



COUNCIL MEETING

12 November 2015

GATESHEAD COUNCIL

REPORT FROM THE CABINET

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This is the report from the Cabinet. Its purpose is to report on issues for the period September to November 2015.

PROGRESS ON KEY ISSUES

2. PEOPLE

Adult Social Care

Statutory Homelessness Statistics – Quarters 1 and 2

National figures have been published demonstrating that the number of people presenting as homeless has remained at a similar figure in the first two quarters of this year, in comparison to the previous year. The figures in Gateshead remained the same in quarter one and have increased in the second quarter by 20%.

Nationally, the main reason for homelessness is loss of shorthold tenancy; this is not the case in Gateshead as the Council has focused on homelessness prevention. This means that officers work with households facing eviction by private landlords three times earlier than statutory guidance suggests, resulting in rehousing the household before an eviction occurs and reducing court costs.

The figures show that, nationally, a smaller proportion of people are accepted as homeless; Gateshead's acceptance figures are more than 10% higher and reflect the attitude that the Council takes toward assisting vulnerable people.

Conversely, Gateshead's use of emergency temporary accommodation is more than 66% lower than the national rate; this demonstrates that the Council is preventing homelessness, taking a proactive approach that means households are avoiding a crisis situation. This approach continues to benefit the residents of Gateshead and is effective in reducing costs otherwise incurred in providing emergency temporary accommodation.

Supported Housing Annual Report

The Housing Services Supported Housing Annual Report and Executive Summary are now available for 2014/15. The report demonstrates a 10% increase of vulnerable client referrals over the year and referrals have continued to increase in the current year.

The Service assists vulnerable people threatened with homelessness due to a lack of independent living skills; it also prevents escalation into more expensive services, such as mental health or learning disability services.

Anxiety and low mood, along with budgeting issues and difficulty with benefit claims, have featured strongly within clients over the last year. The largest age bracket of those supported were households in their twenties, which made up 28% overall. Customer satisfaction remains high within the service with feedback demonstrating a high level of respect, service level, positive attitude and standard of accommodation provided.

77% of clients improved their financial skills and situation and 75% improved their accommodation situation over the year. 62% saw an improvement in their mental health.

23% obtained education, training or employment with the support that they received; these clients are very chaotic, therefore this demonstrates a real achievement. 6 months after the support had come to an end, 78% of clients were still successfully sustaining their tenancy and living independently.

Of the offenders rehoused, none reoffended within 6 months of being resettled, which is a 17% increase on the previous year.

The service continues to change shape to address the increase in demand, with shorter, more intensive support solutions being provided where possible. Full information and breakdown of the various vulnerabilities dealt with by the service can be provided by Lisa Philliskirk or Penny St Bernard within Housing Services - Care, Wellbeing and Learning.

3. PLACE AND ECONOMY

Economy

Jobcentre Plus – Felling

Jobcentre Plus is consulting on the proposed closure of the Felling Jobcentre Plus office, and its plan to relocate staff and services to Gateshead Jobcentre. No official timetable for this has been announced yet, with stakeholders, including the Council, invited to comment on this. A Council response was sent to Jobcentre Plus by their deadline.

The closure of Felling Jobcentre Plus office would reduce the number of Jobcentres serving the Borough to two; Gateshead and Blaydon. However, this would have a major impact on the majority of claimants who travel in order to attend the office once per fortnight. Officers await further dialogue with Job Centre Plus on the proposal.

Start-up Accelerator Programme: SparkTank

In order to accelerate the creation and growth of graduate enterprises, Northumbria University, in partnership with the Council, is delivering an intensive 10-week start-up accelerator programme, from the Council's Baltimore House, providing a platform from which to launch their new ventures.

Over the course of the programme, participants will be provided with the opportunity to develop their ideas, with specialist advice and support from experts in marketing, legal, product development and raising finance.

The intensive accelerator programme commenced on 21 September with 12 participants, each at varying stages of developing a business. Over the coming weeks, they will continue to be supported by the University and other key organisations, to explore their concepts and ideas further.

It is anticipated that this advice and financial support will accelerate the creation of new businesses that will be supported to establish themselves in Gateshead. If successful, it is hoped that further acceleration programmes will be developed and delivered by the University, to generate further growth and job creation within Gateshead.

Environment and Transport

Kittiwake Tower Project

Later this autumn, the Council will be carrying out a capital project to remediate a small area of contaminated land within the boundary of the Kittiwake Tower Local Nature Reserve.

