



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Annual Report

2022/2023



Introduction

It is a real privilege to have recently been chosen to serve as Darlington Borough Council Cabinet holder for health and housing, which includes responsibility for our council housing.

It remains a great achievement that in Darlington we have kept hold of our council homes, maintain them to a good standard and that we continue to build new council homes every year. My day job takes me to different parts of the country and so I have seen where council housing has been transferred from the local authority and created a number of issues, especially in terms of quality and availability.

Good progress was made in 2022/23, including on home improvements (page 6), making homes more environmentally friendly (also page 6), tackling anti-social behaviour (see page 9) and continuing to support older people and others to remain independent in their own home via our essential Lifeline service (page 14). In recognising this progress I would like to thank our excellent staff team, as well as the previous Darlington Borough Council Cabinet holder for health and housing, Cllr Kevin Nicholson.

Many years in the making, it is also fantastic that earlier this year work started on building 150 new council homes off Neasham Road (page 3). It was great to visit the site and see this for myself. Hopefully the first homes on this site will be ready for tenants to move into before the end of the year.

But ultimately it is our tenants that matter the most and I continue to be bowled over by those who get stuck in to help their communities. Tenants like Jill and Veronica who help out with community activities (see page 3). As well as tenants like Denise, Glynis, Hugh, Christine and Karen, just a few of the members of our Tenants Panel (page 5).

Over the coming year we want to continue to make improvements, including through our new Home Search for people looking for a council home, by responding to the Government's new Tenant Satisfaction Measures, increasing our engagement with tenants and continuing to improve existing homes and build new ones.

It is a great blessing to be working with our staff team, tenants and our partners on all of this and more.



Councillor. Roche
Cabinet Member for
Health & Housing

Achievements

Good News Stories

As well as celebrating our successes over the last 12 months it is important to recognise the people that matter the most and that is our tenants. In 2022 the DBC Housing Website page launched our Good News Stories section.

Two examples of this come in the shape of Branksome Hall Residents Bruce, Jill and Veronica who featured as their stories made us all smile.

Sisters Jill and Veronica are pillars of the community with Jill helping out in the “knit and natter” which runs on site.

‘It all started when I used to knit for our old scheme manager Lynne and we realised between us that there might be a need for a knitting club, some come to knit and others just like to natter, but it’s always a good afternoon’.

Keen trout fisher Bruce also lives within the scheme at Branksome Hall Drive and is very appreciative of the scheme managers at the complex.

“Both scheme managers help me immensely and I am extremely grateful to them. I probably shouldn’t say this but I often buy them flowers to show my appreciation”

Games for the Brain

Our Games for the Brain sessions have proved a great success at a number of our schemes. The sessions offer activities to enable people living with dementia to remain physically active and enjoy activities they previously accessed, in a way that is suitable for them. In February participants for the session at Rosemary Court were joined by employees of EE who had donated £125 towards future activities.



New Builds; Neasham Road

Early in 2023 we commenced building at our Neasham Road site where we are building 150 brand new Council homes, which will be our largest site to date. This will be alongside a Rent-To-Buy option offering a first step to affordable home ownership for residents.

The site will include 64 two-bedroom apartments, 24 two-bedroom houses, 43 three-bedroom houses and 19 four-bedroom houses.





Community Funding

2022/23 saw a record amount of funding from the Engagement Fund for local projects throughout the town. The 12 months saw £10,000 given to local projects at Richard Court, Branksome Hall Drive, as well as numerous funding allocations for the Queen's Jubilee.

And it doesn't stop there; in the next few months the Community Fund will fund local celebrations for the King's Coronation in May.

Platinum Jubilee

With so much change over the last 12 months it is easy to forget that in May 2022 Darlington residents celebrated the Platinum Jubilee for the late Queen. In a number of locations tenants joined forces and held celebratory lunches, games and fates to coincide with the national event. Over £6000 was awarded from the Community Fund to our Schemes and Residents Associations, with money being donated to King William Street, the Havelock Centre and Windsor Court, among others.

Darlington Home Online

Between April 2022 and March 2023, 266 Darlington residents registered on our Darlington Home Online portal, ensuring easier access to information such as rents, repairs and tenancy.



Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standards



Our Tenants Panel met regularly throughout 2022/23 with bi-monthly meetings in the Town Hall to discuss matters important to them.

Throughout the year the Panel were introduced to members of the Housing team as well as Councillors. This included the cabinet member for Health and Housing Cllr Kevin Nicholson as well as the Assistant Director for Housing and Revenues Anthony Sandys and the Head of Housing Claire Gardner-Queen.

The Panel were also given an insight into different aspects of Housing with presentations given regarding Income, Key Performance Indicators and the Housing Regulator, all aimed at giving the Tenants Panel all the tools needed when helping us make vital decisions for our tenants. The Panel also scrutinises our performance with the Panel being provided with and commenting on important documents before they are finalised and sent to the general public and put on our website.

In 2022/23 the Panel were pivotal in looking at six policies before they were introduced to every tenant. They included the Housing Management Policy, Low Cost Home Ownership, Damp, Mould and Condensation Policy, Allocation Policy, Fire Policy for Sheltered and Extra Care Accommodation 2022 - 27 and the Leaseholder handbook.

They are also involved with our latest round of mystery shopping, are invited onto the panel for Notice of Possession Proceedings Review Hearings, were responsible in naming our new allocation systems and reviewed our rent increase consultation.

'I find the Tenants Panel meetings very informative and varied. All speakers have such an array of knowledge and fully explain any changes that are coming into effect. This has included new builds and changing of policies due to modern problems. I look forward to every meeting' **Karen Wright - Tenants Panel Member**

In 2023/24 the Tenants Panel will be looking into more ways in which we can engage more residents. This will include introducing hybrid meetings where panel members will have the choice of online meetings or more traditional face to face meetings to increase numbers.

The Tenants Panel will also design a page dedicated to themselves in every Housing Connect magazine, starting in the summer of 2023. This is designed to improve their visibility

We are constantly looking at ways in which we can improve our Council Housing Services. Tenant participation is vital in our Customer Engagement Strategy. Our Panel has been set up to give council tenants their say and ensure we are accountable for the decisions we make. If you are passionate about your area and wants to make things happen in your neighbourhood it has never been easier to get involved. You can email customerengagement@darlington.gov.uk, call 01325 406682 or text 07917040599.



Policies introduced after consultation with the Tenants Panel



Your Home



Home Improvements

The Council has committed to achieving Net Zero Carbon in the coming years. This means we need to reduce our use of fossil fuels such as gas that give off carbon emissions and opt for more environmentally friendly renewable powered measures such as solar and wind power.

In Housing we are supporting this and are committed to reducing our carbon emissions and energy demand. We want our tenants to have a warm, ventilated and energy efficient home, as we know good quality and well-maintained homes can significantly impact upon the health, wellbeing and quality of life of our tenants .

In late 2022 work commenced on the programme of £500,000 funded Social Housing Decarbonisation, which aimed to fund a package of measures to improve the energy efficiency of Council homes, including external wall and cavity wall insulation, loft insulation, double glazed windows, solar panels and low energy lightbulbs.

The consultation for this took place at one of our housing schemes in July last year and was attended by Housing staff, Local Councillors and residents, as well as representatives from Marshall and McCourt who carried out the work. Initially 23 household Council properties were included in the work with more to follow.



Where we spent our maintenance budget

WINDOW UPGRADES	£2.458M
KITCHENS & BATHROOMS	£1.234M
HEATING	£1.169M
STRUCTURAL	£435,000
ADAPTATIONS AND LIFTS	£202,000
GARAGES	£137,000
REPLACEMENT DOORS	£116,000
ROOFING	£106,000
EXTERNAL WORKS	£98,000
FIRE SAFETY	£93,000
COMMUNAL & DOOR ENTRY	£45,000
PAVEMENT CROSSING	£9,000
LIFELINE	£7,000

“We have successfully completed extensive works as part of the government’s Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF). We upgraded 23 homes with energy efficient measures including External Wall Insulation, Cavity Wall Insulation, Double Glazing, Solar PV, Low Energy Lighting and Loft Insulation. These homes will help us in understanding our climate change journey to achieve net carbon zero. These homes look fantastic and will bring many benefits to our tenants, such as noise reduction and reduced energy consumption, which will help to reduce their energy costs”. **Cheryl Williams, Programmes and Performance Manager**

£500,000

Available funding from Social Decarbonisation funding



properties in town included in the first wave of energy efficiency work



Neighbourhood and Community

Homes for Ukraine

Following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, the UK Government launched the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme which saw people in the UK registering as sponsors and offering to open their homes to Ukrainian people.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities called upon Local Authorities to oversee their scheme, meaning that the Refugee Team at Darlington Borough Council were tasked with ensuring the success of the scheme within the Borough.

A vast number of residents in Darlington registered to become sponsors after they had contacted refugees who they wished to support with the Refugee Team undertaking a number of pre-arrival checks to ensure suitability and well being.

The Refugee Team worked with Children's Services, Adult Services, Police and Private Sector Housing in undertaking these checks.

Prior to guests' arrival, property inspections were carried out, which was the first opportunity for the Refugee Team to meet sponsors at their homes and talk to them about the high level of intensive support that their guests will need when they arrive in Darlington. This includes support in applying for benefits, registering children in schools, applying for English for Speakers of Other Languages, opening bank accounts, registering with doctors and supporting their guests with Biometric applications.

Once the guests had been welcomed, the Refugee Team then made regular contact with the sponsors to offer continued support, ensuring the sponsorship is going smoothly.

Since April 2022 sponsors in Darlington have welcomed over 100 Ukraine refugees into their homes with refugees and their sponsors working together to overcome such challenges as language barriers and cultural differences whilst sharing a home.

There have been many success stories with some refugees securing employment and gaining qualifications, helping them to regain their sense of identity and independence. Sponsors report that the children of their guests are very happy in their schools, and they are thriving, despite such a huge transition to their lives.

The Refugee Support Team continue to support 30 sponsors and their guests under the scheme in Darlington with the 24th February seeing the first anniversary since the conflict began.

Refugees are also supported by our Team in applying for council properties.

We have also identified a need for two new resettlement officers to work with the refugees, these new staff started in April 2023. They are helping to provide refugees with support to secure tenancies and transition to living independently.



Housing Options

The Housing Options team are under significant pressures at the moment due to high numbers of people facing homelessness putting more demand on both social housing and the private sector. To help reduce pressures, the team have recently recruited 2 specialist posts, a Domestic Abuse Housing Options Officer and a Mental Health Housing Options Officer. These two roles aim to improve services for anyone fleeing domestic abuse and those with significant mental health issues. These two specialist officers are able to offer targeted support to clients who often have more support needs than others. They have also developed good working relations with other agencies in the Darlington area working in those fields.

In 2022/23, 1842 individuals contacted the Housing Options team for advice regarding homelessness. Unfortunately this was a slight increase in the year before where the number was 1745 which was an increase of 5.5%

The main reasons people found themselves homeless remained the same with family and friends no longer able to accommodate being the largest reason at 21.3%, followed by relationship breakdown at 11.6% and end of assured shorthold tenancies at 5.1%. Along with many other services our Housing Options team has also seen the effect that the cost-of-living has had with many more people needing help.

One positive of the higher numbers is that the team saw a higher number of positive outcomes with 720 individuals finding accommodation after speaking to our team, this is up from 578 the previous year.

They were also able to assist 12 people under the severe weather protocol.



Estate Walkabouts

In the last 12 months our presence in the area continued in a similar vein taking a proactive approach to making our streets safer for our communities. This included successful walkabout in larger area's like Skerne Park and Firth Moor. At Skerne Park our team responded to reports of drug paraphernalia being found near the community centre and invited and engaged with teams such as Civic Enforcement, Streetscene, Local Police, Councillors and Community Groups to not only show presence but to create a plan in tackling future issues. Whilst on the walkabout the team also logged fly tips, broken fences and much more. This has been replicated throughout the borough and will continue to do so.



Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

Under the terms of our policy we will not tolerate anti social behaviour or hate crime and will act wherever necessary to prevent it, as well as taking robust actions against tenants who commit ASB as well as members of the family or visitors to their property

In 2022/23 The Anti-Social Behaviour team opened 444 cases against council tenants. The main reasons for these were issues surrounding Noise, Drug Misuse, Pets and Animals, Verbal Abuse and Harassment and Criminal Behaviour.

Of the 444 cases over 95% (424) have been closed, with positive outcomes including advice given.

Over the course of the year we also applied for 8 orders, 4 closure orders and issued 17 Notice of Seeking Possession and Notice of Possession Proceedings as well as adopting a tougher stance on tenants who continue to abuse their tenancy.

Our Tenancy Enforcement team also attended events across the town during ASB week in July 2022 which showcased our partnership with both Civic Enforcement, Police and Local Councillors.

We believe that tackling nuisance and anti-social behaviour is a key part of delivering sustainable communities and improving the quality of life of our residents.

Through good communication, engagement and liason with relevant agencies and strong partnership working we are committed to using effective measures to prevent anti-social behaviour from occurring. We endeavour to deliver visable improvements for people living in our local areas and communities and take prompt action when anti-social behaviour occurs.

Close partnership working arrangements are necessary and are also the key to achieving successful outcomes and sustainable solutions when tackling anti-social behaviour across the Borough of Darlington.



Managing Tenancies

Our Income Team

During the last 12 months one of the biggest challenges to our Income Team as well as residents of Darlington is the cost-of-living crisis. Despite this, we worked with our tenants and strived to maintain high performance within rents for the financial year.

Last year we collected £25,936,510.71 worth of rent between April 2022 and March 2023, a slight increase on the previous year.

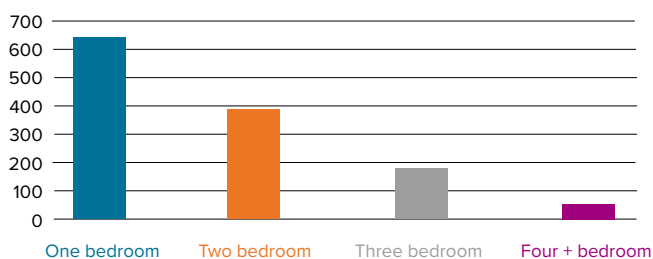
The cost-of-living crisis was potentially evident in the amount of customers who had a zero balance at the end of the financial year. This number reduced from 2883 in March 2022 to 2306 at the end of March 2023 but still equates to nearly 50% of housing tenants.

We still have a large waiting list for Council housing properties, although, again this is slightly down on last year. We had 1271 people on the waiting list for properties at the end of March 2023.

This may be down to numerous factors including tenants being successful in housing applications for our properties or elsewhere in the region.

All of the rent that is acquired goes towards repairs and improvement to our tenants homes.

Waiting List



Tenancy Sustainment

Our tenancy sustainment team offer free and confidential advice to our tenants on budgeting, money management, gas and electric and more. In 2022/23 our team assisted customer to receive water tariff reductions, receiving £236,353.

Housing Plus

In 2022/23 Our Housing Plus Service continued to be a vital tool for Council tenants who are worried about managing their tenancy or need an extra bit of assistance.

Throughout the year Housing Plus worked with an average of 133 cases between our 3 officers, which was an increase of 17 new cases showcasing the continuing need for the service.

“At times being a Housing Plus Officer is very rewarding, we work with many different types of people from all walks of life, each case is individualised and personalised to manage expectation. I enjoy seeing the pride from the tenants when they see the improvements they have made and are praised for their actions, having somebody that believes in their abilities more than they do. As a team we want our tenants to successfully manage their tenancy’s and if they need a bit of help doing so, that’s what we are here for” – **Christina Hall, Housing Plus Officer**



1271

Households on the waiting list



Nearly
£26
MILLION

Overall rent collected



2306

Prope customers with zero credit balance 2021/22



Customer Service

Our Customer Services team respond to a number of queries on a daily basis from more traditional contact methods such as telephone and email and through to our online portal Darlington Home Online

Despite our increased online presence, calls come thick and fast into our Housing Contact team.

In the last 12 months our dedicated team of Advisors have taken nearly 65,000 calls, dealing with issues ranging from repairs, Anti-social behaviour and general enquiries.

