

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S
REPORT TO**

Health Wellbeing and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee
07 March 2022

Report Title: Delivery of Newcastle Housing Advice Service

Submitted by: Executive Director - Commercial Development & Economic Growth

Portfolios: Cabinet Portfolio Holder - Community Safety and Wellbeing

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To ask Scrutiny Committee to review the delivery of the Newcastle Housing Advice Service.

Recommendation

That

- 1. The service demands are noted**
- 2. That the steps taken to continue the delivery of a good service are recognised and support is given for continued improvements.**

Reasons

To enable the Scrutiny Committee to review the service needs and delivery since 1st April 2021.

1 Background

- 1.1 Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) successfully moved from being a commissioned service to an in house service on 1st April 2021. The service which covers the housing register, housing advice and homelessness services which have remained a combined function since before stock transfer in 2000. This report reviews how the Council have taken these services back in-house, the service demands and what improvements have been delivered or are planned.
- 1.2 Significant planning went into ensuring that the service could be up and running on the first day to ensure that all customers could receive advice and importantly those facing homelessness were assisted. The transfer included the physical relocation of the service into Castle House and the TUPE of nine staff. To ensure that the port transition phase was effectively managed an internal working group continues to provide support and is now looking at continuous improvement opportunities.

2 Issues

QUARTERLY	Q1	Q2	Q3
Calls to service	1151	1496	1415
INTERNAL	n/a	372	485
No of Jadu forms received	644	694	560
Emails into Nha mailbox (INFO)	n/a	2422	2083
Emergency homeless presentations	95	106	122
Emergency Out of hours calls	29	17	33
New Housing Options appointments booked	90	109	99
New Housing Options appointments attended	89	107	95
Navigator Cases open	n/a	24	74
Navigator closed	n/a	6	30
No of Rough Sleepers identified	26	33	55
No of customers in TA at the end of the month	17	11	9

QUARTERLY	Q1	Q2	Q3
Total on Waiting List	515	829	969
New Housing Register Applications Received	1631	829	631
BME Applicants on Waiting List	24	35	74

No of Direct lets made				25	43	25
No of exclusions from Housing Register	217	435	364			
No of housing register appeals	13	3	8			
Assisted applications	n/a	11	14			

	Q1	Q2	Q3
DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME			
Total No of cases assisted	0	1	1
Total amount Guaranteed	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Total amount paid - Claims	£0.00	£0.00	£350.00
RENT GUARANTEE			
Total No of cases assisted	1	1	0
Total amount Rent Guaranteed	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Total amount paid - Claims	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
ONE OFF PAYMENTS			
Cases assisted	13	6	11
Total amount used	1,273.71	1,797.07	2,115.06
Private rented Scheme			
No of referrals	21	14	20
Amount spent furniture mine	£1,037.50	£65.00	£807.00
Total amount spent	£2,311.21	£1,762.07	£2,922.06

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Number of Jadu forms	207	195	242	207	229	258	221	223	94	48

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Number of assisted applic's handled by NHA then OFD				14	7	4	4	6	4	3

Number of customer calls to 717717 answered by housing advisors.

	19/12/21	26/12/21	09/01/22	16/01/22	23/01/22	31/01/22	06/02/22	13/02/22
Total	16	74	136	165	0	124	172	111

Joint Housing register and Allocations Policy

Coinciding with the service coming in house a new Joint Housing register and Allocations Policy was launched in partnership with Aspire Housing. This enables customers to access social housing owned and managed by Aspire Housing and other Registered Providers through one application; NHA Options. This is a massive benefit to the customer as not only do they only have to do the application process once but they only have one system to understand. The system is branded as NHA Options and has a dedicated website promoting online applications, with support in the back office from the team as appropriate.

At the time of transfer all people on the housing register were asked to re-register on the system, while this was a huge undertaking and commitment from the team it also served to ensure the waiting list information is up to date. Applicants provide all information and evidence at the time of applying, the majority of which are doing this on-line themselves. Applicants can bid for properties once their application is live and this has the additional benefit that the application can be processed quickly once they match for a property.

Providers are now able to advertise properties any day of the week and the main housing partner Aspire Housing are able to complete the shortlists direct when they want to which is more efficient. Council Officers are able to complete quality checks to check for any issues and work with Aspire to make continual improvements.

It is hoped that the partnership approach with Aspire can continue and that working together subject to the availability of funding will enable further enhancements to the NHA Options software.

Good quality direct advice

As part of the ongoing internal working group and Council wide drive to improve the advice that customers receive at the first point of contact customers can now speak to experienced NHA staff straight away. Two NHA colleagues become part of the One Front Door service from December

2021. This has allowed NHA calls to be triaged at the first point of contact and either appropriately handled at that stage or a case established for transfer to a specialist advisor. While this is still very new early indications are that it has increased the number of calls dealt with at that first point of contact and has reduced hand overs as can be seen through reduced JADU forms. The number of assisted applications has remained consistent showing we are still delivering a quality service to those who absolutely need that level of service. Another intended outcome of the continuous improvement is to allow specialist advisors more opportunity to work with landlords and tenants to prevent homelessness occurring and to quickly identify move on options where people have had to be placed in emergency accommodation.

