

16 June 2020		ITEM: 10
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Housing Service COVID-19 Response		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Ryan Farmer – Housing Strategy and Quality Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Carol Hinvest – Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris – Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report sets out the action taken by the Housing service due to the challenges which have been faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its response to the difficulties caused by this virus, and in line with Government guidance and legislation, the Housing service has taken action to suspend, alter and reduce specific aspects of delivery to ensure that key services can be provided and for staff and service users to be best protected from the risks posed by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience and business continuity planning of the Housing service, and this report records the action which was taken to maintain critical services in the most challenging of times.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the contents of this report which sets out the response of the Housing service in relation to the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1. The Housing service of Thurrock Council, much like the wider organisation, has implemented a number of measures to address the challenges which are being faced as a result of COVID-19, particularly in response to the announcement of the Government's 'Stay at Home' guidance on 23 March 2020.

Since this time, the Housing service has taken action to protect the health and wellbeing of both its staff and its service users from the risks posed by COVID-19 whilst ensuring that critical services could continue to be delivered for those who are most at need. Close attention has been paid to statutory responsibilities, new legislation and Government guidance which has, on occasion, changed at pace.

In developing the COVID-19 response, all services considered their activities against a broad framework in order to determine whether they:

- needed to be suspended, either for the safety of staff and service users or in line with Government guidance
- could continue to be delivered, but with significant alterations
- could continue to be delivered, but at a greatly reduced rate.

2.1.1 It is important to note that the Housing service has not acted in isolation in developing its response to COVID-19. There has been maintained representation from Housing with the Council's Tactical Coordination Group, Thurrock Stronger Together partnership, Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA), and a range of other cross-service, cross-directorate and cross-organisation groups and forums.

2.2. High-level summary of changes to service delivery

2.2.1 Suspended services

A number of services and processes have been suspended across Housing, not only as a result of service-led reviews, but also due to measures which have been implemented nationally by the Government.

The choice based lettings process was suspended, as was all scheduled resident engagement activity, such as resident meetings, events in communal halls at sheltered housing complexes, and the planning for this year's Tenant Conference. All face-to-face interviews which would otherwise have been held at locations such as the Civic Offices, community hubs, children's centres or in residents' homes were cancelled. The delivery of aspects of the Transforming Homes programme was suspended, along with a range of other property inspections and visits, for example Warm Homes.

There have been no arrears court cases or eviction action undertaken, which is a position reflected nationally due to a moratorium on eviction proceedings.

2.2.2 Altered services

As almost all members of Housing staff are working at home, interactions which would ordinarily have taken place face to face are instead being undertaken by telephone. These include, but are not limited to, support calls where rent arrears have increased, financial inclusion interviews, and expanded daily and weekly calls to sheltered housing tenants.

Applicants approaching the homelessness service have been able to complete their assessments online and by telephone, with additional welfare calls being made to all households in temporary accommodation.

In line with Government guidance, the service has greatly expanded its support for those rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping by providing accommodation and food to provide opportunities for self-isolation and prevent the risk of infection in this particularly vulnerable group.

Due to the risks identified in gas safety and water testing, statutory compliancy checks for properties in these areas have continued, however a number have required reprogramming for a future date in cases where access to properties has been impacted by shielding and self-isolating residents.

Many physical inspections of private sector housing have been unable to continue, however changes to ways of working have been made as a result, such as allowing residents to provide video evidence of the condition of their property.

2.2.3 Reduced services

It has been possible, and in some cases vital, for some services to continue, albeit a reduced level. This includes tenancy sign-ups for risk-assessed homeless households and applicants whose safety is at risk where they live.

Estate caretakers have been vital in ensuring that our communal areas remain safe and clean for those who live in and travel through our estates, however priorities have been adjusted to focus more heavily on sanitising.

It has been possible to continue to deliver emergency repairs to properties, with arrangements made to record requests which have been received for routine repairs so that these can be addressed at an appropriate point in the future. Essential health and safety visits in private rented sector properties have also been undertaken.

3. Service area responses

3.1. Allocations

In response to the Government's 'Stay at Home' guidance, steps were taken to suspend all choice based lettings from 23 March 2020. Whilst properties have not been made available for applicants to place bids on through this process, provision was made to ensure that direct offers would continue to be made to risk-assessed homeless households and applicants whose safety was at risk where they live, such as those experiencing domestic abuse.

