

ANNUAL OVERVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICES

Summary

The purpose of the report is to present to members an overview of the Council's Housing Services over the last year, highlighting key achievements and future challenges.

Detail

1. Background

A number of housing services are managed by the Council's retained housing service (the landlord function having transferred to Tristar homes now part of the Thirteen Group in 2010). The functions we manage are:

- Benefits Service
- Housing Options
- Housing Strategy and Regeneration
- Private Sector Housing

2. The role of the Benefit Service

- Housing Benefit & Local Council Tax Support schemes
- Administration of Welfare Assistance scheme – 'Back on Track'
- Administration of Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme
- Provision of a new claim interview service to support the customer service centre
- Provision of an overpayment recovery service
- Implementation of Welfare Reforms
- Development of new initiatives to support customers affected by the welfare reforms
- Case Reviews, preparation of appeals and presentation to the Tribunal Service and the Valuation Office
- Claim@Home visiting service (for vulnerable customers)
- Calculation and submission of Subsidy claim on behalf of the Council
- Partnership working with the Single Fraud Investigation Service to prevent, detect and investigate fraud
- In-house management and development of IT systems
- In-house training provision
- Regular contact with partner agencies, negotiating and monitoring SLAs.

A significant part of the team's work is transactional (processing claims on time and accurately), however increasingly the team work alongside Housing Options and Welfare Rights to consider the impact of welfare reforms and take steps to mitigate impact. To provide a practical example, if someone

applies for back on track funding we don't just assess whether the person is eligible for funding but why they require the funding in the first place. The team will, for example, refer to welfare rights for income maximisation or to liaise with DWP if a person has had benefits suspended, refer to Stockton Advice and Information Service to help support someone with debts, consider a Discretionary Housing Payment to make up a temporary rent shortfall etc. This approach ensures a more holistic service.

The service continues to receive a high volume of claims and is constantly under review to ensure it remains fit for purpose. The team are responsible for administering local council tax support and also for carrying out annual reviews in line with financial pressures and ongoing welfare reforms.

Key Achievements in the last 12 months

- ✓ Following a review of the Welfare Assistance scheme 'Back on Track', the service was brought in-house to work alongside the discretionary housing payments function from April 2015
- ✓ Reviewed and implemented a refreshed Discretionary Housing Payments policy – **100%** of our Govt. allocation was paid out to support our most vulnerable clients with their housing costs
- ✓ Increased overpayment recovery despite a difficult economic climate, bringing funding back into the authority
- ✓ Maintained claims processing times despite a significant increase in workload
- ✓ Worked with the DWP to prepare for the setting up of the national Single Fraud Investigation Service
- ✓ Secured circa **£50,000** funding from the DWP to reduce fraud and error (Feris project)

Emerging issues/challenges going forward

- Developing effective working arrangements with the new Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)
- Introduction of Universal Credit & the Local Support Services Framework from December 2015
- Maintaining performance against a backdrop of increasing workload, reducing administration grant, uncertainty for staff (when/whether UC will be fully introduced and the responsibility for housing costs transferring to the DWP)
- Responding to the digital inclusion agenda -preparing customers for making online claims
- Meeting the needs of customers who are in crisis or resettling into the community within the constraints of a significantly reduced budget
- Preparation for the implementation of a number of welfare reforms
- Review of current local council tax support scheme – understanding the impact of the welfare reforms on current expenditure
- Preparations for the merger of the taxation and benefit service from April 2017

3. The role of the Housing Options service

- Provision of Housing Advice and Homelessness Services
- Allocation Policy development & monitoring
- Housing Needs Framework
- Sub regional **Choice Based Lettings** (including allocation policy development/monitoring)

- Provision of emergency accommodation
- Single Gateway Scheme
- Youth Accommodation Panel and Pathway Panel
- Homeowner Specialist Advisor
- Management of Travellers Site
- Housing Occupational Therapist Service
- Rough Sleepers & 'No Second Night Out' Strategy
- Diagnostic Peer Review Sub-Regional Group (Gold Standard)
- Developing alternative housing solutions & commissioning new services/initiatives
- Administering funds to prevent homelessness
- Bidding for new resources
- Significant Multi Agency working (with regard to public protection and safe guarding) – multiple partners

Our service operates a triage service and unlike many other local authorities we do not just undertake our statutory duties (to determine if someone is homeless under the relevant legislation). Customers approaching the service will also be provided with advice, assistance and in most cases a tailor made homeless prevention/intervention plan. The objective is to identify housing problems at an early stage and take appropriate action to prevent someone becoming homeless. The fact there is a significant amount of available housing stock belonging to local registered providers and also private landlords helps us with this approach. We are responsible for having a local allocations policy and for regularly updating it.