This resulted in an average of 5,410 monthly calls with over 6,200 in our busiest month of September.

With the variety of the calls and with no 2 calls being the same, life in the Housing Contact team can be very rewarding.

“I joined the Housing Contact team just before Christmas last year, prior to this I worked at NHS 111. You could say I still deal with emergencies but they are of a very different type, I enjoy roles where I am helping people. My colleagues are really friendly and supportive and I am happy to have joined Darlington Borough Council.”

Georgina Rudd, Housing Contact Advisor.

As well as calling into our Customer Service team tenants can also email the team via housing@darlington.gov.uk or contact us via their Darlington Home Online Account housing.darlington.gov.uk/MyAccount/www/login



Apprentices

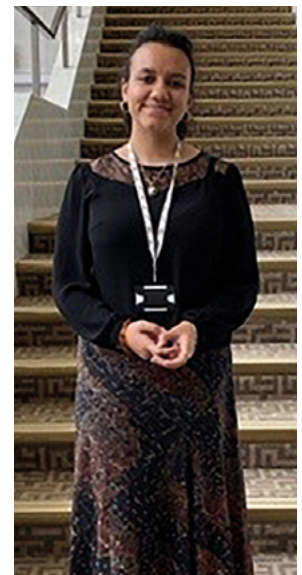
We continue to see our apprentices successfully gaining permanent employment after their apprenticeships with us

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

Georgia successfully gained employment in our Revenues and Benefit Team after going through our Apprentice Scheme.

One of our current cohort of apprentices Jamiellia works in our Housing Tenancy Management team helping Advisors with tasks such as garage applications, meeting minutes, essential printing and scanning as well other important admin tasks.

“I have been at my apprenticeship for three months and it has been very enjoyable for me. I am completing a Business Admin Apprenticeship and have learnt many varied skills during my time here, all of which are transferrable to future job roles. This has prepared me for future roles and makes me very hopeful for my future as I know I will not be entering a field with no prior knowledge. On top of that, the Council is a very warm and welcoming place to work, with everyone around you inviting you to be a part of their team. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time here and look forward to its continuance as I go through my term here.” **Jamellia Greenhough Lee**



Building Your Housing Team

Over the course of the last 12 months we have continued to invest in both staff and the wellbeing of residents of Darlington. In that time numerous roles have been created within the Housing Team with new colleagues adding to our success and strengthening our commitment to Darlington Residents. Abbie, Rana, Steven and Charlotte have been successful in their short time with us.

“I started in my role in 2023 and since then the team have been really welcoming, making the transition as smooth as possible. They have allowed me to make links with all aspects of the department who have supported me to understand different roles and how I can utilise the wider team. It has been a pleasure to join a team who are so passionate and knowledgeable which has then been cascaded to myself as a new starter. I have enjoyed having access to relevant training programmes that allow further professional development.”

Abbie Robinson, Refugee Resettlement Officer

“Starting a new role has been a refreshing change of pace with a wide range of new tasks, training opportunities, and learning new skills. One of the biggest changes has been working in a new team with staff members I’d previously had limited or no interactions with prior. The team have been helpful in assisting me with any enquiries and learning the day to day responsibilities of my new role.”

Steven Trenholme, Housing Data Quality Officer

“As a new starter, I was a bit nervous when I joined the team at the Council. With the passage of time and due to the welcoming attitude of my colleagues I feel extremely relaxed in my new role. I enjoy working within the team and helping the clients to resettle effectively into the society. In this short span of time I have learnt a lot about the social housing sector and specifically about the homelessness prevention laws, duties and procedure.”

Rana Bari, Refugee Resettlement Officer

Since joining Darlington Borough Council this year I have been welcomed into the team and feel like I have worked here for years. My job can be varied from meeting with tenants and listening to their concerns to performing street inspections with members of the Housing Team, Police and Councillors. No day is the same. Although there is the option for hybrid working I enjoy coming into the office and catching up with colleagues. I would like to thank everyone in the Council who I have met so far for welcoming me into the office and helping me along the way to getting settled into my role.