Work has also been continuing to identify and make offers to a number of applicants for the new properties which will soon be available at the Tops Club development.

3.2. Anti-Social Behaviour and Housing Safeguarding Team

The Anti-Social Behaviour Team has continued to provide a service to tenants remotely. The number of cases reported to the team decreased slightly between February (34) and March (25). In April, 27 cases were reported, and the majority of these were neighbour disputes and noise complaints, with a decrease in complaints regarding more serious criminal activity on estates.

Reports have been received regarding groups of people gathering on estates, both inside and outside their homes, during this period. A process has been established with the Police which allows this intelligence to be reported, which will in turn allow the Police to monitor the reported areas.

The Housing Safeguarding Team experienced higher levels of domestic abuse reports in February (99) and March (89), however there was a significant reduction in April as referrals to the team fell to 50. Of these referrals, approximately half were repeated presentations.

Referrals appear to be increasingly complex in nature, in particular those from partner agencies, and there has been an increase in Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) enquiries.

There have been no overall increases in the number of sanctuary referrals from the police or requests from residents for additional security and, where social distancing has been achievable, sanctuary measures have continued to be installed.

The Housing Safeguarding Team continue to provide a service to all residents of Thurrock by way of welfare calls, text messages and other virtual, secure and safe means.

3.3. CCTV

The CCTV cameras which have been installed across the borough are essential for the prevention and detection of crime, and for maintaining community safety. It has been observed that the range of recent Government guidance has contributed to changed behaviour, and the majority of people are abiding by the rules which have been set out.

When compared with March 2018 to April 2019, local neighbourhood crime captured on camera has fallen by 48%, however, the total number of council incidents, such as fly tipping crimes, increased by 133%.

3.4. Homelessness

Following the Government guidance on 26 March 2020 to 'bring everyone in', good progress has been made to identify and provide accommodation to all known rough sleepers. As at 28 May, accommodation is being provided to 32 individuals who were rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping. Three individuals have also been successfully supported into private sector accommodation to date.

Accommodation for 12 individuals has been arranged with a local hotel, with the distribution of food being undertaken in collaboration with a commissioned support service and some local voluntary organisations. A hot meal is provided daily alongside weekly food packs which contain a variety of food items sufficient for breakfast and lunch.

The remaining 23 individuals have been placed in general temporary accommodation, with arrangements in place for food to be distributed to them. A coordinated response from support services has also been established, including Mental Health, Inclusions and Adult Social Care.

The team are working to ensure that no-one accommodated returns to the street. A comprehensive recovery plan is being developed to meet this aim, to provide settled accommodation that will provide long-term housing for these individuals and to support them to make positive transitions into independent living.

Work towards an integrated housing approach with health and care to secure access to services, comprehensive package of support and continuity of care is also underway, as is work with our support provider to conduct robust care, housing and support assessments in a phased approach.

Each individual will receive an assessment as part of this multi-agency group to ensure that there is a clear picture of their needs and so that a tailored offer of support can be provided. These measures are being implemented to mitigate against the risk of a 'cliff edge' as restrictions are lifted through amended Government guidance.

Regular welfare calls have been made to all rough sleepers, with mental health support provided by the mental health social worker. Any individual with an identified history of substance misuse has been referred to the appropriate service for monitoring and to ensuring that medication is collected.

In general there has been a reduction in the number of households approaching the Council for assistance due to homelessness or the risk of homelessness, but where approaches have been made, assessments and interviews have been undertaken whilst following social distancing guidance.

3.5. Private Sector Housing

Following specific guidance published by the Government for landlords and tenants in both the private and social rented sector, the service and roles within the team were redesigned to address poor housing conditions and enforce against illegal practices by landlords in a different way whilst improving resident outcomes.

These changes included updates to the Private Housing Enforcement Policy to reflect the government guidelines published, a new e-form which allowed photographic evidence to be submitted, telephone support for landlords wishing to apply for an HMO license, and the introduction of a video-conferencing call-back service to review property defects or issues. Where visits have been identified as necessary, but are not urgent, they have been registered and will be undertaken at a time where it is safe to do so.

