

September 2022

HOUSING

Housing Strategy and Partnership

West Northants Housing Strategy

The new West Northants Housing Strategy has been written and was presented and recommended for approval at Cabinet on the 23 September. The strategy was developed through extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders, partners and members.

The formal consultation on the emerging themes and priorities ran from 14th April – 24th May 2022. We had nearly 600 responses analysed, with 257 completing the whole questionnaire and over 280 comments in total from a variety of groups and individuals including residents, registered providers, voluntary and charitable organisations, statutory bodies and parish/town councils.

The Housing Strategy has four themes. The themes are:

- Deliver homes people need and can afford
- Improve the quality, standard and safety of homes and housing services
- Support residents to live healthy, safe, independent, and active lives
- Support thriving and sustainable communities

These themes are supported by 14 strategic priorities. Each of the strategic priorities identify a number of actions required to deliver the priority.

Following adoption of the strategy a Delivery Action Plan will be developed, this will set out the specific actions and targets for the delivery of the Housing Strategy. This will be prepared with partners.

Homes England funding

Homes England announced in August that following bids submitted, we had been successful in Homes England funding for two schemes that will be delivered by Northampton Partnership Homes. The schemes that received this funding are:

Avenue Campus – This development will deliver 170 new homes. Demolition works are currently taken place on the site, and construction works will commence straight after. The current development programme indicates that the works will be complete early 2025.

Belgrave House (The Clockhouse) – This is a 1960's constructed office building, which will be converted into 122 new 1 and 2-bedroom apartments. The necessary works are currently taking place to prepare the building for development.

Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF)

The SHDF Demonstrator scheme has enabled the planned investment programme to optimise a whole house retrofit programme for a selection of properties across Northampton, with the explicit aim of improving energy performance.

The project will have retrofitted 150 solid wall homes in the areas of Kingsthorpe and Kingsley. These house types were targeted due to the poor energy performance of solid wall homes and high levels of fuel poverty in these areas. The demonstrator scheme is nearly complete with anticipated finish by the end of September 2022.

WNC/NPH have also been successful in obtaining funding through Wave 1 of the SHDF, this will see a further 429 properties benefitting from this scheme.

Homelessness and Housing Solutions

The Homelessness & Housing Solutions Team and Housing Strategy & Partnerships Team worked together earlier in the year to complete a rough sleeping self-assessment toolkit and apply to secure additional funding through the Government's Rough Sleeping Initiative. Over recent weeks the Government has announced that West Northamptonshire Council has secured £2,311,493 through Rough Sleeper Initiative 5 to support those sleeping rough or at risk of rough sleeping over the period 2022 – 2025.

Private Sector Housing

Landlords Forum

On Tuesday 6th September 2022, the Council ran its successful landlords forum. The meeting, attended by around 40 private sector landlords representing properties across West Northamptonshire, heard from officers and partners. The agenda for the meeting including controlling fly-tipping and waste disposal from rented properties, the options for improving access to temporary accommodation, a legal update, and a further update on funding being made available for energy efficiency. The next meeting is scheduled for December 2022.

HMO Task & Finish Group

The housing team, continue to support the Portfolio Holder and selected Councillors on a cross party HMO (houses in multiple occupation) Working Group. The group have heard from officers on the available legislative requirements regarding both planning and property licensing. The group will now start to gather evidence from local residents, businesses, and partners regarding HMOs in our community. The group hope that its recommendations will be presented to WMC Planning Policy in October / November 2022.

Homes for Ukraine

Officers from the Council's Private Sector Housing Team have continued to undertake inspections of properties being offered under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The inspections, being undertaken to ensure that properties meet the minimum safety standards, have been completed in many properties that the Council would not routinely visit. The properties are not usually homes that the council would routinely

visit as they are owner occupied properties and single-family occupancy private rentals. This has provided the Council with new and additional information regarding housing standard across West Northamptonshire. To date, 325 properties have been visited by the Private Sector Housing Team, with inspections being undertaken, and advice being provided particularly regarding gas and fire safety.

CULTURE & LEISURE

The Library Service

This year's Libraries Summer Reading Challenge entitled "Gadgeteers" has been underway since July. Books and activities themed around science, technology and inventions have been encouraging children from 4 - 11 to keep up their reading practice over the long summer school break by reading 6 books and collecting stickers. On completion of this they receive a certificate and medal to reward their hard work. For children between 0 – 4 there is also a mini challenge to keep them involved over the Summer too and for the first time we are running a 6-book challenge for adults so that teachers and parents can encourage their children to take part and lead by example.