Key Achievements in the last 12 months

- ✓ Housing options advice provided to **3586 households**
- ✓ **Maintained a reduction in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation**
- ✓ Prevented **1131** households becoming homeless
- ✓ 50 Homeless applications received of which 8 were accepted as being owed a full duty (homelessness prevention is cost effective - the cost to the local authority of preventing homelessness is 23% less than progressing the customer through the statutory homeless route)
- ✓ Continued positive working with Private Landlords to increase housing options available for homeless customers
- ✓ Continuation of the Homeowners Service and the Occupational Therapy Services
- ✓ Additional funding secured – to fund Gateway Project Service/Struggling Homeowners/Occupational Therapy Service/ Bed & Breakfast service improvements/'Back on Track'
- ✓ Monies secured from DWP/Public Health/ SBC MTFP
- ✓ Completed a diagnostic peer review as part of the Government's Gold Standard Challenge – Stockton being the second local authority in the north east to have successfully completed the review - achieving excellent feedback
- ✓ Worked in partnership with Harbour to secure funds to extend service provision to victims of domestic abuse
- ✓ Assisted in the commissioning of a new generic floating support service utilising 'supporting people' funding in October 2014 (313 successful referrals through this to date)
- ✓ Secured funding to create the New Walk project officer role – working with the most chaotic and difficult to engage customers living in New Walk property in the town centre

- ✓ Assisted in the recommissioning of St James hostel provision following the cessation of contracting arrangements with Four Housing
- ✓ Worked in partnership with SDAIS to deliver a bespoke advice and information service to support CESC working with families open to CAF.
- ✓ Worked in partnership with CESC to identify gaps in accommodation provision for young homeless people

Emerging issues/challenges going forward

- Affordability and the threat of interest rate rises
- Introduction of payment by results
- Mitigating the impact of the forthcoming reduced Benefit Cap threshold
- Mitigating the impact of the proposed removal of housing benefit entitlement to under 21 year olds
- Through recommissioning of contracts for the 'Supported People' funded accommodation for homeless households ensure that specifications are fit for purpose and align with the enhanced Gateway provision
- Maximising social housing provision available to meet housing need across the Borough
- Ensuring the private rented sector continues to be an accessible and affordable housing option for customers
- Ensuring Choice Based Lettings meets the needs of all stakeholders
- Delivering real solutions for homeowners threatened with repossession
- Mitigating the impact of increased mortgage interest rates (tenants and landlords)

4. The role of Housing Strategy

- Policy appraisal and production of key strategic documents (e.g. Housing Strategy)
- Research i.e. housing market, needs and aspirations
- Secretariat to the Housing & Neighbourhood Partnership
- Working with Registered Providers to support the delivery of new affordable housing / negotiation with developers on S106 agreements (again to deliver additional affordable housing units)

This is a small but very important function within housing. We need to understand what local housing needs are and how we can help meet that need. We do this by carrying out market assessments, understanding the special housing needs of client groups within the borough such as housing for older people, learning disabilities and care leavers etc, negotiating affordable housing on new development sites and working with registered providers and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to bring forward new housing choices.

Key Achievements in the last 12 months

- ✓ With our RP partners delivered **74** new affordable homes (at Mandale, Hardwick and the return of Empty Homes back into use) and **16** new homes completed to support independent living (including bungalows on the former Blenheim House site and S106 units at Ingleby Barwick).
- ✓ Secured RP interest in 3 Council owned sites that will deliver **63** new affordable homes over the next 2 years.

- ✓ And started work on a number of other sites to deliver independent living units (former Blenheim House – LD housing scheme, Billingham – Care Ready Housing and Norton Park – includes both LD and bungalow housing).

Emerging issues/challenges going forward

- Reduced levels of HCA funding to deliver new affordable homes
- RP rent changes -1% over next 4 years

5. The role of Housing Regeneration

Delivery of housing led regeneration schemes from inception to completion:

- Mandale Park
- Meadow Rise (Hardwick)
- Nursery Gardens (formerly known as Parkfield 1)
- West End Gardens (formerly known as Parkfield 2)
- Norton Park (formerly known as Swainby Road)
- Victoria

The team have brought about substantial housing regeneration working in partnership with other council services such as planning, technical services, valuers, legal and our appointed private developer partners and registered social providers. Nursery Gardens is now built out and occupied, Mandale Park nearing completion and Norton Park rising out of the ashes with the show home recently opened. The knock on effect of this regeneration has been jobs and training opportunities as well as the significant physical impact improving neighbourhoods and making them more sustainable. Challenges remain such as how we create more residential accommodation brownfield development sites such as Stockton Town Centre and how we develop new housing, for example the potential to build an active ageing village on the former Victoria Estate.