In certain scenarios, where the safety of residents would be put at significant risk or harm, physical inspections of properties have been unavoidable. In these instances, social distancing in line with published guidance has been adhered to.

3.6. Rent and Welfare

The Rent and Welfare team have faced significant challenges, not least due to the increased number of tenants which have started new Universal Credit claims.

In the week of 16 March 2020 there were 2,252 of the Council's tenants in receipt of Universal Credit, however by 17 May 2020 this number had increased by 12.75% to 2,538. In comparison, in the weeks between 3 February 2020 and 23 March 2020 new Universal Credit claims increased by 4.55%

Continued financial inclusion support has been provided for tenants during this time, with 72 tenants receiving direct support from a financial inclusion officer. Those receiving support have had assistance with completing discretionary housing payment claims, council tax benefit claims, benefit claims (including Universal Credit), and referrals for reductions in water charges.

The total amount of additional income which has been secured by financial inclusion officers from 23 March 2020 until 15 May 2020 is in excess of £27,000, with many tenants whose cases are still in progress and awaiting further information or a final outcome.

3.7. Repairs and Planned Maintenance

Following a review of the range of guidance published by the Government it was determined that emergency repairs would continue to be undertaken, however all other reported repairs would be logged and monitored. These

repairs will then be progressed in line with the Council's Repairs Policy once it is safe to do so.

Since 23 March 2020, over 1100 emergency repairs have been carried out. The most requested trades have been electrical, plumbing, and drainage, which represents the first recorded time that carpentry and joinery has not featured in the top three.

There has been a 31.5% reduction in repair demand overall when comparing figures from April 2020 with April 2019. The vast majority of individual trades have seen reductions in demand in excess of 20%, however drainage repairs has experienced close to normal demand for with a reduction of 4.8%.

Although repair demand has decreased overall and there are a relatively small number of backlogged repairs, it is likely that tenants are not reporting repairs at present, meaning that the repairs which make up this decreased demand will be reported at some point. It is estimated that up to 1100 repairs are required which have not yet been reported due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Attempts to undertake planned gas servicing, water testing and other essential communal repairs have been undertaken in line with the Council's statutory obligations as required by law to ensure the continued safety of residents.

In instances where it has not been possible to gain access to carry out an annual gas safety test due to a resident which is self-isolating or shielding, contractors have been delivering carbon monoxide detectors along with simple instructions for use until access can be gained and the service can be completed.

Overall compliance rates have been affected by the number of residents self-isolating or shielding, which is reflective of the national position for compliance, however plans have been established to visit these properties as soon as restrictions are lifted so that obligations can be met.

3.8. Sheltered Housing

Due to the nature of sheltered housing, a significant proportion of tenants had been identified as either clinically extremely vulnerable (required to follow shielding guidance) or clinically vulnerable (advised to follow social distancing guidance closely).

Immediately following 23 March 2020, sheltered housing officers were asked to contact all tenants to obtain updated information to ensure that records were correct. As part of this activity tenants were asked if they required a daily health and wellbeing call, if this was not already established for them.

Officers were asked to attempt to make these calls with all tenants at least twice a week, with additional time for each call to ensure that tenants feel safe and to alleviate any feelings of isolation. From 23 March to 18 May 2020, in excess of 16100 contacts have been made with tenants by the sheltered housing officers.

In addition to the above, the sheltered housing officers were asked to identify any other areas where support or assistance may be required, such as the collection of shopping or medical prescriptions. The service achieved a sustainable weekly shopping and prescription collection provision, meaning that tenants would not have to rely on other areas of the organisation to meet these needs.

The communal halls at the sheltered housing complexes were closed down swiftly, with a letter sent to each tenant to advise them accordingly. Laundry rooms remained open with additional guidance and timetables provided to assist tenants with keeping the area safe during this period. All fire, health and safety legal requirements on site have been maintained weekly across all the sites.

Due to the action taken within sheltered housing which aimed to reduce the likelihood of the virus spreading within complexes, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in sheltered housing have been very low. Sadly, to date three residents have died – two of which died in hospital.