This low-key reclamation scheme will reduce risk to the public, volunteers and staff accessing the site. The work will also improve the site both ecologically and aesthetically, as the land will be capped-off then seeded with a wildflower mix, complementing the meadows that already surround it within the rest of the Local Nature Reserve. This is, in effect, a final minor phase of the Saltmeadows Riverside reclamation scheme. The scheme is costing £45,000, of which £25,000 is from the Capital Programme, with the remaining £20,000 coming from grant/S106 income linked with the Kittiwake Tower. The Tower itself will not be affected by these works.

The project follows a very successful breeding season at the Kittiwake Tower, with over 90 nesting pairs. This is a 15% increase on last year, and numbers have now returned to the level they were at before the colony failed completely following egg predation by Carrion Crows in 2013. Public interest in Kittiwakes was also given a further boost this summer by the installation of the 'Kittiwake Cam' and associated exhibition at BALTIC, giving live images of birds on the nesting ledge there, in a project led by Durham Wildlife Trust.

Major Schemes Update

The Council is continuing to develop and promote major transport schemes to meet the future needs of the borough. Major work is already underway to improve sections of the A1, while funding for provision of a bus-based park-and-ride site at Eighton Lodge has been provisionally allocated through the North East Combined Authority.

Future possible schemes include a further upgrade to the A1 south of Team Valley; a developer funded park and ride site at Lobley Hill; and the long term Gateshead Boulevard project, which would see removal of the Gateshead flyover to provide a more attractive gateway to the Town Centre. Smaller schemes for which funding will be sought include replacement of the old Sunderland Road subway link to the Chandless area with an at grade facility for pedestrians, cyclists and buses, and other upgrades to the sustainable travel networks needed to support economic and housing growth in the area.

A1/A1231 (Mill House) Roundabout Reconfiguration of Traffic Signals

As well as the current scheme on the A1, Highways England has been keen to examine the causes of road accidents and capacity issues at the A1/A1231 Bowes incline interchange and the adjacent Mill House Roundabout.

Following investigations, Highways England have suggested a possible scheme consisting of some localised widening of the A1231 north-east bound approach to Mill House roundabout and improved coordination of the traffic signals, as well as improvements on the A1 to road markings and highway signage.

While the Council is the Highway Authority with responsibility for the maintenance of the A1231 and the adjacent Mill House roundabout, Highways England may be willing to fund the scheme including the work on the highway. The Council has agreed to Highways England progressing this work at no cost to the Council during this financial year.

Highfield Primary Pupils Bike It Coast to Coast

As part of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund's Schools Go Smarter Programme, Highfield Primary School participates in Bike It with our partners Sustrans. An after-school bike club was set up last year, and a fleet of mountain bikes were bought using the schools PE and Pupil Premium funds. The goal was to get pupils who had barely ridden a bike to a standard where they could competently cycle a distance of 20-30km. The club started slowly but gathered momentum, and pupils were challenge to cycle the Coast to Coast (C2C).

In June 2015, after a handful of training rides, nine 9-11 year olds , the head teacher, 2 staff members and 2 parents successfully rode every inch of the C2C route over four days. Starting in Whitehaven, they tackled some serious hills, before finishing at Tynemouth with the obligatory wheel dip in the North Sea. This was an enormous achievement given that, when they first started out, most of the group could barely ride a couple of kilometres without having to get off and walk!

During the ascent of Hartside Pass, the organiser of this year's Tour of Britain (who by chance was doing a risk assessment ride) rode past the group and was so impressed by what they were undertaking, he invited them onto the podium for the stage finish of the Tour of Britain at Hartside on 10 September. To watch some of the world's best riders climbing hills that they had conquered was a unique and thrilling experience to end an amazing journey for the children at Highfield.

Essential Roadworks for Gateshead District Energy Scheme

Work began on 11 October to lay the underground pipe to supply gas to the District Energy Centre on Quarryfield Road.

One lane of the A184 Park Road (Felling by Pass) between St James Road and Albany Road will be permanently closed from 11 October to 23 November, with congestion expected westbound. The Council has opted to schedule this work after the Great North Run and Rugby World Cup and before the run-up to Christmas, to minimise the potential disruption. The public have been informed through driver information signs and press coverage by local media, and are advised to leave extra time for their journeys and use public transport where possible during the roadworks.

To date, the main length of pipe along the section has been completed ahead of schedule, and contractors will commence the final section of pipework, which crosses the Felling Bypass into Albany Road, from 20 October. If this proceeds to plan, it is hoped that the works will finish ahead of schedule, allowing the lane closure to be removed earlier than 23 November.

