

September 2023

HOUSING

Council tenants in Northampton whose flats are affected by recent changes to fire safety legislation have started receiving home visits.

Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) recently announced they were taking prompt action to assess if cladding on blocks of flats over 11 metres or seven storeys high in the town is compliant with updated fire safety rules issued by the Government earlier this year.

Although the buildings were previously assessed in 2018 after the Grenfell incident and found to be compliant, the recent changes to legislation mean that cladding commonly used across the UK no longer meets the new government safety standards.

Whilst participating in a Homes England Safety Scheme pilot, specialists carrying out a fire risk assessment of external walls have now confirmed the cladding is present at Alliston Gardens, a block of around 50 flats managed by NPH in Semilong, Northampton.

NPH and WNC are working closely with the guidance and support of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service to minimise any potential fire safety risks at the building and make future arrangements for removing the defective cladding found.

NPH and WNC are now taking swift action to carry out fire risk assessments to the external walls of all other blocks of flats in Northampton over 11m or seven storeys high, with tenants affected by these investigations due to be contacted directly in the coming days. Daily safety checks will also be extended to these buildings as a precautionary measure whilst the assessments are carried out and local ward members will be advised of affected properties in their area.

Following Cabinet approval in July, the proposed new Housing Allocations Scheme is now out for a 12-week public consultation, which is set to finish on 26 September. At the halfway point of the consultation over 550 had been received, the consultation asks to what extent do people agree with the qualification criteria and suggested prioritisation, at this point the responses are overwhelmingly in support. Once the consultation has ended, responses will be collated, and where required changes and updates to the Scheme will be made. The final West Northants Allocations Scheme will be presented to Cabinet on the 14 November.

Work is ongoing to draft a new Homelessness Strategy, with the first draft set to be presented to Cabinet on 14 November to seek approval to consult.

The relationship with Northamptonshire Partnership Homes continues to improve as both organisations work together to develop the quality assurance framework and plan together for the introduction of the new regulatory regime next year. A joint piece of work is currently being undertaken to analyse and draft a joint response to the Regulator of Social Housing's consultation on the new proposed Housing Consumer Standards.

The Library Service

During the summer period the libraries have continued to offer welcoming spaces, providing cold drinks as well as tea and coffee and we are developing wrap around services in some libraries to enhance the opportunities to support residents in their communities. This includes Towcester library's new 'chatty café' where there are plans for money debt and housing advice, mental health support and other council services. From September, Towcester library will also be hosting employment support drop in sessions every month. As a further development of welcoming spaces, we have started to take part in Community Training partnership courses. The Community Training Partnership provides bitesize training to frontline workers and volunteers. The Partnership is funded by West Northamptonshire Council and led by Northampton Hope Centre and Community Law. Training so far has covered topics such as An Introduction to Universal Credit, Debt Advice, Key Conversations, Mental Health.

In other partnership news many libraries will be promoting Ability Travel CIC who will in turn promote library events and timetable permitting, deliver customers to our Libraries. They have previously helped customers access our warm space resources.

The summer reading challenge has been a great success this year. The final figures are not yet available but we know for sure we have exceeded last years starters by more than 1000 and we are hoping to exceed our finishers. Every library held at least 10 events for families and some far exceeded this target. 36 volunteers were also recruited across the West to support library staff to deliver this very busy reading initiative.

In August libraries started helping the Hope charity by hosting food donation points in all council run libraries, accepting donations of non-perishable food and toiletry donations supporting the cost of living crisis and the sustainability agenda.

Northampton Central library is being supported by Councillor Stone to sign a pledge to the Libraries of Sanctuary scheme. The scheme is set up to welcome refugees and those seeking sanctuary in our communities into their local library. Plans are starting to form to invite the Local Bangladeshi community and previously settled communities to the library for an introduction. Staff will participate in a workshop to gain some new understanding around refugees. This initiative will enable the library to further demonstrate that it is a place offering safety and sanctuary to all.