**Charlotte Robinson,
Housing Complaints Response Officer**



Stock

At the end of the financial year we had a total number of 5,274 properties in our stock.

These include 2,073 1-Bedroom Properties, 1,672 2-Bedroom Properties, 1,487 3-Bedroom Properties and 42 properties with 4 or more bedrooms.

This shows our continuing availability to provide for a range of Darlington tenants from single occupiers to larger families.

In 2022/23 we continued to build new homes to suit the needs of Darlington residents with the demand for high quality housing still being a major goal. As the influx of high profile jobs in the region continues it is now even more important that our stock continues to grow.

Work started in earnest at our Neasham Road site where 150 quality homes will be built for Council tenants alongside a Rent-To-Buy option offering a first step to affordable home ownership for residents.

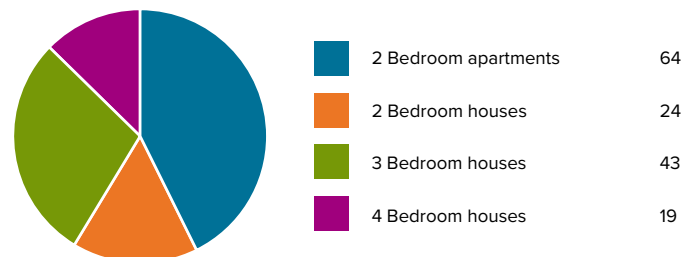
With the site located in the south east area of Darlington it is ideally located for the A66 and A1M motorway as well as being in walking distance to the town train station.

The 150 properties at the Neasham Road Site, will consist of 64 two-bedroom apartments, 24 two bedroom houses, 43 three bedroom houses and 19 four bedroom houses making it our biggest site to date.

Property Types



Neasham Road Property Types



We have completed the final phase of our development at Earl Carlson Grove and Lancaster Close last year. The site has 86 properties which were completed in different phases and includes three and four bed family homes.

“Having a local council new build was lovely. We have a spacious flat that is cost effective to live in. Being new, all the tenants have formed a lovely community.” **Karen Wright, Lancaster Close Resident**



Lifeline Services

Our Lifeline Services continue to be an integral and vital tool for Darlington tenants to live independently. The team manage our community care alarm and Telecare services, plus all of our older person properties and schemes.

During 2022/23 we have seen a small increase in clients throughout the year with the average number increasing from 3,374 to 3,435 showcasing the continuing need for the service.

During the last 12 months over 90,000 calls were made to the teams.

Following those calls nearly 8,500 incidents were attended in the same time period with 90% of those incidents being treated within 30 mins ensuring that help to those who desperately need it is never far away.

The Lifeline team also helps Darlington Borough Council provide safe and vibrant accommodation for over 50's living in sheltered, extra care and good neighbour schemes with tenants right across Darlington thriving due to the ongoing help they receive.



2022/23 has been a particularly busy time for Lifeline with the team changing over our analogue equipment in readiness for the digital switch over in 2025. They have currently replaced around 800 dispersed alarms and have another 500 to complete. We are also looking at our housing schemes to ensure they are digitally ready.

This includes ensuring that Internet connection is fit for purpose and helping tenants with digital services such as online banking, paying their bills and interacting with friends and family.



The Coming Year

Over the last year we have made significant steps in services that will positively effect our tenants for the foreseeable future.

One of the major changes will be the move towards our Darlington Home Search system following feedback from our applicants.

The Darlington Borough Council Housing Allocation policy has been approved by cabinet and our Council housing will now be allocated according to the new policy.

With the changes coming into place in June 2023 tenants will be guided throughout the transition period with information provided on how to register, how to upload documents and essentially how to bid for properties.

We have also been extremely busy preparing for the Tenant Satisfaction Measures which come into play in April 2023 and will be carried out by Darlington Borough Council in September 2023.

The aim of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM's) is to hold all social housing providers to account for their actions. We need to know what we are doing right, what we are getting wrong and where we can improve.

This is all important as we give the public greater visibility of our performance.

We have enlisted the help of BMG research who are a leading independent provider of market research services to the UK public and social sectors. They will work in partnership with our team to deliver the TSM's. In the run up to those measures we have asked our tenants for their most up to date contact information.





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