

Housing Enforcement Team – Inspections and Illegal Evictions

During a period when the Housing Enforcement Team has had to scale back its programme of inspections, Officers have been busy providing landlords with advice and guidance on the impacts of Coronavirus and dealing with a marked increase in the number of enquiries and service requests relating to illegal eviction activity in the private rented sector.

Working closely with Northamptonshire Police, the Housing Enforcement Team has continued to target properties that are owned by large portfolio landlords and have been identified as properties of interest during the sharing and analysis of information by the partners' Intelligence Officers. These inspections have highlighted the need for formal enforcement action and resulted in a series of improvements to the inspected properties, making them safer for tenants.

HMO Licensing

Northampton's HMO licensing scheme has proved invaluable in helping to prevent, tackle and control the spread of COVID-19 by enabling specific advice and guidance (produced in a variety of languages) to be targeted at the owners and tenants of HMOs in particular areas. It was especially useful when a large number of Greencore employees tested positive for the virus.

Throughout the pandemic, the Housing Enforcement Team has continued to support landlords with the licensing of their HMOs. Following changes to the Government's COVID-19 guidance for landlords and tenants, the team has started to send questionnaires and guidance on the HMO licencing requirements to people suspected of operating a licensable HMO without a licence.

Ongoing Support for Rough Sleepers

In my last report, I explained that the Council has been using one of the University of Northampton's halls of residence to accommodate rough sleepers since 1st July 2020.

With the support of the University, it has been agreed that the Council will continue to use the hall of residence, for an additional three months, until 30th November 2020.

Since the end of March 2020, a total of 162 men and women have been provided with emergency accommodation for at least one night. Of these, 92 (57%) had been sleeping rough for a long time or had been sleeping rough for an extended period on numerous occasions, 39 (24%) had been sleeping rough for only a short period of time and 31 (19%) had never slept rough but were at imminent risk of having to sleep rough.

At present, 15 of the 25 rough sleepers who are being accommodated in the hall of residence are non-UK nationals. This includes 14 Eastern Europeans, most of whom had previously been living in the makeshift shelters and tent encampments on the outskirts of Northampton. If International Lighthouse is able to resolve their immigration status and benefit eligibility issues, this will increase, to more than 30, the number of Eastern Europeans moved on into settled housing.

Home Adaptations Team – Disabled Facilities Grants

Changes to the Government's COVID-19 social distancing guidance have enabled the team to be more proactive in the delivery of the Home Adaptations Service. Officers have been contacting customers whose applications were put on hold during the lockdown in order to progress their applications and ensure that the disabled facilities are provided as soon as practicable.

In July 2020, Cabinet approved a new Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy which refreshes the policy on mandatory disabled facilities grants and makes use of the Regulatory Reform Order to provide additional discretionary housing assistance.

Northampton Partnership Homes

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

Emergency maintenance and essential compliance and safety works

Despite the current challenges of COVID-19 in Northampton, NPH has returned to a more normal service with non-urgent repairs being undertaken in homes where it is safe to do so. Risk assessments are carried out to ensure that works can be completed safely.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, when all non-urgent works were put on hold, a backlog of more than 2,900 requests built up. This backlog is now being addressed and, although it could take up to six months to complete them all, the backlog of requests has now reduced to 1,461.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, a number of the Council's properties did not comply with the gas safety regulations due to the tenants isolating or COVID-19 being present. NPH has confirmed that the backlog of gas servicing is now complete and it is now at 100% compliance.

All neighbourhood investment works have been resumed following COVID-19.

Neighbourhoods and housing services

Unfortunately, incidents of anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and fly tipping remain high. 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 and ensure that serious cases are taken through the Courts as soon as they reopen.

In line with Government instructions, evictions have been put on hold. The ban on evictions has been extended until 20 September 2020 and, except in cases involving ASB or domestic abuse, six months' notice will need to be given for evictions.

The Government has stated that, when possession hearings resume, cases involving ASB and other crimes will be prioritised, along with those where the landlord has not received any rent for more than a year.

Tenancy visits by housing staff have resumed.

New build development works

Work on all new build sites is now progressing well and the national shortage of certain materials is now abating. This means that NPH is now able to plan and forecast completion of the projects with a higher degree of accuracy.

Service delivery moving forward

NPH has now completed its new "way of working" plan which acknowledges that COVID-19 is likely to have an impact for a long time and is designed to ensure that residents are provided with the best possible service. The office layout at Westbridge has been changed to assist social distancing, and additional measures have been put in place to protect staff and prevent the spread of the virus. From the middle of September 2020, staff will be returning to work on a rota basis with a mix of home working and office working.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing