three years for the No Second Night Out project to reduce rough sleeping in Northampton through partnership and personalised engagement.

Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

The Administration was elected with a mandate to address the negative impacts and concerns around the conversion of family homes in residential areas to Houses of Multiple Occupation. Since May 2011, the Administration has introduced an online register of HMOs and introduced new rules on the conversion of properties,

On 9th April 2014, Cabinet agreed to introduce additional licensing for Houses of Multiple Occupation in Abington, Castle, Kingsley, Delapre & Briar Hill Kingsthorpe, Obelisk, part of Phippsville, Semilong, Spring Park, part of St James, St David's, Sunnyside and Trinity. The additional licensing has been introduced to help protect tenants from unscrupulous landlords by bringing smaller properties into the licensing regime that are currently not included.

The changes give greater protection to tenants, as well as making landlords accountable for the effect their property and tenants have on the local area. This covers anti-social behaviour such as noise, putting too many refuse bags out or blocking up parking spaces in the street. It is an opportunity to set standards that protect tenants and neighbours by making more landlords responsible for the appearance of their property, stopping overcrowding of properties and making sure repairs work is completed.

The Administration has also pledged to consult on the possibility of extending the scheme to other parts of the town in the future. This Administration supports and welcomes responsible landlords in our town, and is committed to protecting tenants from landlords who fall below the standards expected.

Disabled Facilities Grants

The provision of Disabled Facilities Grant has remained a commitment for the Administration. £9.8 million has been invested since May 2011 to help in over 1,300 properties to support people to remain in their homes despite their disability.

Sheltered Housing

This Administration recognises the importance of sheltered housing and the role it plays in protecting some of our most vulnerable residents. A Sheltered Housing Services and Operational Review is currently underway which is consulting with tenants and partners and surveying housing stock to make sure we can provide high quality service and accommodation for sheltered housing residents for years to come.

Call Care

The Call Care service celebrated its 25th anniversary in May 2012 which continues to give 7,500 elderly and vulnerable residents support, peace of mind and continued independence. The Call Care service is operated by the Council 365 days a year, 24 hours a day and, in October 2013, the service was relocated from Exeter Place to the

third floor of The Guildhall. As well as substantially reducing the accommodation costs of the team, this also released four flats to be reinstated to the housing stock for much needed tenancies. The Administration remains committed to the Call Care service provision across Northampton.

New Council Homes

On 12th March 2014, Cabinet agreed the decision to build 100 new council homes at Dallington Grange. The development will be the largest social housing development in Northampton for more than 20 years. This major development will be built on land owned by the Council and will be financed by selling a parcel of land in the area or with money received from ex-council houses sold under 'Right To Buy' legislation. This Administration is committed to increasing the number of council houses available for rent, and I am pleased that we are able to provide 100 new homes for families in our town.

Community Energy Savings Programme

The Council joined forces with energy company EON in March 2012 to improve the energy efficiency of over 2,500 Council properties and help private householders save energy and money. Householders qualifying for the scheme could save up to £300 a year on their fuel bills through a series of energy saving measures that included external wall insulation, loft insulation, new boilers and solar panels.

Northampton Energy Saving Service

Northamptonshire Energy Saving Service (NESS) was one of the winners in the 2013 Green Apple Awards competition. This is in recognition of companies, councils and communities carrying out projects that enhance the environment. The housing service played a huge part in this process by initiating the idea and successfully securing funding to develop the service. The Council developed partnerships with the Community Law Service, Care & Repair, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Workbridge - St Andrews Healthcare, the Flourish Partnership and the County Council. The partnership delivers frontline energy efficiency and benefit update advice across the borough and to date have helped over 6,000 residents keep warm and out of fuel poverty.

Right To Buy

The Administration has supported the Right To Buy options for tenants and, since May 2011, 174 houses and 62 flats have been bought by tenants. The Right To Buy option remains available to eligible tenants that have transferred to the management of Northampton Partnership Homes and the Council will continue to promote the scheme.

Fraud Initiative

The Administration has taken a hard line on fraud issues that have been uncovered and the Housing Services, in partnership with the Fraud Team, launched a new safeguarding process for tenancy allocations in July 2013, following a successful pilot exercise. The pilot found that one in seven cases investigated were not eligible for social housing and others had adjustments to benefits and single person discounts removed from Council Tax liabilities. The new safeguarding process will allow cases of high risk to be referred for verification checking, including credit search and home visits to ensure that we prioritise for those people in real need of our help, and not those seeking to play the system.

Empty Homes Programme

In 2012 the Council was awarded £1.9 million government funding from the Empty Homes scheme, which aims to put more homes that have been empty for six months or longer, back onto the property market. The programme aims to help meet the demand

for affordable housing, enabling the Council to lease empty homes from their owners and help house those on the waiting list. Owners who take part in the scheme receive an interest free loan to help with the initial refurbishment costs and the continued maintenance of the property, both of which will be carried out by the Council. By bringing empty homes back into use, it contributes to the housing supply to meet local needs and help tackle homelessness. This scheme also prevents neighbourhood decline and regenerates areas, helping to improve the environment that people live in.

I am incredibly proud to have worked with a fantastic team in the Housing Department and to have worked alongside the tenants we serve. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to work as the Cabinet member for Housing and as Deputy Leader of the Council. I would like to thank Cllr Stephen Hibbert and Cllr Matt Lynch who have both served as my Assistant Cabinet member during this time.

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Cabinet Member for Housing