

Protecting Rough Sleepers from COVID-19

As I explained in my last report of 15th June, emergency hotel accommodation was provided for rough sleepers and residents of the Nightshelter from 27th March until 30th June.

During that period, more than 140 people spent at least one night in the hotels and, when they were at their busiest in April, the two hotels (Travelodge in Gold Street and Holiday Inn Express in Grange Park) were accommodating up to 90 men and women, between them, each night.

By the time the Council's 'block booking' arrangement with the hotels ended on 30th June, a total of 76 people had been helped to move on into settled housing. Half of these moved into homes managed by the Northampton single homelessness charity, NAASH.

On 1st July, 26 hotel guests moved into one of the University's halls of residence as part of the second phase of Northampton's multi-agency plan to ensure that as few rough sleepers as possible return to the streets. The hall of residence is available, for this use, until 31st August.

As almost two thirds of the rough sleepers currently being accommodated were originally from Eastern Europe and many of them have previously been living in the tent encampments and makeshift shelters on the outskirts of Northampton, we have enlisted the help of International Lighthouse (a Northampton-based community interest company) to provide them with specialist advice and assistance, using native speakers, on matters relating to the EU Settlement Scheme, their eligibility for welfare benefits, and the housing options that are available to them.

I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my sincere thanks to the Travelodge and the Holiday Inn Express for responding so rapidly and positively to our urgent request for help in dealing with this COVID-19 public health emergency. The two hotels, and all of their staff, provided the rough sleepers with a very warm welcome and created an environment in which so many of them thrived and seized the opportunity to engage with services and rebuild their lives.

Provision of Temporary Accommodation during COVID-19

The number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation (excluding the rough sleepers who have been accommodated in the hotels) has remained fairly constant during the COVID-19 lockdown, fluctuating between 350 and 360.

We are very concerned about the increase in homelessness that is likely to be caused by COVID-19, including people's loss of employment, and next month's end to the ban on evictions.

Additional HMO Licensing

Since the approval of the Additional HMO Licensing Scheme, the Council has received more than 100 licence applications in relation to properties that are occupied by 3 or 4 people and were previously outside of the HMO licensing regime. These properties are now being licensed and will be inspected when the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

The licensing of Additional HMOs supports the Council's work in raising the standards in Northampton's private rented sector, encouraging behaviour change and tackling criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords.

Home Adaptations Team – Disabled Facilities Grants

The COVID-19 public health emergency has had a significant impact on residents and their confidence in allowing Officers and contractors to visit their homes and undertake works.

As the lockdown restrictions are eased, the Home Adaptations Team will focus on meeting the demand for home visits and adaptations, and commissioning home adaptation works.

I am grateful to the local contractors for the way in which they have responded to the COVID-19 restrictions, changed their operating practices and undertaken works in the most urgent cases.

Housing Enforcement Team – Inspections and Illegal Evictions

Although COVID-19 has reduced the number of enforcement inspections carried out, the demands on the Housing Enforcement Team to support landlords needing advice and guidance on the impacts of coronavirus have increased. There has also been an increase in the number of enquiries and service requests relating to illegal eviction activity in the private rented sector.

The Team has been proactive in sending information (including links to Government information and guidance) to known private sector landlords. It is anticipated that, when the 'lockdown' is relaxed, the number of evictions (both legal and illegal) will increase.

Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH)

Looking after its staff and the Council's tenants and leaseholders remains NPH's priority.

Emergency maintenance and essential compliance, safety works

At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, NPH reduced its maintenance service to an emergency repairs service. It is now returning to a more normal service with non-urgent repairs being undertaken in homes where it is safe to do so.

Although the Health and Safety Executive has made it clear that it expects full safety compliance (including gas and lift servicing) many tenants have told NPH they do not want anyone to access their homes at this time. NPH has raised this with the town's MPs and has received assurance from the Minister that no action will be taken against the Council for non-compliance during this time.

NPH has a small number of properties outside of the gas regulations timescales and it is working closely with those tenants to carry out the gas servicing as soon as it is safe to do so.

Neighbourhoods and housing services

Reports of anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and fly tipping have all increased. Although some of the enforcement measures that are normally used are not possible at the moment, NPH is dealing with reported cases of ASB as quickly as possible and is working closely with the Police to keep the neighbourhoods safe.

In line with Government instructions, evictions have been put on hold. This is having an impact on rent recovery and ASB. Where there are serious cases of ASB (such as in Drayton Walk where the police have been actively dealing with drug-related ASB issues) NPH is working closely with the Police to address them.

New build development works

NPH has worked very hard to keep its construction sites running, whilst ensuring safe working and social distancing, and it has continued to support the local economy wherever possible.

Work on new build sites is now gathering pace and NPH has continued to progress and develop proposals for new schemes, including a number of major developments.

The acquisition of Beaumont House and Riverside House are now complete and work will soon be underway to convert these two redundant office blocks into a total of 120 apartments. (The Renal Unit on the ground floor of Riverside House will be retained).

Materials supplier

Travis Perkins' materials contract expired on 1st April 2020 and, following a comprehensive tender exercise, NPH awarded the new contract to Grafton's (Buildbase).

The new supplier is now delivering the materials direct to tenants' homes, and this is helping to improve NPH's efficiency in carrying out repairs and improvements.

Looking Forward

NPH is working on a COVID-19 "recovery plan" and business transformation plan that will include a staged return to business and a new way of working which includes, for some time, social distancing and increased protection and prevention measures.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing