

Health, Wellbeing and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee update

14th September 2020

Work undertaken to ensure town centre visitors feel safe with the reopening post lockdown

In line with the Government guidance the Council has sought to introduce measures to enable the safe use of our high streets. In the main town centres of Newcastle and Kidsgrove this has included signage and marking of the streets to support town centre users to abide with the social distancing measures. In the smaller areas significant queuing outside of businesses has not been an issue and advice has been offered, alongside working with Parish Councils where appropriate.

The Council has also undertaken a thorough cleansing operation in the town centres in advance of reopening, installing a new suite of litter bins, removing graffiti, jet washing under market stalls, applying weed killer and removing fly posting. It has implemented the annual floral displays of hanging baskets, barrier troughs and bedding plants and resumed maintenance of the ring road roundabouts to ensure that the town centres look attractive and cared for to support economic recovery.

The Council has been working closely with Newcastle Business Improvement District (BID) on a work programme to support businesses and the safe reopening of the town centre. The Council and BID have jointly introduced a range of marketing and safety measures.

The Council has also worked with the Business Growth Hub and a number of other Staffordshire local authorities to produce and promote Safe Staffordshire. This included filming within Newcastle town centre with local businesses. These short social media clips were used to promote the reopening of the town centre and safe visits.

Within the market control measures now in place include the following:

- minimum spacing between traders on stalls.
- distancing markers on the floor in front of stalls for social-distancing measures.
- Safe distancing signage at head-height on every stall, in front and at the rear.
- Contactless, cashless payment being introduced for the collection of rents by the Market Supervisor
- Sanitizer to be provided and used by traders. Public toilets in Hassell Street to remain open for trader and shopper use, with increased cleaning frequency.
- Online ordering and click-and-collect encouraged and supported on social media advertising, website, etc as a safe option for shoppers.
- To protect our staff and shoppers, traders will only work from a stall if they are well and no one in their household is self-isolating.
- Hazard tape and barriers to small walkways through some stalls.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of table tops.
- Safety advice based on guidelines available will be given to traders still dealing in cash.

Sanitiser has been provided at key locations around the town centre to complement sanitiser provided in individual businesses to ensure that town centre users can regularly sanitise.

Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and temporary accommodation – lessons learned

Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA), the Borough homelessness and housing options service, delivered by Midland Heart, have reported an increase in demand for service over the last 6

months, particularly for emergency housing. The service is operating with a full complement of staff, offering telephone support with staff working from home. NHA are being assisted by the Council's Housing and Partnerships Team and the Safe Recovery service (commissioned by the Council using the annual Locality Deal Funding allocation from Staffordshire Commissioner's Office), is also giving support to the service, particularly with cases presenting with the most complex needs.

The NHA service is due to return in house to the Council in April 2021 and preparations are underway for a smooth transition. A working group has been created to ensure the delivery of a detailed project plan to manage procurement of systems, introduction of a new housing allocations policy, integration with current Council Customer services and digital systems and the transfer of 9 members of staff. The challenges presented by COVID have demonstrated that the service can be operational in a different way and that efficiencies can be made by the evolving digital offer for the majority of customers.

The Rough Sleepers Team service, delivered by Brighter Futures and commissioned by the Council jointly with Stoke-on-Trent City Council, have also advised that they are operating as normal, whilst using social distancing good practice and have full capacity. There has been an increase in demand for the service across North Staffordshire but it is currently unclear how much this has increased specifically in Newcastle because of the transient nature of the cohort between the City and the Borough.

At the end of March 2020, the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to all local authorities asking them to urgently accommodate all rough sleepers. Local authorities were advised that they may use third party accommodation providers to comply with this request, including local hotels and bed and breakfasts.

People who are rough sleeping or living in temporary accommodation are disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of their complex needs e.g. mental health and substance dependency, along with the fact that they are unable to self isolate. Those rough sleeping are especially vulnerable to the worst effects of COVID-19 and our primary concern is to secure accommodation for everybody who is rough sleeping, where they can self-isolate if need be and obtain appropriate support.

The Council used its discretionary powers and additional funding made available from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to find temporary accommodation for all people rough sleeping, regardless of local connection, immigration status, eligibility or priority need. This was an extremely difficult task because most hotels and bed and breakfasts locally either closed for business or advised that they would only accept guests who are key workers or people who can be guaranteed not have substance misuse or mental health issues, thus leaving Officers with extremely limited options.

After considerable research and having exhausted all available contacts in the Borough, temporary accommodation placements were made for a number of rough sleepers at the Crown Hotel in Longton, which has been used by the Council for this cohort for a number of years. The Crown Hotel also has a sister hotel in Stone and when the Longton site was fully booked, rooms at Stone were made available to Newcastle cases and booked on a short term basis by NHA, the Council's homelessness and housing advice service, until an alternative could be sourced.

Four rooms were also booked at the Crown in Longton as COVID-19 self isolation rooms. The intention being that these could be brought into use for any rough sleepers reporting or presenting with symptoms to the Rough Sleepers service.