We are now busy planning for National libraries week 2nd to 8th October which this year is branded "Green libraries week". This is an opportunity for us to shout about what libraries are doing to help the council achieve the Green and Clean priority. Our social media plans will focus on highlighting what libraries are doing for:

- Good health and wellbeing
- Quality education
- Decent work and economic growth
- Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Climate action
- Partnership for the goals
- Responsible consumption and production

They will also be engaging local partners and running a variety of green activities during the week including re-using left-overs from previous craft activities.

The Business & IP Centre Northamptonshire has received £300,000 over 2 years from West Northamptonshire Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This will enable them to deliver the Build Your Business programme of business support that launched in September and will run until the end of

March 2025. The programme consists of - 1:1s, webinars, workshops, access to specialist business databases, mentoring, networking and start-up grants of up to £2,000. The programme has a designated business adviser working across West Northamptonshire. Build Your Business will deliver on intervention E23 of UKSPF – ‘Strengthening local entrepreneurial ecosystems and supporting businesses at all stages of their development to start, sustain, grow and innovate, including through local networks.’ BIPC Northamptonshire will be working closely with colleagues in Economic Growth and Inward Investment and delivery partners for other WNC UKSPF projects.

CULTURE & LEISURE

Arts & Culture:

The Arts & Culture newsletter has seen steady growth in number of subscribers since it's refresh and launch in July. Up to 332 at last count mid-August.

Planning continues for **Choir fest '24**, a celebration of musical genres sung by local choirs.

Main Stage '24, working title for the major live music event planned for Delapre Abbey in the summer 2024. A procurement process is underway to on board an experienced event promotor with experience of holding large scale music events.

A wider stakeholder planning meeting eholders has been set for 20th September.

Consultation with ward members and local residents has been proposed. Meetings and communication will be scheduled during Autumn.

Swimming Pool Support Fund Phase 1 – total funding requested is £522,431. Submissions from Brackley Leisure Centre, Towcester Centre for Leisure, Lings Forum, Mounts Baths, Daventry Leisure Centre, Moulton Leisure Centre, Wilson Sports Centre (Roade). Further feedback expected from Sport England at the end of September.

Swimming Pool Support Fund Phase 2 – launched 4th September.

The objectives of Phase 2 - Capital of the SPSF are to:

- i. Improve the energy efficiency of facilities offering public swimming and support the leisure sector to transition to a position of environmental and financial sustainability
- ii. minimise the closure of public swimming pool provision within local authority areas
- iii. prevent gaps in public swimming provision emerging
- iv. reduce carbon output of the public leisure sector over the medium to long term
- v. prioritise support in those areas of greatest socio-economic need (as evidenced by deprivation), where all other factors are equal

Officers will continue to work closely with swimming pool operators to ready applications for bid submission.

Leisure centres

The Leisure Centre Procurement Cabinet Report is presented to Cabinet on 19th September for approval to start the procurement process. The process will start with a round of soft market testing open to our existing contracted leisure operators.

The soft market testing will inform questions that will be posed to Members during a workshop to be scheduled for February 2024. The workshop will explore the scope for the final tender documents and set out the councils ambitions for the future leisure centre service.

British Cycling partnership was announced during August. The partnership with cycling's National Governing Body is funded for two years through UKSPF linked to active travel ambitions. The partnership will employ a full time Community Developer post who will be responsible for convening a local cycling steering group to design and lead a cycling development plan for West Northants.

The partnership also includes Pedal Part (a celebration event for cycling), volunteer ride leader training to recruit to Breeze Champion's (Breeze is the largest women's cycling network in the country offering free guided bike rides for all levels).

Rugby World Cup 2025

National announcement launched on 22nd August.

West Northants has been confirmed as a host city and Cinch Stadium (Franklins Gardens) confirmed as a host match venue.

The tournament will be held across England 22nd August to 27th September.

West Northants aims to host up to four team training bases. These will be confirmed in a future announcement by World Rugby, expected late autumn.

RFU Impact Programme

Work with the national governing body for Rugby has started with initial introductions to the RFU Player Growth team.

Meetings scheduled for October to start planning the RFU Impact Programme across West Northants, identify the council's priorities aligned to the impact programme goals to grow the game through increased participation in the women and girl's game.

Work will include community and club engagement, roll out and increased visibility of RFU programmes.

Councillor Adam Brown

Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture & Leisure