



Cabinet Member Report for Housing

Northampton Borough Council

14th December 2015

Tackling Modern Day Slavery

Officers are working with the Police, Northamptonshire County Council and other agencies to tackle modern day slavery and people trafficking in Northampton.

On 18th November 2015, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) provided training for 50 frontline staff from Housing, Environmental Health and Community Safety on the role of the GLA, how to recognise the signs of modern day slavery and people trafficking, and why organisations need to work together, and share intelligence, to identify, disrupt and prevent such abuse.

Improving Northampton's Private Rented Sector

In order to support the Council's strategy for tackling criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords, I have asked Officers to develop a new Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy and HMO Fees Policy for consideration by the Cabinet in February 2016.

As well as encouraging and incentivising good behaviour, these two new policies will ensure that criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords are not only prosecuted for their offences but are also required to meet the full cost of any enforcement action taken by the Council and are granted a shorter licence if they fail to license their HMOs on time.

A series of focus groups, involving a range of stakeholders including landlords and letting agents, has been arranged for 15th & 17th December 2015 and will inform the Council's new approach.

Reducing Rough Sleeping

The recent sharp and visible increase in the number of people sleeping rough in Northampton requires a fresh and more innovative, multi agency approach to what is a very complex problem.

Over the next 3 months, the Council's Housing & Wellbeing Service and Community Safety Team will work with a broad range of local organisations (including charities, faith groups, health professionals, advice and support providers and the Police) to develop a Rough Sleepers Strategy that encourages everyone to work together to not only help rough sleepers to get off the streets but also to tackle the main causes of rough sleeping in Northampton.

Informed by a formal rough sleepers 'count' in February 2016, the new Rough Sleepers Strategy will be published in April 2016 and will ensure that all organisations are doing everything they can to tackle, prevent and reduce rough sleeping in the borough.

In the meantime, the SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) Project – a partnership between the Council, NAASH and the Hope Centre, based at Oasis House – will operate again to provide rough sleepers with emergency shelter, food, advice and support when temperatures drop to below freezing and are forecast to remain that low for at least 3 consecutive nights.

Bringing Empty Homes Back into Use

At present, there are almost 1,500 empty privately owned homes in Northampton and, of these, around 185 (one in eight) have been empty for at least two years. Although the number of empty homes has fallen in recent years, it is still far too high.

There are lots of reasons, of course, why homes are left empty. However, in order to increase the supply of affordable housing in the town, support the work of Northampton's social lettings agency and provide lasting solutions to the problems that local neighbourhoods are being caused by 'eyesore' properties, the Private Sector Housing Team is planning to contact the owners of all homes that have been empty for at least 12 months to establish the owners' intentions and offer them any information, advice and assistance they require to bring their homes back into use.

Although every effort will be made to persuade owners to re-occupy, let or sell their empty homes, doing nothing is not an option and the Council will take all necessary action (including enforced sales and compulsory purchase) to bring problematic and long-term empty homes back into use.

Making the most of Disabled Facilities Grants

Disabled Facilities Grants help fund the cost of home adaptations that make it easier for disabled people to get in and around their home, such as widening doors, providing ramps, improving bathroom or kitchen facilities, and installing stairlifts and level access showers.

As well as improving residents' independence and quality of life, Disabled Facilities Grants play a vital role in reducing the number of avoidable admissions to hospital and residential care.

The Private Sector Housing Team is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the way in which the Council's Disabled Facilities Grants scheme is publicised and promoted in order to maximise the take-up of Disabled Facilities Grants.

On completion of the review – which will involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including people who have previously applied for a Disabled Facilities Grant – the Council's webpages and standard letters will be re-written, a new suite of leaflets will be produced and a series of briefings will be arranged with local support groups and advice and support providers.

Preparing for the Rollout of Universal Credit

Universal Credit arrived in Northampton on 23rd November 2015.

Although it will eventually be rolled out to all working age claimants, Universal Credit will initially only apply to single people without dependent children who are making a new benefit claim.

Housing costs will normally be paid direct to the claimant (rather than their landlord, if they have one) as part of their Universal Credit which will be paid monthly in arrears. Claimants will need to make, and manage, their Universal Credit claim online and have access to a bank account.

Prior to the introduction of Universal Credit in Northampton, a substantial amount of work was undertaken by the Council, the DWP and Northampton Partnership Homes to ensure that everything runs smoothly and that claimants are able to manage their finances and rent payments. A multi agency Universal Credit Partnership Group, chaired by the Head of Housing and Wellbeing, has been established to ensure the effective co-ordination of local services.

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Cabinet Member for Housing