Housing

155 High Street, Wrekenton - Concierge Supported Accommodation Scheme

The Council has entered into a long lease with the owner of the long-term empty premises 155 High Street, Wrekenton. The property comprised 8 self-contained flats, above shops at the heart of this neighbourhood centre, which had been vacant for two years.

A scheme has been developed collaboratively between the Council and The Gateshead Housing Company (TGHC). The property has been refurbished to provide 7 self-contained flats, and one office with bedroom for the use of support concierge. The flats will be let to individuals of all ages/sexes, who have a mild to moderate level of learning disability and who, with support, are able to live independently.

The accommodation provides a distinctly non-institutional environment that should be attractive to the identified client group, offering residents their own front door and the opportunity to live independently. The on-site concierge will act as point of contact for all tenants, and provide the necessary support to ensure the building provides a safe and secure environment. A concierge will be on-site 5.00pm to 10.00am, Monday-Friday, and for 24 hours on Saturday and Sunday.

The location of the flats provides excellent links with the Wrekenton Base, which provides a day service for people with learning disabilities. Based in the local community centre, the Base offers people the opportunity to engage in employment and voluntary work, or to learn employment skills. People are supported to learn skills for independent living such as cooking and home care; they have support to exercise; partake in arts, crafts, drama and music.

155 High Street will be managed on behalf of the Council by TGHC, and the full range of tenancy management responsibilities will be divided between TGHC and the concierge.

The Gateshead Housing Company – Updates

Lettings

A total of 1,811 properties were let in 2014/15, slightly up from 1,746 the previous year. 1,341 homes were let to those on the waiting list (74%) and 470 homes were let to existing Gateshead Council tenants transferring (26%).

1,622 (90%) of all lettings were to people who already lived within the Gateshead borough; of the 189 (10%) from outside Gateshead, 116 lived within the Tyne and Wear area.

Refusals - The number of offers refused has increased significantly over the last two years. In 2012/13 there were 2,818 offers refused and 1,451 homes let. In 2013/14 we

received 3,706 refusals when letting 1,753 homes. In 2014/15 this increased again to 4,491 refusals to let 1,811 homes.

Towards the end of the year 2014/15, a reassessment of demand for properties was carried out. Whilst 37.5% of properties are now considered to be in high demand, 21% are in very low demand.

Rent Arrears Monitoring and Prevention

The Gateshead Housing Company has identified tenancy sustainment as a key priority, especially with the ongoing issues surrounding the demand for housing amongst its stock. The rent and income service is evolving its approach, to ensure tenants obtain the support they need as soon as possible; this includes more referrals than ever before to in-house advice provision and partner agencies.

The average increase in rent charges at the start of the year 2014/15 was 2.2%, and current rent arrears increased during the year by 7.6%. The previous year 2013/14 had seen rent charges rise by 5.1% and arrears rise by 11.7%. In 2014/15 the average arrears for all tenants increased from £102 to £110 in 2014/15.

A fuller briefing detailing the impact of welfare reform, and work to support tenants with regard to energy provision is available to councillors.

Rollout of Universal Credit in Gateshead

In the two months from mid-June to mid-August there were 23 claims for Universal Credit (UC). Of these, 17 have been from male tenants and 6 from female tenants. 18 of the claimants were in secure tenancies, with the remaining 5 in introductory tenancies. These tenants have been migrated on to UC for a variety of reasons.

Once a tenant makes a claim for UC, they will receive their first payment one month and 7 days after the date of claim. The first claims for UC in Gateshead were made in week commencing 15 June; the earliest payment date was 25 July. It is still very early into our UC roll out; however experience to date shows that the process is far from smooth.

Officers will continue to monitor the impact of UC on both the tenants and TGHC. We will work with all tenants who are migrated over to UC to offer them advice and support throughout the process of application and ensure they are paid promptly by the DWP. A suite of performance reports are currently being developed to adequately monitor the impact this policy has on TGHC's ability to collect rental income. It is apparent that UC is causing significant stress and anxiety for some tenants, due to delays in processing claims and receiving payments.

A further report will be produced at a later date to analyse the early impact this policy has had on rent arrears, once more TGHC tenants have been migrated over to UC.

4. COMMUNITIES

Culture, Sport and Leisure

Enchanted Parks

Enchanted Parks celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The event, which is organised in partnership by the Council, with NewcastleGateshead Initiative, is set in Saltwell Park. To mark the anniversary, a selection of artists from across the ten-year programme will be showcasing work at this year's event.