Wider Team Alignment

With the current realignment of services NHA will become part of Housing and Vulnerability and will sit in the Sustainable Environment and Operations. This ensures strong links are maintained with teams where there may be cross overs with NHA cases. Including the work of the vulnerability hub and the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference MARAC, housing standards work with landlords and partnership working to provide temporary accommodation options.

Current Pressures

NHA has seen a significant increase in requests for help, Covid 19 has had a particular effect on family relationships which can lead to housing situations breaking down and also on the ability of some households to afford rent and other household bills. While private renters were protected from eviction during the first year of the pandemic that did not in itself resolve the issues leading to people being vulnerable to eviction and they still need support and advice to recover.

A continuing pressure for the service is the needs of singles (particularly males) with complex needs such as drugs, alcohol, mental health. Often these customers have difficult needs, some may not wish to engage and they are often excluded from local supported housing services. The time taken to assist customers is increasing as those with complex needs are increasing and many options have to be considered before a solution can be found.

Covid-19 related rent arrears

In December 2021 the government announced additional funds to local authorities, £38, 484 for Newcastle-under-Lyme, to support low-income private renters with COVID-19 related rent arrears to avoid eviction or find a new home where necessary in order to prevent homelessness. This is being used to good effect by the team as of the 31st January 2022 6 applications to the fund 4 evictions, and subsequent emergency housing presentation, prevented.

Emergency and Temporary Accommodation

Crucial to an effective NHA service is suitable options for temporary and emergency accommodation. The Homeless reduction act requires certain applicants to be provided with emergency interim temporary accommodation, ideally all placements should be made into suitable temporary accommodation i.e. accommodation specifically commissioned for that purpose where there is support in place to maintain the initial accommodation, to engage with the individual and develop a personalised move on pathway. Where this is not available or the customer not eligible or the household does not require support, hotels are used as emergency accommodation. This is more likely to fail as it is not a 'home' it is unsupported and additionally it is expensive. Hence work is ongoing to develop those temporary accommodation and supported housing offers so NHA have more options on suitable placements. The Council has been working to develop three levels of supported accommodation to assist homeless households and to help discharge any duties owed. The first lowest level support is Bronze, with 4 units of accommodation with Aspire Housing used for family temporary accommodation. Silver is 8 units for single people as a move on option with lower

level of a support, this is currently under development. Gold is intensive supported accommodation, the Council is looking to work in partnership to develop 6 units.

In recognition that emergency placements did increase through Covid 19 additional funds of £112,712 were received to support this and are also being used to support a temporary addition to the advisers to cover the increased activity.

3. **Proposal**

3.1 To ask Scrutiny Committee to review the delivery of the Newcastle Housing Advice Service.

4. **Reasons for Proposed Solution**

4.1 To enable the Scrutiny Committee to review the service needs and delivery since 1st April 2021.

5. **Options Considered**

5.1 Scrutiny has the option to review the service.

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

6.1 The activities and support of the NHA team follow the homelessness legislation.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 At the beginning of the new service the EIA identified some improvements that have since been implemented; for those whose first language is not English Locata NHA Options system will allow for language change. Interpretation and equality and diversity questions are now included on the form so it is more inclusive.

7.2 It has been recognised that there is a continual need for greater involvement with applicants who are vulnerable and have disabilities, so as to understand their experiences and tailor the services accordingly.

7.3 Positive impact on 16-17 year olds as they are a recognised priority group through the homelessness legislation.

7.4 Within the EIA several policies were identified for review as part of bringing the service in-house:

Equity Protocol has been reviewed.

Move on Protocol has been reviewed.

NHA Service Standards has been reviewed.

NHA Homelessness Prevention Schemes has been reviewed.

Deposit & Rent in Advance Scheme has been reviewed.

One Off Payment Scheme Procedure has been reviewed.

Rent Arrears Rescue Procedure has been reviewed.

NHA storage of furniture procedure has been reviewed.

Nominations Agreement – a review has been undertaken and the new agreements have been issued to the landlords, at the time of writing this report some of these have not yet been received back.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 The service is operating within the budgets approved by Cabinet when making the decision to bring the service back in-house.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 Key risks are lack of supply of appropriate temporary and supported accommodation, this will be kept under review and the current plans for the development of the Bronze, Silver and Gold schemes are seeking to reduce this risk.

9.2 Another key risk is the mismatch of demand compared to service delivery, through potentially excessive demand from increasing numbers and complexity of households there is a need to ensure the Council has sufficient qualified and experienced staff. The latest Government Grant has been utilised to fund a temporary agency officer to meet the increased demand in this quarter.

10. **UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)**

10.1



11. **Key Decision Information**

11.1 This is not a key decision.

12. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

12.1 On 15th January 2020 Cabinet approved the NHA service coming in-house.

13. **List of Appendices**

13.1 None.

14. **Background Papers**

14.1 None.