

<b>25 November 2020</b>	<b>ITEM: 11</b>
<b>Council</b>	
<b>Report of the Cabinet Member for Housing</b>	
<b>Report of:</b> Councillor Barry Johnson, Cabinet Member for Housing	
<b>This report is</b> Public	

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. This report presents an overview of the range of Housing services and provides details of the performance of the department in 2019/20.
- 1.2. The document also outlines the action taken by the Housing service in response to the challenges which have been faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.3. This document also identifies a range of key external factors which have affected and shaped service delivery throughout the 2019/20 financial year and sets out the financial position for the Housing Revenue Account and General Fund budgets within Housing.

## **2. Service Overview**

- 2.1. The Housing service provides a range of statutory and landlord functions, utilising rental income through the Housing Revenue Account as well as smaller General Fund budgets. The Housing service interacts with around 10,000 households in the borough directly through the provision of tenancy and leasehold management services, and additional households through the housing advice and options, homelessness and private sector housing functions.
- 2.2. The key functions which the Housing service are responsible for delivering include:
  - Tenancy management activities, including tenancy audits, sign-ups and exit inspections, and other day-to-day interactions with the Council's tenants for both general needs and sheltered housing properties.
  - Caretaking and estate services for many of the blocks and communal spaces across the borough.
  - Rent collection, financial inclusion and welfare advice.
  - Ongoing repairs and maintenance of Housing stock and assets.
  - Monitoring and maintaining over 300 CCTV cameras across the borough.
  - Tackling domestic abuse, hate crime and other safeguarding issues.
  - The investigation, management and implementation of enforcement action for anti-social behaviour issues.
  - Capital investment programmes delivering improvements to Housing stock and assets, such as the Transforming Homes programme.

- Homeownership services, including the administration of Right to Buy applications and leasehold management.
- Tenant and leaseholder engagement through forums, community activities and other events.
- The administration of the Council's Housing Register and the allocation of properties in line with the Allocations Policy.
- The prevention and relief of homelessness in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, as well as the provision of temporary accommodation for households, for example those which are homeless or have been displaced through emergency or disrepair
- Management of three council run Travellers' sites, including rent collection.
- Mediation, enforcement and licensing activity for private sector landlords and tenants.

2.3. The majority of Housing services use the Northgate Housing Management System as the central system for administering, managing and monitoring the range of functions.

### **3. Performance in 2019/20**

3.1. The performance dashboard for Housing is designed to ensure that key objectives are identified for reporting across three distinct sections:

- Corporate Performance Indicators (CPI) – Captures the contribution of the Housing service to the corporate suite of performance indicators, including measures such as budget variance, complaints received and upheld, and sickness absence. The targets for these indicators mirror the corporate targets.
- Key Performance Indicators (KPI) – A suite of service critical performance indicators designed to measure key outputs of the Housing service, including measures such as gas check compliance and tenant satisfaction with primary functions of the service.
- Local Performance Indicators (LPI) – An extensive suite of service level indicators which measure the outputs of individual teams within the Housing service, as well as tenant satisfaction with specific services such as repairs, caretaking and grounds maintenance.

3.2. The Housing performance scorecard is updated on a monthly basis and performance is reviewed at management team and directorate performance management meetings. The suite of key performance indicators and corporate performance indicators are reported at Performance Board, forming part of the quarterly performance report which is taken to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3.3. Tenant satisfaction surveys are completed by an independent research contractor which specialises in satisfaction surveys for the Housing sector. Satisfaction levels in the 2019/20 financial year were measured using a 5 point scale (excellent, good, fair, poor and very poor), with only excellent and good ratings included in the satisfaction rate.