3.9. Tenancy Management

Tenancy Management officers have been taking proactive steps to make contact with their vulnerable tenants by phone and letter, and have made in excess of 5100 such contacts to date. Vulnerable residents on the Council's Travellers sites are also being contacted daily by telephone.

The team have been working alongside other teams in Housing to complete emergency lettings for risk-assess households. These sign-ups have been completed in line with Government guidance and have introduced new ways of working to which has significantly reduced the time spent face-to-face with service users.

Neighbourhood officers have started external inspections of estates to ensure that issues are identified and addressed swiftly, such as reporting fly tipping, repairs requirements and anti-social behaviour.

3.10. Transforming Homes

On 31 March 2020 United Living closed down its site operations across the business as a consequence of government advice relating to COVID-19, however since this time there have been weekly site inspections and an emergency out-of-hours service operating.

Wates have maintained an active presence on site, which has been adjusted to adhere to Government guidance. Activity has been reduced to works within void properties and to external works which can be carried out in accordance to social distancing guidelines.

The Resident Liaison Officers (RLOs) in the Transforming Homes team responded to the above development by undertaking a review of the residents they had been in contact with and identified 64 with additional vulnerabilities.

Assistance to connect with TCCA was given where required, and RLOs were also able to help directly with practical support, such as arranging shopping collection from local supermarkets. In some cases, arrangements made for regular calls to particular individuals as they had little or no contact with people for long periods during isolation.

3.11. New Build Housing Development

Of the Council's three Housing Revenue Account development sites, only the Calcutta Road site was able to continue with site activity following the issuing of the 'Stay at Home' guidance. This was because the project was at groundworks and foundations stage and contractors were able to comply with industry guidelines and social distancing. The number of operatives on site at any one time has been reduced, however the project is still currently expected to complete on schedule in Summer 2021.

The Tops Club and Claudian Way sites were both initially closed, however both contractors have now reopened the sites and are progressively resuming activities following changes to in the way that sites are required to operate to ensure compliance with Government and industry guidance. The Tops Club site is expected to complete around late June 2020 and Claudian Way will handover its completed units in phases from late June 2020, with the last units expected to complete around September 2020.

Both sites have incurred ongoing delays as a result of site closures with the main causes being:

- reduced operation of utility companies where only emergency works were undertaken
- the closure of the biggest UK manufacturer of plaster and plasterboard during lockdown, resulting in a nationwide shortage of these materials
- increased delivery time for other materials from suppliers
- reduced labour levels due to most sub-contractors making a gradual return from periods of furlough.

The Council expects the Contractor to mitigate any potential cost due to delays occasioned by its act or action as they continue to bear the cost of having its staff on site longer than expected and whilst the possibility of a claim by the Council for delays against the original project timetable due directly to the consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak may be remote, there

may be contractual provisions for delays in the contract outside the scope of COVID-19 that the Council may explore or rely on.

Discussions are currently ongoing with both contractors as to how to facilitate safe viewings for prospective tenants which comply with social distancing and government guidance.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1. The COVID-19 pandemic has tested almost every aspect of resilience and business continuity planning. This report serves as a record of the action which was taken to order to achieve the aim of maintaining a Housing service which continued to provide its critical services in the most challenging of times.
- 4.2. This document can be referred to in any upcoming exercises to identify and review the 'lessons learned', and also to assist with establishing future business continuity plans.

5. Consultation

None

6. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Not applicable

7. Implications

7.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead, Corporate Finance

COVID-19 has had financial impact upon service delivery across the Housing service. Where relevant, namely in relation to financial demands relating to homelessness and rough sleeping, additional costs are being recorded against the central government funding allocations. In relation to rent losses and potential increases in bad debts, this will continue to be monitored as part of the housing revenue accounts forecast budget outturn position, and reported corporately. An continued increase in the number of existing tenants claiming Universal Credit poses significant financial risk to the stability of the Housing Revenue Account.

7.2. Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**

Deputy Head of Law and Deputy Monitoring Officer

This report summarises the actions taken to date by Housing in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There do not appear to be any direct legal implications arising from this report.

7.3. Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

The action outlined in the report demonstrates the steps which the Housing services took to ensure that support continued to be provided in a safe way to those who were most vulnerable and in need of assistance.

7.4. Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Not applicable

8. Appendices to the report

None

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