Officers recognised that bed and breakfast is not sustainable for rough sleepers and other complex needs cases and sought an alternative model of accommodation with support, initially for a twelve week period, which was later extended on further government guidance. The Council and NHA are working with local charity Open Door to create a 7 bedroom temporary accommodation unit, which is staffed by support workers 24/7. The unit is situated in Stoke-on-

Trent, as a suitable property in Newcastle couldn't be identified at short notice and was mobilised on Monday 13th April.

In Newcastle, there is already a commitment from partners to provide a holistic approach to rough sleepers, including debt/benefit advice from DWP, input from criminal justice agencies and a range of support from the local third sector. This is supported by the existing Rough Sleepers Co-ordinator and Navigator roles funded by MHCLG. Officers are also working on an additional proposal seeking further MHCLG funding to complement the existing mechanisms and local provision.

Rough sleeper figures have slowly increased over the last financial year and were averaging about 5-7 at each count. Most of these cases are known to have complex needs and many have been excluded from housing providers and the emergency temporary accommodation usually used by NHA on behalf of the Council, thus presenting a challenge to the Council in delivering the 'Everyone in' obligations. The COVID period also presented challenges because of limited options due to B&B closures and providers that remained open limiting room access and overall capacity for bookings. We also faced competition with other local authorities in securing availability of the reduced bed spaces so created the emergency unit as an alternative.

Other temporary accommodation is also being used by NHA, for other homeless presentations and there are a further two shared supported houses used to transition individuals into independent accommodation. Families who present as homeless are able to access two 2 bedroom temporary accommodation properties owned by Midland Heart. Since the changes to homelessness legislation and the duty owed to homeless individuals in early 2019, Officers have recognised that there is more demand for temporary accommodation presenting to the NHA service and more placements in temporary accommodation are being made.

Officers are aware that demand for temporary accommodation is continuing to rise and are working closely with partners to develop more housing options and tactics to move people on where possible. There have been some issues with housing providers ceasing to turn over void properties and make lettings but these seem to be being addressed and worked through on a one to one basis.

The Furniture Mine, who are a local charity helping homeless households with furniture and white goods, have advised that they have closed for business, which may have a knock on effect when trying to move people from temporary accommodation into a permanent tenancies. Officers have been liaising with the Furniture Mine to ensure that the remaining furniture stock can be accessed if required to ensure that households can be supported and sustained in new tenancies.

As another alternative to the Furniture Mine, Officers developed a similar scheme, using homelessness prevention funding, to pay for a furniture pack, in order to set a homeless household up in a tenancy and move them from temporary accommodation. Although there is an initial financial outlay for this it would save the cost of continued B & B in the longer term for some and therefore present a longer term saving.

All in all the demand for the NHA service continues and following a review of temporary accommodation undertaken by the Council, Officers have recommended continuation of the emergency temporary accommodation unit and complementary temporary accommodation share units as an alternative to the use of B & B, with the further development of supported move-on options, subject to sourcing and securing additional available funding.

Domestic violence – post lockdown

The Borough Council are continuing to assist more complex cases and other vulnerable households with partners through the work of the Daily Vulnerability Hub, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and the Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) service. There has been an increase in cases being referred into the Daily Vulnerability Hub.

The Council is also contributing to a number of pan Staffordshire task groups, which have been established to co-ordinate activity that is supporting and managing assistance to vulnerable households. These groups include the Civil Contingency led Staffordshire Resilience Forum Vulnerability and Voluntary Support Group and the Police led C-19 Safeguarding, Vulnerability and Partnerships sub group and Domestic Abuse task group.

Staffordshire Police advise that there has been no noticeable increase in demand in relation to reporting of domestic abuse, but they have prepared for a potential increase as the lockdown has been eased. Presently the majority of the jobs received remain lower level, however there are concerns that these incidents could escalate into something more serious if unaddressed and early intervention is key.

The weekly Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), at the time of writing had four cases with another four cases being prepared for the MARAC next week. The MARAC deals with more serious cases and puts an emphasis on a co-ordinated partnership approach to ensure that appropriate support and safeguarding is offered and made available to victims of domestic abuse and their families as a priority.

New Era, the County domestic abuse service commissioned by Staffordshire Commissioner's Office, advise that there has been an increase in referrals for service. The service is operating with a full complement of staff and are making preparations for potential increase in provision. They are offering telephone support and staff are working from home. They report that there have been some front line barriers experienced with complications with accessing legal aid as self-isolation reduces the options to provide proof of identity.

GLOW, the provider of the Newcastle Children and Young Persons (CYP) service, who also own and manage the Elizabeth House Refuge, report that referrals are increased to all elements of their services. The Refuge staffing and occupancy is stable at Elizabeth House. The CYP is being offered predominantly as telephone based support but visits will be undertaken if necessary and safe to do so. Schools are continuing to refer children and young people to the Glow service, these are currently children that are not in school and are a mix of primary and secondary school children.

Officers have also been working closely with colleagues at NHA to monitor the situation closely, in relation to homelessness presentations approaching due to domestic abuse. This has led to the Council working with GLOW to identify some short term funding for 4 specialist units of temporary accommodation for victims of domestic abuse until October 2020.

Officers have prepared and shared information around available domestic abuse services for dissemination to staff and the wider public, which has been shared by our Communications Team.

Staffordshire Commissioner's Office have launched a County wide domestic abuse communications programme, which Officers have been sharing alongside the more local campaigning.