

Government Funding to Support Rough Sleepers' Rehousing

In my last report, I explained that Northampton was the only local authority in Northamptonshire to apply for funding under the Government's Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) and that it had been awarded NSAP funding of £607,400 to provide rough sleepers with short-term accommodation (emergency housing) and establish a 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' Hub.

I am delighted to report that, since the last meeting, the Government has assessed Northampton's application for NSAP funding for long-term accommodation and awarded the Council £2m of funding to purchase and refurbish 15 one-bedroom flats and 3 five-bedroom HMOs (with ensuite facilities) that will be used to expand Northampton's Rapid Rehousing Pathway for rough sleepers.

In December, we learned that Northampton has been successful in its application for Public Health England funding to set up a dedicated Rough Sleeper Drug and Alcohol Team. The multi-disciplinary team of seven drug and alcohol specialists, supported by peer mentors, will work intensively with people who are sleeping rough, or have a history of sleeping rough, and have a dependency on drugs and/or alcohol or are using them problematically.

£50,000 Civil Penalty for Criminal Landlord

Working closely with Northamptonshire Police and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, the Housing Enforcement Team has been very active, executing a large number of warrants during a crackdown on landlords suspected of operating licensable HMOs without a licence.

Northampton's intelligence-led approach to housing enforcement is helping to tackle serious organised crime and criminal, rogue and irresponsible landlords.

Since April 2020, the Housing Enforcement Team has issued civil penalties totalling £262,000. Although some of these civil penalties are subject to appeal, the Council's investigation of housing offences and its enforcement of civil penalties are very robust.

Last month, the Housing Enforcement Team presented evidence to the First Tier Tribunal in two cases where the landlords had appealed against the civil penalties imposed on them. Although we are currently awaiting the outcome of the second case, we were very pleased that the Tribunal supported the Council's decision to impose civil penalties on the landlord and it ordered the landlord to pay civil penalties totalling £50,000.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

SWEP has been activated on three occasions (and for a total of 10 nights) since 24 December.

Although emergency shelter will be provided for one or two nights if the overnight temperature falls to -1°C or below, SWEP will normally be activated when the Met Office is forecasting that the temperature will be 0°C or below for three consecutive nights. When SWEP is activated, emergency shelter will be provided between 9.00pm and 9.00am.

I am pleased to report that everyone staying in the severe weather shelter has respected, and complied with, the special measures introduced to prevent the spread of Coronavirus.

As always, I would like to express my thanks to all of the Volunteers who have supported SWEP.

Homelessness Prevention and Temporary Accommodation

During the eight months ending 30 November 2020, the Housing Advice & Options Team prevented a total of 589 households from becoming homeless by helping them to remain in their existing homes or to secure alternative accommodation.

Although the severe shortage of affordable housing has meant that homeless households are spending a long time in Temporary Accommodation (TA) and the use of TA is still much higher than we would like, Officers from the Council and NPH are continuing to do everything they can to improve the situation. In November 2020, a total of 46 households were helped to move out of TA and into settled housing, including private rented accommodation.

The team is working proactively with the Department for Work and Pensions to identify households that are experiencing difficulties with their housing due to COVID-19. It is working with tenants and home owners to resolve their housing issues and prevent homelessness.

HMO Licensing

Throughout the pandemic, the Housing Enforcement Team has continued to support landlords with the licensing of their HMOs. It maintains the online HMO Licence Register (a list of all licensed HMOs) and, at present, more than 1,000 HMOs have a licence.

Home Adaptations

The Home Adaptations Team has continued to process applications for mandatory disabled facilities grants, and discretionary grants under the Council's Housing Assistance Policy.

Since April 2020, the team has spent, or committed to spend, more than £680,000 of funding to ensure that adaptations can be made to local residents' homes

Northampton Partnership Homes

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

Maintenance, compliance and safety works

Despite the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, NPH continues to undertake repairs and safety works in tenants' homes. Risk assessments are regularly reviewed and updated strictly following government guidelines and protocols to ensure that works can be completed safely.

The large backlog of non-urgent works that built up during the first COVID-19 lockdown is being addressed and, although it could take up to six months to complete them all, the backlog is reducing. All neighbourhood investment works have resumed.

Neighbourhoods and housing services

The pandemic has caused a spike in requests for support and welfare relating to social isolation, especially amongst people who are aged 70 or over. NPH is also seeing an increase in reports of domestic abuse compared with the previous year.

NPH has continued to support elderly and vulnerable people and those families who have been hardest hit. It continues to provide weekly food parcels and, through very generous donations, it provided more than 300 food parcels and hampers for families over Christmas.

Development of new council homes

NPH has completed Phase 2 of the redevelopment of Toms Close, Collingtree. All 21 family homes have been allocated and the new tenants – selected through a local lettings policy – have all moved in. The new tenants included existing council tenants who had been previously been living in overcrowded conditions or were under-occupying their homes, housing applicants on the Housing Register and homeless households living in TA.

NPH has also completed the redevelopment of former garage sites, including Shockley Street and Fulleburn Court, to provide new homes. After a series of delays, the redevelopment of the former Tanners Pub site is now progressing well with Phase 1 recently completed

Despite COVID-19 delays, the 2020/21 investment works in Southfields and Briar Hill are progressing well, and planned works at Goldings are due to start this month. Landscaping and external 2021/22 works have been fully scoped and a programme of surveying the inside of tenants' homes has commenced in line with all necessary COVID-19 precautions.

NPH's Board has approved a new Sustainability Strategy. This is a significant strategy for NPH in terms of how it operates and the nature and extent of capital investment in existing homes and new homes to meet future decarbonisation targets.

Following the second lock-down, NPH re-opened the paint shop operated by its CIC Happy to Help and appointed a handyman to commence a new service in the year, aimed at supporting vulnerable and elderly tenants to carry out minor works in their homes and gardens.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing