



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council

# Annual Report

2020/2021



# Introduction

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The Covid-19 pandemic had a huge impact on Council services last year, not least Housing services.

There's no doubt it's been an incredibly tough year for all, but as an organisation we pulled together and worked extremely hard to deliver the best service possible.

Our Housing team quickly adapted to new ways of working, with many staff working from home. Although it meant that some housing services had to be suspended for a time, they were brought back as quickly as possible. Learning from these challenges, many of our services have now moved online to make them even easier to access while allowing staff to have greater capacity to assist those who do not use online systems.

Many of our staff also took up the challenge of working in our community testing centres and the town's Community Hub, taking phone calls and making home visits to help residents across the borough during the lockdowns. I'm very proud of each and every one of them for all their efforts.

In the midst of all this, we also had plenty of cause for celebration too. The Council was successful in

securing Green Homes Grants, which have enabled us to offer energy efficiency measures to eligible households. This work will also support the Council's pledge to become carbon neutral by 2050.

In addition, we have been able to continue our programme of building new homes for tenants, with 14 completed last year and another 56 scheduled for completion in 2022. At the same time, we completed adaptations in 141 homes across the borough and dealt with more than 15,100 repairs.

As part of our bid to keep in touch with our tenants and ensure they could access the information they might need, we launched a Housing Facebook page, which has proved popular. We would encourage residents to follow the page to keep up-to-date on the latest housing news.

Finally, I'd like to express my thanks to the Housing team who have worked tirelessly through the most challenging of times. I look forward to working with them to support our communities across Darlington as we face the challenges ahead.



*Kevin Nicholson*

**Councillor Kevin Nicholson, B.E.M.**  
Cabinet Member for Health & Housing

# Achievements

## Covid-19

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in March 2020, our normal ways of working were flipped upside down.

We had to very quickly adapt to the huge changes this brought, including the majority of our staff having to work from home and many of our services being limited.

As an organisation, we have pulled together and worked extremely hard to ensure that we were able to deliver the best possible service under very difficult circumstances. We have continued to carry

out all essential work on our properties, provided help to those in need, and continued to support our tenants and the general public.

Our Housing and Lifeline staff assisted in Covid-19 test centres, as well on the Community Support Hub phone calls and home visits 7 days a week. Our staff also made over 41K phone calls out to elderly and vulnerable Council residents between March and August 2020 to offer advice, arrange for medication collections and food deliveries.

## Energy grants funding

Darlington Borough Council have been successful in receiving two Green Home Grants, which will offer energy efficiency measures to eligible households. This will help reduce carbon emissions, make their homes warmer and reduce energy bills.

The grants include installing measure such as, loft insulation, double glazing, external and cavity wall insulation, solar photovoltaic and air source heat pump systems.

We will continue to bid in future Government grants to install energy efficiency measures into properties.

## Coming together during difficult times

Due to the impact of COVID-19, many of us were left living in very isolated circumstances. The inability to see loved ones in person meant many tenants were faced with no means of communication with their loved ones.



With this in mind, Mitie, one of the Council's building contractors, donated tablets to our residents at Roxby Court and Dinsdale Court. This enabled our tenants to join the digital world, and to connect with their family online. The tablets helped tenants avoid feeling lonely during very difficult and uncertain times.

Kath Barningham, our longest serving tenant at Roxby Court - 'I was very happy to accept the Ipad from 'Mitie' on behalf of Roxby Court. It will enable me to contact my family during difficult times.'



# Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standards

During 2020/21, following the effects of the pandemic, we worked to ensure our residents and members of the general public were still able to access relevant information and advice. One of the platforms we used was our Facebook page, which saw a big increase in followers throughout the year. We now have just under 1,000 followers. This was really positive as we were able to communicate with our tenants and the public during times where face-to-face interaction has been limited.

We also have our Darlington Home Online service, which allows tenants to contact us, make online payments and see rent balance and rent statements online without having to call us. By the end of 2020/21, 27% of our tenants were registered to access online services. This is a great improvement from 18% last year.

We hope to improve this even further next year with some great new features for Darlington Home Online service. Tenants will be able to book their own repairs online, and will be able to set up Direct Debits online from their own homes!



**169,702**

Unique visits to our website pages



Services changed, implemented or withdrawn during the year as a result of resident involvement



**10**

Tenants involved in consultation groups



**583**

No. of sign ups to Darlington Home Online from April 2020 to March 2021



## Compliments and Complaints

**In 2020/21 the Council received 37 compliments, an increase from last year. This is a great achievement for our teams, especially given the challenging year we have all faced.**

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, the Housing service received a total of 43 complaints. The majority of complaints were concerning communication and the service we provided. The second most common area of complaints was Contact & Repairs Co-ordination. This includes communication, appointments and delays in undertaking repairs.

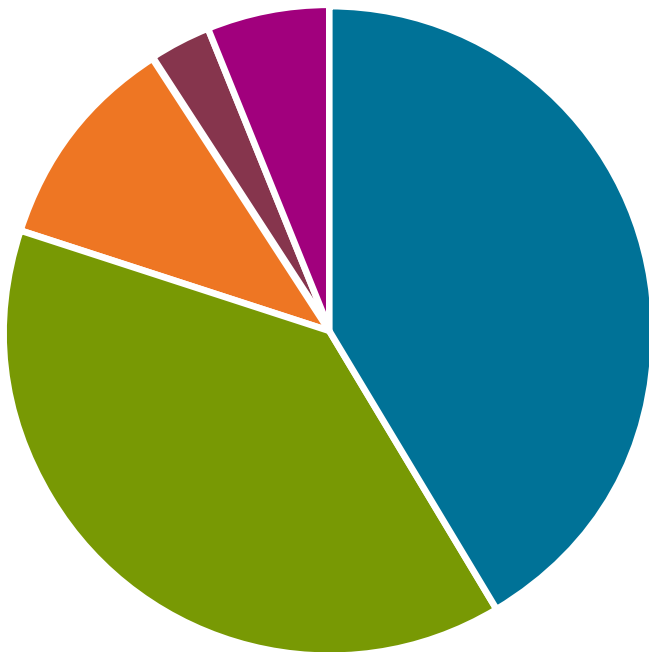
Most complaints were dealt with at Stage 1 of the complaints process, but 7 were escalated to Stage 2. No complaints went to Stage 3 and only 1 complaint was escalated to The Housing Ombudsman. This figure remains the same as last year.

As a result of changes made by the Housing Ombudsman, part way through the year our complaints response target was changed from 25 days, down to 10 days.

Before the change from March 2020 to January 2021, we met our response target in 51.1% of Stage 1 complaints. This is a decrease from 80.7% last year, which is due to COVID related issues including staffing levels.

After the change was implemented from January 2021 to March 2021, we met our response target in 88.9% of Stage 1 complaints.

After each complaint, we try to establish any learning which could prevent the same issue from occurring again.



## Compliments by Housing Team

|                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| ■ Lifeline .....                      | 14 |
| ■ Management Services .....           | 14 |
| ■ Contact & Repair Co-ordinator ..... | 6  |
| ■ Tenancy Enforcement .....           | 1  |
| ■ Customer Services .....             | 2  |

**88.9%**  
Our Stage 1 complaint response time was met from Jan 2021 to March 2021

**43**  
complaints

**37**  
Compliments



# Your Home

## Home Improvements

**It is extremely important to us that our tenants are provided with a safe and secure place to live and somewhere they are happy to call home. We are therefore committed to ensuring that the homes you live in are warm, comfortable and fully functioning.**

Throughout the last year, we have spent approximately £3 million on improving your homes, with the highest spends within 'Kitchen and Bathroom works' and 'Structural'. Despite being faced with a challenging year, we have still strove to ensure that all necessary work has been carried out.