Library staff and volunteers attended over 100 school assemblies to promote the challenge and our libraries have been full of families joining up to take part in the challenge and attend Gadget themed events. By week 3 of the summer holidays, we had seen 7035 children signing up, an increase of 428% on those who had joined by this time in 2021 demonstrating families' confidence in using libraries post-Covid. So far 942 adults have signed up to the 6-book adult challenge. All the challenges continue until the week after children return to school.

On Monday 25th July, St James Library re-opened in its new home at the Doddridge Centre. After several years of negotiations, seeking expressions of interest and exploring business models the hard work has paid off and the community in St James have local access to library services. The new library is managed by the Doddridge Centre and supported by WNC Library Plus to provide a range of book stock and other services.

Support for Ukrainians resettling in West Northants continues in our libraries with the newest support group beginning to run at Weston Favell Library. The library will also be running free English lessons from 9th September for an initial cohort of 10 Ukrainian learners, funded by the Modern School of Language. On Monday 15th August a job club at the Central Library was attended by 40 resettled citizens (Ukrainians and Afghans) where they discussed jobs, interviews and training courses.

Sport & Active Lives

Leisure Centres

Sport & Active Lives team working closely with contracted leisure operators to monitor impact of rise in utilities costs. SLM/Everyone Active approached WNC with a proposal to increase casual swim costs by up to 10% to help mitigate utilities increase of just under £100k this year. Proposal has been approved as the impact on customers can be limited through the various alternative swimming options at the Daventry and Moulton leisure centres (membership, swim pass etc). This action will not achieve full cost recovery, but the operator does not want to impose further (in year) price increases at this moment in time.

Further mitigations are being explored to support leisure operators. The Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) provides grants for public sector bodies to fund energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation measures in public sector buildings including leisure centres. WNC are reviewing sites for inclusion in a wider bid to the scheme and WNC's Assets Team is leading this project, working with consultants Leisure Energy with a submission due in September. Northampton leisure centres will not be included due to WNC £1.8m plant improvement project which is underway.

Benchmarking review for the Parkwood Leisure contract (Brackley and Towcester leisure centres) begins in October. This process will review financial operations from the first six years of the contract, setting a revised contract management fee for the next six years of the contract. WNC Leisure, Finance and Legal colleagues form a working group with the leisure operator.

Archives and Heritage Service

The period from 1 April to date has been one of adjustment of service provision, as the threat from Covid-19 reduced, and maintenance of basic levels of professional work, prior to the agreed staff restructure being implemented. This will add some much-needed staff capacity to a very small team. Once these are in post, work on the important service Accreditation application will be able to proceed.

Adjustments to the public services procedures have been made to support both researchers and documents, and to encourage more people to visit, regardless of whether they have made appointments or not. It is vitally important that local people are aware of the service and use the resources, whether to support the development of local neighbourhood plans, the writing of a village history, the study of an individual's family history or the research for educational projects.

On the collections side, the most important work has been preparing for an important accession of records from St Andrew's Hospital, Northampton. St Andrew's was formerly the county's private asylum and since then has become a leading institution in the treatment and research of mental health and related illnesses. The collection will therefore be invaluable both to those wishing to trace the history of ancestors who were treated in the asylum and to medical historians researching changes in approach within this area of medicine.

Some welcome buildings work was undertaken in June and July. The building, that was specially designed for the specialist storage of and public access to archives, is now over 30 years old and, inevitably, showing signs of that age. It is hoped that further works can be done to ensure the building can remain as 'fit for purpose' for the joint authorities for the foreseeable future.

The Service includes the Historic Environment Record (HER). Funding has been secured from Historic England for the conversion of Northamptonshire data, that is currently on the National Record of the Historic Environment, to the local database. Northamptonshire is one of the first and leading authorities to undertake this work. It will be of great benefit to all users, both private and commercial, because the result will be that the data for the county is much more comprehensive. HER data includes scheduled ancient monuments, archaeological sites, listed and historic buildings, churches, historic parks and gardens, battlefields, finds spots etc.

Councillor Adam Brown

Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing, Culture & Leisure