

These minutes are draft subject to approval at the next meeting of the sub-committee

Housing Sub-Committee

19 October 2015

Present: Councillor S Cox (Chair)
Councillors A Arkle, L Darke, M Green, John
Hunter, P Oliver, M Thirlaway.

H021/10/15 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Austin, D Drummond, A Newman and J Walker.

H022/10/15 Substitute Members

Pursuant to the Council's constitution the appointment of the following substitute Members were reported:

Councillor M Green for Councillor D Drummond

H023/10/15 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.

H024/10/15 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

H025/10/15 Anti-social behaviour – victim and witness support volunteers

The sub-committee received a presentation in relation to the support provided for victims and witnesses of anti-social behaviour. Officers from the Safer Estates Team were in attendance to deliver the presentation and answer questions.

Members were informed that 7 Housing Neighbourhood Teams were in place to investigate initial reports of anti-social behaviour relating to Council tenancies. In cases where further action was required to resolve an issue, i.e injunction or eviction, a referral would be made to the Safer Estates Team. It was noted that 96% of cases were resolved locally without the need for legal action. The Safer Estates Team also investigated reports of anti-social behaviour relating to owner occupiers and private rented properties.

It was highlighted that the management of anti-social behaviour cases demonstrated a clear focus on protecting people from harm and on supporting victims and witnesses. Measures were in place to identify and respond to both the risk to and vulnerability of victims and witnesses, including repeat victimisation. Members were informed that action plans were agreed with complainants (victims) and they were updated regularly to provide progress of their case. A Victim Support Officer was employed within the Safer Estates Team to provide support to victims and witnesses of anti-social behaviour.

In 2009 the Safer Estates Team set up a victim and witness support group which included recruiting volunteers in order to offer an enhanced service to victims of anti-social

behaviour. Feedback from victims using this support group was excellent. The volunteers that had been recruited had experienced some form of anti-social behaviour themselves and their experiences were crucial to the support they were able to provide to others. In September 2014 a funding bid was submitted to and approved by the Police and Crime Commissioner's Community Fund to expand the volunteer victim support service. Following this 9 further volunteers were recruited and 7 Council staff expressed an interest in volunteering (above and beyond the paid role that they undertake for the authority).

It was explained that when an anti-social behaviour complaint is raised, a victim support officer, housing neighbourhood officer or a neighbourhood police officer will identify a case requiring enhanced support. The victim support officer will identify a volunteer to work with the victim and ensure that there are no conflicts of interest. It was up to individual volunteers how many cases they decided to take on. The support from the volunteers was designed to be practical, friendly and informal, which could take place over the telephone and/or face to face.

As part of the scheme, volunteers had been issued with photo ID cards, mobile phones, uniforms and personal alarms, along with an information pack including key contact numbers, the tackling low level anti-social behaviour procedure and diary sheets. Since the launch of the volunteer group, 47 victims had been referred for support and 16 referrals had been made to specialist agencies. When an anti-social behaviour complaint case has been closed, the victim in receipt of support will be asked to provide some feedback of their experience of the process. Between the period 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015, 100% of respondents were very or fairly satisfied with the support given to them during their anti-social behaviour case.

Members congratulated the Safer Estates Team for all the work that had gone into establishing and running the successful volunteer scheme. The sub-committee sought assurance that, whilst such support was being provided to victims, there was still a clear focus on tackling the causes of anti-social behaviour. It was noted that the support provided by the volunteers meant that officers had more time to focus on the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour.

A Member of the sub-committee asked whether there was a timescale in place for an instance of anti-social behaviour first being reported to a resolution being reached. It was explained that the timescale would very much depend on the circumstances within each individual case. Some cases would only last a few weeks whereas others could take several months to reach a resolution. The previous year's data demonstrated an average timescale of 42 days, which put North Tyneside in the top quartile nationally. It was noted that often the most difficult cases to resolve were those that involved a clash of lifestyle between neighbours as there was little the courts could enforce to reach an agreement. In these cases mediation was used to try to agree a resolution.

The sub-committee identified that some residents might expect immediate resolution to a complaint that they had made. Members were informed that a checklist was in place for managing expectations during the handling of a case and that this would be shared with the complainant. A Member enquired as to whether there was further victim support in place to deal with more serious cases that may also involve victims of crime. It was explained that Victims First Northumbria, based at Cobalt Exchange, was an independent and free referral service which provided help and support to victims.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided in the presentation in relation to the victim and witness support volunteers.

H026/10/15 Universal Credit

Officers from Housing Operations were in attendance to deliver a presentation in relation to Universal Credit, Welfare Reform and the Summer Budget 2015. A Welfare Reform Timeline highlighted the various initiatives that had already been rolled out in previous years and the impact these had on North Tyneside tenants, along with the future welfare reform plans that would impact on residents within North Tyneside.

It was noted that Universal Credit (UC) would be introduced in North Tyneside on 23 November 2015. This would replace the following 6 main working age benefits:

- Working tax credits
- Child tax credit
- Income support
- Housing benefit
- Income based jobseekers allowance
- Income based employment and support allowance

UC was for people both in and out of work and would be paid on a monthly basis directly into a claimant's bank account. The roll out of UC within North Tyneside would be a gradual process, at first only affecting new single claimants with no vulnerabilities. UC also only applied to those of working age meaning pension credits would not be affected. It was noted that once a new claim for UC credit was made, it would be around 6 weeks until the first payment would be paid. Members expressed concern at this period in which claimants would receive no money and it was explained that a bridging loan was available to apply for, which would be paid back from future UC payments.

The sub-committee was informed that the change to UC would mean that there was a greater role for the authority in collecting rent from tenants. In order to respond to this, work needed to take place to improve the Direct Debit offer from the Council, meaning that claimants had a greater choice when selecting a payment date (currently there are only 2 dates a month available). It was anticipated that UC and other changes due to be brought in would impact on tenants' finances, which in turn would result in an increase in rent arrears. In order to respond to this a review of the rent escalation policy was needed, along with a review of the services delivered by housing to, in part, focus resources on providing additional support to the increasing number of tenants struggling with budgets.

The presentation included details of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill currently going through Parliament and the initiatives coming out of this that would have an impact on tenants. This included lowering the benefit cap to £20,000 (outside London), abolishing automatic entitlement to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds, limiting UC, tax credits and housing benefit to the first 2 children for families who have subsequent children after April 2017 and the adjustments of thresholds, tapers and disregards within tax credit and universal credit. In relation to the 1% rent decrease, it was noted that there would be a 1% reduction in Social Housing rents each year for the next 4 years. This would mean the Housing Revenue Account 30 year budget plan would no longer be affordable and a full review of the service delivery model would be required.

In relation to the abolishment of the automatic entitlement to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds, it was explained that this would be introduced from April 2017 and would apply to new claims from those out of work. It was clarified that this would apply to single claimants only and that a young person leaving care would be entitled to an allowance. Exemptions would be in place to include vulnerable young people, those not able to return home to live with their parents and those who had been in work 6 months or more prior to making a claim, who would be entitled to support for 6 months. It was not yet clear who would be described as 'vulnerable' and who would make this assessment.

The challenge to understanding the impact of all the proposed changes was that every individual and/or household would be different depending on their specific circumstances. More information would be needed in relation to household data, children and income in order to know exactly how tenants would be affected. It was anticipated that there would be winners and losers following the introduction of these various schemes and that people's positions would change several times as new measures were gradually introduced.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided in the presentation.