GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 23 October 2023

PRESENT: Councillor B Clelland (Chair)

Councillor(s): T Graham, D Burnett, H Weatherley, H Kelly, J Turnbull, K Dodds, S Dickie, V Anderson, P Maughan, A Wintcher, S Gallagher, P Burns, D Welsh, K Walker and L Brand

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): A Geddes and F Geddes

CPL83   MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last Committee held on 11 September 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

CPL84   CONSTRUCTION SERVICES UPDATE - REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

The Committee received a report providing an update on outcomes from the repairs and maintenance service review.

From the report, the Committee were advised of the following:

- 111 new posts have been recruited to across Construction Services. This includes 53 new trade operatives. 6 new Building Technicians and 7 additional Customer Operations Staff.

- Trade operatives no longer have a rigid set time for each job. Operatives can request additional work when a job takes less time than expected in standard minute values or stay longer at a property to complete newly identified work.

- A new process for damp, mould and condensation was introduced in April this year. This has enabled more accurate diagnosis and quicker responses to customers. A dedicated Building Technician is in place to coordinate and investigate reports of damp mould and condensation and treats this as a repair issue rather than a housing management function.

- Changes to void processes have increased productivity and deceased delays in work streams. 576 properties were made ready to let in the period April to end of September 2022. 619 properties were made ready to let in the same period for 2023.

It was proposed that repair and void processes, performance and productivity remain under review with changes made as necessary. The Committee also noted

that there are options to move away from contractors to in-house staff being explored; it was highlighted that this is intended to improve responsiveness, quality and customer service.

The Committee welcomed the updates from the report. A query was raised in relation to customer wait times for repairs; officers advised that wait times vary depending on the repair required but that wait times are reducing. It was also noted that tenants awaiting planned repairs and maintenance may wait the longest but that new measures are in place to maintain communication with tenants to provide timely updates on their repairs. Officers also advised that the new processes would reduce the number of times a tenant may feel the need to contact the Council to chase up a repair.

The Committee noted concern of staff shortages in the customer service teams in repairs. A comment was made noting that many tenants are still struggling to get through to speak to someone about a new repair or an ongoing issue. The Committee were advised that across the service there are approximately 300 roles to be filled, this included trades. It was also explained that the Council has had difficulty in recruiting contractors that can work on a reactive basis which is why it is the service's overall aim to have trades brought in-house.

RESOLVED:

    (i) The Committee noted the report.

CPL85   DAMP & MOULD COMPLIANCE

The Committee received a report providing an overview of the Council's approach towards ensuring that homes in Gateshead are compliant with statutory and regulatory requirements relating to damp and mould.

It was reported that following the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Report on Damp and Mould, a review of Gateshead Council's response to reports of damp and mould was undertaken to ensure compliance with guidance highlighted in the report. The Committee were also provided with an overview of the extent of damp and mould hazards identified in the Council's housing stock.

The Committee were advised that when a customer contacts repairs to report damp mould or condensation, Construction Services raise an emergency order to wash down the mould and eliminate or reduce the risk to the customer. It was further explained that this would be done within 3 working days. It was also explained that simple repairs will be raised on a 20-working day priority order. The Committee also noted that for those properties where it is difficult to diagnose, or appears to be more complex, a Building Technician/ Building Surveyor will attend depending on the severity.

It was explained to the Committee that all planned works orders are placed on a 40 working day priority order and that the Council will commission from time to time a specialist damp contractor to provide further reports and facilitate required works.

An update on damp, mould and condensation reporting was also provided from the report. It was noted that current repair systems and its collation of damp mould or condensation data will be used to produce a live report within Power BI software. It was noted that this will enable borough wide accurate and current reports adding an additional layer to identifying trends as they occur. The Committee were also advised that the Council has reviewed its online literature and guidance around damp, mould and condensation and that training workshops for customers are to be introduced.

The Committee requested a further deep dive on the extend of damp, mould and condensation within the Council's housing stock in addition to data on tenant wait times for their issues to be resolved. The Committee expressed concern that some Council practises had been used to gas-light tenants into having them take the blame for their damp, mould and condensation issues. The Committee noted that it understood that some lifestyle choices had contributed to damp in homes in some cases but that a lot of cases are a consequence of poorly built and insulated properties. Officers provided assurances that processes are robust and fair for tenants, it was also explained that properties with sloping roofs were particularly vulnerable to damp, mould and condensation.

It was explained to the Committee that the Council conducts stock condition surveys which are compared to the 'decent homes' standard. It was noted that this informs services where investment is needed in the Council's stock and that investment is made only when a property has a long term, viable future as a suitable home to let.

RESOLVED:

    (i)   The Committee considered and noted the report.

CPL86   LOCALITY WORKING

The Committee received a report and presentation providing an update on the locality working model which includes the alignment of emerging Family Hub model within the broader locality working approach.

From the report, the Committee were advised that a work programme has been developed that will:

- Align the Family Hub model to the broader locality model to support the "whole family / all age" approach and align the activity to VCS partners who will be commissioned to support/ develop the network and the community development approach.

- Implement a locality-based case management approach within the Early Help Service and develop a programme to embed the links with Housing services and neighbourhood management teams/ partners in localities.

- Develop a locality-based plan for the South with the aim that it has synergy with the Primary Care Network plan to tackle health inequalities.

- Incorporate learning activity and opportunities that pave the way for further

development of the locality-based approach across Gateshead.

- Recognise the importance of schools and the contribution made to the locality approach and locality working models are mapped to schools to ensure a network of wrap around support for schools to support integrated early help and prevention services which is easy to access and seamless.

From the presentation the Committee were provided with a map displaying priority neighbourhoods in Gateshead and a summary of emerging workstreams to support these communities. This included:

1. Connected communities
2. Connected partners/services
3. Data, evaluation and learning
4. Governance and communication

An overview of next steps was provided as follows:

- Work with Housing, Early Help, Family Hubs and Mental Health to embed the approach in the south of the borough.
- Work with Learning & Skills and Economic Development to determine a joint approach starting in the south.
- Adult Social Care to develop the locality model.
- Ongoing conversations with Primary Care Networks and Police.
- Develop the internal support available from workforce development colleagues.
- Realign the Neighbourhood Management Team into Localities team.
- Induct the Project Manager into the locality agenda and develop the programme.

The Committee expressed its support to locality working and the progress that has been made so far. The Committee were also advised that a Member's Seminar has been scheduled to provide a deeper understanding of the adult social care offer as part of locality working.

A query was raised in relation to the use of volunteers in locality working and the sustainability of this (noting that many voluntary sector organisations are struggling – particularly with the cost of living crisis ongoing). Officers acknowledged the challenges within the voluntary sector but noted that the Council has strong, long established relationships with providers and where support is needed, a partnership approach would be taken to lessen the burden.

The Committee also noted that locality working had been particularly effective within the Lamesley Ward, notably via the safer streets funding scheme.

RESOLVED:

(i)   The Committee noted the update.

CPL87   WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received a report which provided details on development of the work programme for OSC's and the provisional work programme for Housing, Environment and Healthy Communities OSC for the municipal year 2023/24.

The Committee agreed to defer the scheduled update on economic development, physical development and regeneration to the March 2024 meeting.

RESOLVED:

    (i)   The Committee noted the Work Programme.

Chair………..……………..