We are still continuing to work towards improving the energy efficiency of our homes and we are still carrying out work on window replacements. This still remains a high priority, as the Council aim to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Now more than ever, it is extremely important to have a comfortable home that you feel settled in and this is something we recognise and highly value. We continue to work towards implementing appropriate adaptations, such as low level showers and ramp access, to enable our tenants to remain within their current homes for the foreseeable.

### Where we spent our maintenance budget

|                         |          |
|-------------------------|----------|
| STRUCTURAL              | £750,000 |
| KITCHENS & BATHROOMS    | £735,000 |
| ROOFING                 | £731,000 |
| HEATING                 | £403,000 |
| ADAPTIONS & LIFTS       | £96,000  |
| COMMUNAL & DOOR ENTRY   | £85,000  |
| REPLACEMENTS DOORS      | £74,000  |
| EXTERNAL WORKS          | £40,000  |
| REPAIRS BEFORE PAINTING | £28,000  |
| WINDOW REPLACEMENTS     | £19,000  |
| PAVEMENT CROSSING       | £14,000  |
| SMOKE DETECTION         | £8,000   |
| GARAGES                 | £4,000   |
| LIFELINE                | £3,000   |

118

Properties received window and/or door upgrades



93

Properties had works to their roofs



208

Heating upgrades undertaken

£3m

spent improving your homes



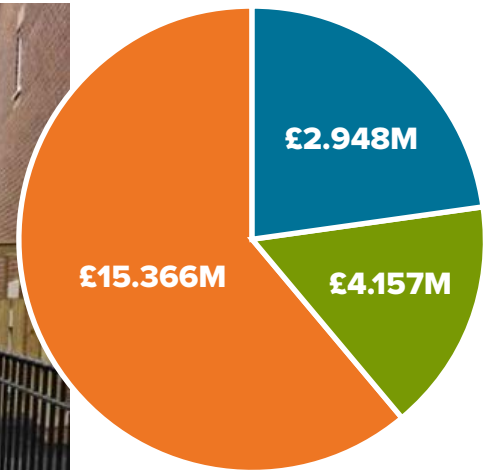


## New Build Homes and Repairs



'Living here and being able to have a garden for my three year old son, has changed my life'

Tenant of Mickleton Close



### Where we spent our budget in 2019/20

- Management
- Repairs & Maintenance
- Major Improvements  
new builds, regeneration

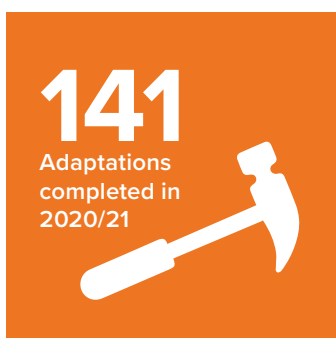
**We are following our ambitious plan to build 1,000 homes over the next 10 years, as the demand for affordable, high quality housing still remains high across Darlington.**

Despite the challenges of Covid, over the last year we have built 14 new Council homes for our tenants. Next year we hope to build even more and have 56 new Council homes planned within Lancaster Phase 2, which will be available late in 2021. This will include three and four bed family homes with access to gardens.

One of our next developments is Allington Phase 3, with 56 homes due to be completed in Spring

2022. We're also hoping to gain more funding to create Phase 2 of our popular Sherborne Close development.

We are committed to responding proactively when things go wrong. That's why in 2020/21 our excellent service responded to 15,124 repairs in our homes, including repairs in garages and communal areas. 32.2% of these repairs were carried out as emergency repairs. We understand how damaging and worrying it can be if you get an urgent repair, which is why our emergency team aim to attend within 24 hours.



# Health and Safety

**The Council has a well established and robust processes in place to monitor health and safety compliance in relation to our Council housing stock.**


Fire risk assessments are carried out on all communal areas in sheltered housing and apartment blocks. This is to ensure adequate and appropriate fire safety measures are in place to minimise the risk of injury or loss of life in the event of a fire. Risk assessments include the condition of gas and electrical appliances, the general condition of the building, ensuring fire alarms have been tested, and exits and corridors are free from obstruction.

Although fire risk assessments were still carried on a regular basis in 2020/21, they presented real logistic challenges for our teams, with social distancing and ensuring the safety of everyone involved.

Our electrical safety testing programme was suspended from April to December 2020, mainly due to a lack of available operatives due to Covid-19. We restarted our program in January 2021. Since then we have been working really hard to catch up, even hiring an extra electrician to help.

We also carry out gas servicing every year. In 2020-21, 4,518 Council properties were due for their annual gas service and all were completed. Normally, the number of properties where a gas service is completed outside of the compliance period would be less than 1%. This increased a little in 2020/21 because of tenants shielding, reduced workforce due to shielding, and other factors. However because of the commitment of our teams, we managed to get them all completed as soon as possible.



**21**   
Fire Risk Assessments carried out in the communal areas of flats in 2019/20

  
**405**  
Houses had asbestos surveys carried out

**£71,475**  
Spent replacing communal doors to ensure better security  


**100%**  
All gas services completed





# Neighbourhood and Community Standards

## Community support

### Engagement Fund

The engagement fund is used to spend on projects that aim to help within our communities. Due to the pandemic, we felt it was very important to try and help those affected by school closures.

We spent £17,548 on 75 school laptops which were distributed to 7 schools: St George's Academy, St Teresa's Primary School, Mount Pleasant Primary School & Children's Centre, Whinfield Primary School, Red Hall Primary School, The Education Village Academy Trust and St John's Academy.

### Restored family benches

We are planning to carry out some painting and restoration of outside benches in Windsor court, so that they can be enjoyed by families in the summer. This is being carried out free of charge by our contractors Mitie. With the ongoing pandemic and current restrictions, we are hoping this will provide our communities with a pleasant place to enjoy the outdoors and catch up with loved ones.

### Across the Schemes

During the Coronavirus pandemic, we worked hard to ensure that our tenants within our sheltered and extra care schemes were still supported. We

recognised the impact of COVID-19, leaving many of us feeling isolated, so we took steps to help ensure our tenants felt connected and supported.



laptops distributed between 7 schools.



£17,548  
Engagement fund spent



966

Tenants in our Good Neighbour, Extra Care & Sheltered Schemes



## Supporting Homeless People

**Our Housing Options Team work to provide help and support to those who are currently homeless or threatened with homelessness within Darlington. Their aim is to prevent homelessness wherever possible.**

Our Housing options team worked hard throughout the pandemic to help keep our communities as safe as possible, during frightening times. We held events where we worked alongside third sector partners and the Covid Vaccination team to help vaccinate some of Darlington's Homeless Community, with over 40 clients being vaccinated in one day.

In 2020/21, 1,418 individuals contacted the service regarding their homelessness and 131 clients were seen. This is a large decrease from 1,752 clients seen in 2019/20, due to the pandemic. As a result of many restrictions and lockdowns, we had to adapt our services to telephone appointments and drastically reduce the number of people we were seeing face-to-face.

The top reason why individuals are faced with homelessness, is that friends and family are no longer able/willing to accommodate them.

The Housing Options team work closely with the Police, Community Safety and the 700 Club around begging and rough sleepers. Through our 'Have a Heart, Give Smart' campaign, we try and raise awareness with the general public about the importance of donating directly to charity, rather than giving money to beggars on the street. In 2020/21, 38 rough sleepers were reported within our service, an increase from 13 last year. 116 sofa surfers were reported, a decrease from 191 last year.

During 2020/21, we also helped to support 91 victims of domestic abuse. This was an increase from 72 during 2019/20.



**618**

Clients owed a Statutory Duty



**645**

Positive outcomes achieved for clients in march 2021



**39**

People assisted under severe weather emergency protocol for a total of **150** nights



## Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

**Darlington Borough Council take a tough stance on ASB. We don't tolerate anti-social behaviour and take action to allow our tenants to feel safe within their communities.**

Housing Services work with Durham Constabulary, Civic Enforcement and other agencies to deal with anti-social behaviour (ASB) and tenancy breaches. We also have our own dedicated Tenancy Enforcement officer.

We are committed to ensuring our tenants are able to live peacefully within their neighbourhood. It is important to us to maintain safe communities, where our tenants are happy to live.

Some of the enforcement actions that were taken over the past year include: notice of seeking possession, notice of possession proceedings, injunctions, closure order and acceptable behaviour agreements.

### Time taken to resolve cases:

- **92%** of cases resolved within 3 months





# Managing Tenancies

## Allocations, Lettings and Tenancy

**During this past year, as a result of the pandemic, we have been faced with extremely difficult economic conditions. However, our performance within rents has still remained on track.**

By the end of 2020/21, current tenants owed us £630,488. This is a decrease from last year. Former tenants owed us £424,361, which has nearly halved since last year as a result of fantastic efforts from our rent team.

At the end of 2020/21, there were 1415 households on the waiting list. 447 of them had statutory preference, which is for people who are overcrowded, homeless or other various reasons.

During 2020/21, we let 494 properties with an average letting time of 50 days, which is approximately double last year's figure. During the beginning of COVID-19, we paused lettings for a few months during the initial lockdown. This really affected our re-let time. Since then, our team have worked really hard to be able to catch up again.

### COUNCIL HOUSING WAITING LIST

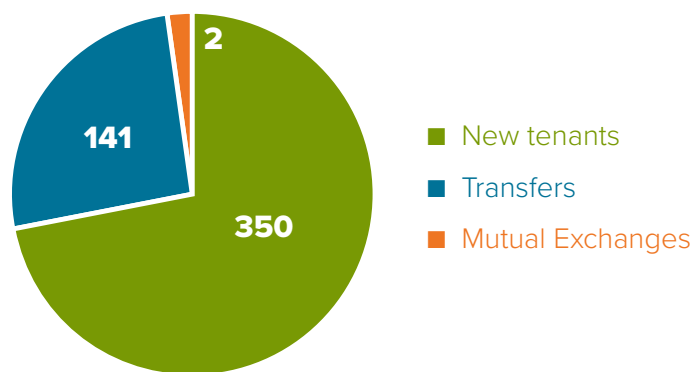
| Number of Bedrooms | 2020/21     |
|--------------------|-------------|
| One Bedroom        | 730         |
| Two Bedrooms       | 450         |
| Three Bedrooms     | 212         |
| Four Bedrooms +    | 23          |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>1415</b> |

## Tenancy Sustainment and Housing Plus

Our tenancy sustainment team offer free and confidential advice to our tenants on budgeting, money managements, benefits, gas and electric and more. In 2020/21, they assisted 508 customers to receive water tariff reductions from Northumbrian Water.

In 2020/21, Housing Plus worked with an average of 125 cases weekly between our 4 officers. Due to COVID-19, new cases were a lot lower than usual at 24 new cases during the year. This is due to the fact that our officers were unable to visit tenants during lockdown which made it more difficult to carry out new assessments. 149 Housing Plus cases were sustained during 2020/21.

## Properties Let in 2020/2021



**1,415**  
Households on the waiting list

**£25.5**  
MILLION  
Overall rent collected

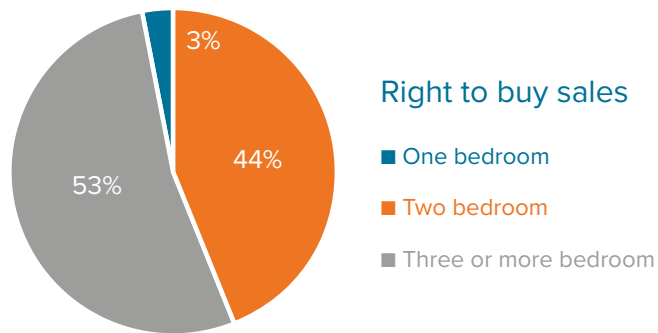
**397**  
tenants were offered advice to ensure they were claiming the correct benefits

**494**  
Properties let in 2020/21



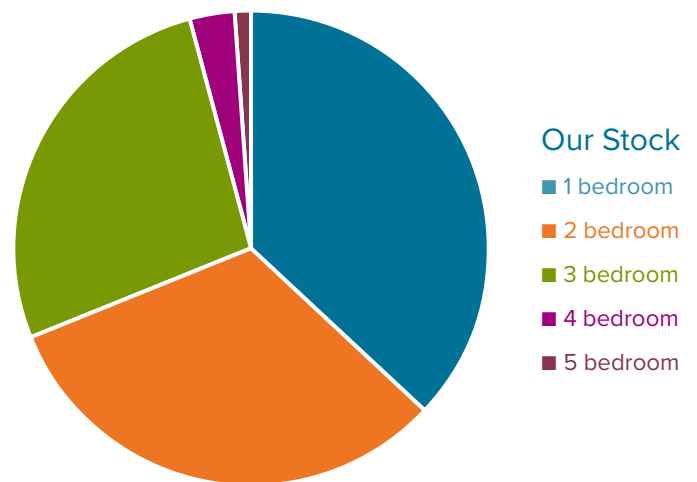
## Right to Buy

In 2020/21 we received 56 right to buy applications for our homes. Of these, 32 were completed (57%). The number of applications is slightly higher than 2019/20, when there were 51, with fewer completions (37 last year). Last year's completion rate was therefore higher, at 72.5%. The majority of the properties were three or more bedrooms, and all except 2 were houses.



## Stock

We have 5,288 homes in our stock.



## Apprentices

We continue to see apprentices successfully gaining permanent employment after their apprenticeship. 100% (6 apprentices) of the Darlington Borough Council apprentices between April 2020 and March 2021, have gained employment or have entered further education.

We receive money for recruiting apprentices aged between 16 and 18. This money is directly re-invested into resources to support apprentices within the workplace.

This picture shows two of our apprentices, Meg and Savanna, who started at the beginning of March 2021 and are completing a Level 3 Business Administration apprenticeship within our Housing sector.

**Savanna, part of our Planning Team** - 'I have been welcomed into the team with open arms and have received plenty of support during my journey'.

**Meg, part of the Programmes and Performance Team** - 'I am thoroughly enjoying the apprenticeship and feel it has been beneficial to complete a qualification, whilst working and gaining experience'.





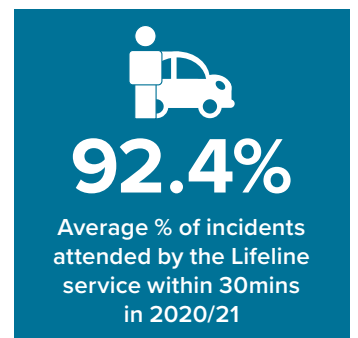
## Lifeline

**Our lifeline team works to help provide individuals with the ability to live independently. They manage our community care alarm and Telecare services, plus all of our older person housing.**

In 2020/21, there were 966 tenants within our 74 schemes. During a very busy and challenging year, our lifeline team and scheme managers worked extremely hard alongside our CCTV team to ensure that our tenants were safe and secure and has access to a 24/7 service.

The work our lifeline team carry out helps to relieve pressure off the NHS and ambulance service, as they attend incidents where our tenants may have fallen or are not feeling well. In the past year, our lifeline team took 98,640 calls, and attended 8,660 incidents. 1,908 falls were attended, resulting in 297 ambulances being called. Due to our support, only 37 of the almost 2,000 falls required a hospital visit.

This was a huge achievement for our team, as even during difficult circumstances, we worked hard to make sure we were still able to provide our residents with the support they require.







Darlington Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Feethams  
Darlington  
County Durham  
DL1 5QT



01325 405333



[housing@darlington.gov.uk](mailto:housing@darlington.gov.uk)



[www.darlington.gov.uk](http://www.darlington.gov.uk)



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