This year, artists have been invited to propose works in response to 'Alice's all-new experiences in Saltwell Park in the 21st Century'. Inspired by the 150th anniversary of the publication of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', the event will create a magical, surreal world with images and experiences that would populate a young woman's dreams in 2015.

Proposed Chopwell Library Relocation

It has been agreed by Cabinet that Chopwell Library will relocate into Chopwell Primary School. The Library will share the space currently occupied by the Children's Centre. The move will ensure that shared space is used to optimum levels by the Library, the Children's Centre and the School. It is planned that construction work will be completed for approximately Easter 2016. The Library will continue to operate in the existing library until the relocation. Alternative accommodation for the Children's Centre is being organised.

Remembering Gateshead's Fallen

Gateshead Central Library Knit and Knatter Group have been leading a project to commemorate Gateshead's role in the First World War. Working with other craft groups from Gateshead Libraries and St Mary's Heritage Centre, a call was put out to members of the public to help knit well over 1700 poppies, to commemorate each man from Gateshead who gave their life in the war.

There has been an overwhelming response to the request, and the Project has received lots of media interest. The artwork to showcase the poppies for November 2015 'Body of Water: Body of Men' will go on display from 5 November to 18 December, at St Mary's Heritage Centre and the installation will be joined by an exhibition put together by the WEA, which was launched in the North East in 1910, at a time when education was mostly accessible to the wealthy. There will also be a World War 1 Posters Exhibition specially selected from the stunning archive of WW1 posters owned by Gateshead Libraries. Visitors can view the free exhibition, Tuesday to Saturday 10am to 4pm.

Wi-Fi in Public Libraries in England - Arts Council Funding

The Council has been successful in its bid to Arts Council England's fund for 'Wi-Fi for public libraries', which aims to ensure that all public libraries in England will offer free Wi-Fi access by March 2016.

The Council will receive £38,475 to introduce Wi-Fi into nine libraries in Gateshead and to update the Wi-Fi at Central Library. The libraries for which funding is being applied are as follows: Chopwell, Crawcrook, Leam Lane, Rowlands Gill, and Whickham libraries, and also Low Fell, Lobley Hill, Ryton and Winlaton, which are volunteer managed libraries.

Tinder Foundation Funding

The Library Service has made a successful application to the Tinder Foundation's Library Digital Inclusion Fund, for a research pilot to promote the use of Wi-Fi in libraries. The project will run for 6 months from 1 October and brings funding of £5K. The funding from Tinder Foundation was set to coincide with the wider funding for Wi-Fi installation from Arts Council England announced in July.

The Project will trial 'Try Before You Buy' sessions, to allow residents to try out different makes of tablet, and learn about their ease of use and security. Sessions will be held at the Central Library, Blaydon and Birtley and will reach a target of 100 people. In the final stages of the Project it will also trial loan schemes for tablets, which could then be adopted elsewhere in the country if successful.

e-Day 4

eDay 4 was held at the Central Library on 26 September. The Library Service worked with partner organisations to deliver this popular event in which emerging technologies are showcased, and which was attended by over 300 people. Many families attended the day, and spent a long time enjoying the opportunity to be hands on with the different technologies being showcased.

Local technology provider, Vector76, brought a virtual reality headset for people to try, and the local business start-up, Daedalus Group, brought drones for people to see and learn more about. Newcastle University taught sessions on how to program robots and local enthusiasts, Makerspace, brought a range of technologies and games for people to learn more about, including 3D printers and raspberry pi. Through its success, eDay has become an annual event and has helped to build a national reputation for Gateshead libraries for such work, alongside other programmes such as monthly coding clubs for young people.

Gateshead Family Sculpture Day and Sculpture 30 Festival

On 27 September nearly 2000 people celebrated the 30th anniversary of the much loved Gateshead Family Sculpture Day in Saltwell Park. Since the event began, around 3000 Gateshead school children and 30,000 local people have dusted off their saws and hammers, to come together to make artwork out of wood at this popular annual art festival.

This year's theme was 'Home', with visitors being encouraged to recreate what home means to them using scrap wood, tools and nails. Professional artists worked with school groups from St Joseph's RC Primary School, St Peter's RC Primary School, Hill Top School and Whickham School at the School Sculpture Days, in advance of the main event.

This year's event also launched the Sculpture 30 Festival, which celebrates thirty years of Sculpture Day and Public Art in Gateshead. With funding from Arts Council England, the festival will focus around a programme of Artists of the Month who all have sculpture at the heart of their professional practice. The first artist of the month in October is Helen Pailing from Northumberland.

5. CONCLUSION

The Council is asked to note this report.