Key Achievements in the last 12 months

- ✓ *Mandale Park* – **578** properties demolished, over **800** new homes have been built including **242** new affordable homes & by completion £100m will have been invested into Mandale.
- ✓ *Nursery Gardens* – **186** properties demolished, **110** new homes built. Scheme will be fully completed by the end of September.
- ✓ *Norton Park (Swainby Road)* – **180** properties demolished Keepmoat Homes start on site to deliver **174** new homes. First completions expected September 2015.
- ✓ *West End Gardens* – **190 low demand** properties demolished. Our lead Partner (Tees Valley Housing) has recently appointed Keepmoat to re-commence the development of the site, in total they will build **117** new homes.
- ✓ *Victoria* – decant of estate continues at place, **84** demolitions (out of 257) completed to date and 43 households left to relocate. We are currently exploring re-development site options, which include the provision of retirement housing with the Thirteen Group

Emerging Issues/Challenges going forward

- The completion of our housing regeneration schemes in difficult economic times.
- Ability to develop a sustainable solution for the Victoria Regeneration Scheme.

- Ensuring properties at our key regeneration sites are let and sold as per the plans.
- Attracting private sector developers to brownfield development sites.

6. The role of Private Sector Housing

The service is delivered by 2 teams:

Housing Conditions:

- Enforcement of housing conditions and standards in the Private Rented Sector in both single dwelling and Houses of Multiple Occupation.
- Improving conditions and management standards in Single Dwelling Houses and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)
- Mandatory Licensing of HMOs
- Landlord Accreditation Scheme
- Empty Homes
- Licensing and inspection of caravan sites
- Investigating allegations of Harassment and Illegal Eviction

Housing improvements:

- Financial assistance packages (for vulnerable homeowners) to carry out essential repairs to their homes
- Provision of disabled adaptations

Key Achievements in the last 12 months

Private Sector Housing

Housing Conditions:

- ✓ Introduction of the **Stockton Rental Standard**
- ✓ **242** properties improved via the Private Sector Toolkit (formal and informal action).
- ✓ Increased the number of properties on the Landlord Accreditation Scheme by **42** properties accredited (total = **152** accredited landlords / **897** properties).
- ✓ **59** Category 1 hazards removed in single dwelling houses.
- ✓ **329** Category 2 hazards reduced in single dwelling houses
- ✓ 44 HMOs were improved using Management Regulations
- ✓ **640** Requests for Service which resulted in **1728** officer visits.
- ✓ **134** empty properties returned to use / occupation via formal or informal means.
- ✓ Initiative introduced to proactively identify and target 'Rogue Landlords' in areas with high numbers of privately rented properties.
- ✓ Successful prosecution of landlords for not complying with statutory notices to improve housing conditions (Northcote St in July 2014).

Housing Improvements:

- ✓ **12** Financial Assistance Packages delivered to enable vital property repairs to be carried out for vulnerable owner occupiers.
- ✓ **124** Disabled Facilities Grants delivered.
- ✓ **213** clients supported via the delivery of an Equipment Loan Scheme

Emerging Issues/Challenges going forward

- Continued increase in private sector housing (nationally the second biggest tenure) and the growing challenges faced by private rented residents seeking support regarding housing condition and management issues.
- Introduction of legislation affecting the private rented sector (Deregulation Act to prevent retaliatory evictions and the requirement for private landlords to provide smoke and carbon monoxide alarms).
- Possible extension of Mandatory Licensing of HMOs.
- Growing aging population.
- Increasing demand for DFG services (vs. static budgets)
- No Government funding to support vulnerable homeowners maintain property condition.

7. Summary of Challenges we faced in 2014/15

- Responding to the impact of major Welfare Reform changes
- Addressing significant increases in demand for all services
- Reduced resources to deliver services (and lack of external funding opportunities)
- Changing housing market (demand for smaller properties/increase in demand for private sector housing)

8. Our Service's Key Strategic Priorities

- Promote and Sustain Independence
- Prevent and Tackle Homelessness Across All Tenures
- Meet the Challenges of the Housing Market
- Promote Safe and Sustainable Communities
- Deliver modern, efficient and customer-focused services

9. Emerging Issues and Future Challenges

Across all service areas

- Increasing *demand for all front line services*
- Managing the *impact of Welfare Reform*
- Addressing the lack of and mismatch of *affordable housing* (and time lag of new build)
- Increasing numbers of people choosing to live in the *private rented sector / changing relationships*
- Maintaining and sustaining *effective partnerships* (with partners who also face budget challenges)
- Managing *community expectations* (against a background of 'less' resource)
- Attempting to *secure additional resources* (but generally 'less' money to bid for)
- Ensuring *effective working relationships* with new partners (i.e. Public Health & CCG's)

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