### 3.4. Performance Indicators

KPI	Performance Indicators	Target	2018/19	2019/20
KPI01	% General Satisfaction of Tenants With Neighbourhoods / Services Provided by Housing	75%	68%	74.9%
KPI02	% Satisfaction of Tenants With Transforming Homes (Contractor & Programme)	85%	87.5%	86.9%
KPI03	% of Repairs Completed Within Target	95%	97.7%	98.3%
KPI04	% Rent Collected	98%	98.8%	98.5%
KPI05	Average Time to Turnaround / Re-let Voids (in days)	28	26.64	25.6
KPI06	% of Gas Service Checks Carried out Within Statutory Timescale	100%	100%	100%
KPI07	Number of Applicants with Family Commitments in Bed & Breakfast for Six Weeks or More	0	1	3
KPI08	Number of Category 1 & 2 Hazards Removed as a Direct Result of Private Sector Housing Team Intervention	900	896	1000

- 3.4.1. The Housing Revenue Account continued to balance through the 2019/20 financial year. The final outturn position of the Housing General Fund at the end of 2019/20 was above budget by £18,154.

There was a reduction of 4.2% in the number of Housing related complaints received during 2019/20 in comparison with the 2018/19 financial year which equates to 2 fewer complaints per month, on average. Additionally there was a 1% reduction in the percentage of complaints upheld in 2019/20 compared with 2018/19.

- 3.4.2. The 2019/20 financial year saw significant improvement in overall tenant satisfaction with Housing services. Through the tenant satisfaction surveys which were carried out in 2018/19, out of a sample of 2,011 tenants 28% rated the Housing service as excellent or good, however in 2019/20, 74.9% of a sample of 2,002 tenants rated the Housing service as excellent or good. This represents a year on year improvement of 6.9% in tenant satisfaction.

The 2019/20 financial year was also the strongest performing year for overall tenant satisfaction with Housing since the Housing department began measuring tenant satisfaction in 2013/14. Satisfaction with a number of individual Housing services and service elements increased against final outturns for 2018/19.

Relating to specific service provision, satisfaction increased with Grounds Maintenance, tackling ASB, and Estate Caretaking by 8.9%, 3.1% and 1.9% respectively. Tenant satisfaction with their Tenancy Management Officer increased by 5.5%, new tenant satisfaction increased by 6.4%, and satisfaction with the quality of home increased by 1.5%.

Analysis of tenant feedback indicates that one of the key drivers for dissatisfaction is a perceived lack of communication and engagement between the Housing service and its tenants. Towards the end of the 2018/19 financial year the Housing service introduced a regular tenants and leaseholder e-newsletter, a formal communication plan, an annual tenants' conference, enhancements to the Tenants Excellence Panels involvement in service delivery and mailshots to tenants. Since these measures have been implemented, satisfaction has increased. Analysis of this improvement indicates that the improved communication and engagement is closely correlated with overall satisfaction.

- 3.4.3. Satisfaction with Transforming Homes remained high at 86.9%, above its target of 85% for 2018/19. From an overall sample of 453 tenants who provided feedback on the work in their homes, 90.1% were satisfied with the quality of the work which was carried out and 94.6% found the operatives completing the works to be polite and courteous.
- 3.4.4. The percentage of repairs completed on target has continued to show strong, consistent performance with year-on-year improvements. Against a contractual target of 95%, the outturn for 2019/20 was 98.3%, up 0.6% against 2018/19 and 0.8% against 2017/18. A particular performance highlight for this indicator was that 99.2% of repairs were completed on target in quarter four of 2019/20.

Satisfaction with the Repairs service also remained high at 90.5%, continuing the consistent strong performance of recent years.

- 3.4.5. Despite growing challenges faced by the Rents and Welfare team, namely through a 47% increase in the number of tenants claiming Universal Credit and a £3.5m reduction in the amount of rent paid by Housing Benefit against the 2018/19 financial year, rent collection remained strong and the final outturn position was above target. The Financial Inclusion Officers within the team continue to work alongside tenants to maximise their income, and their contribution to the positive outcomes which have been achieved with tenants was recognised by being named 'Team of the Year' for 2019/20.
- 3.4.6. The average time to re-let empty properties continued its trend of year-on-year improvement since the 2015/16 financial year when re-lets took an average of 36 days. During 2019/20, it took an average of 25.6 calendar days to re-let an empty property, an improvement of 1 day in comparison with 2018/19 and 10.4 days compared to the final outturn of 2015/16.
- 3.4.7. The Housing service continued to remain 100% compliant with gas service checks carried out within the statutory timescale throughout the 2019/20 financial year.
- 3.4.8. The performance of the Housing Solutions team relating to the number of homeless applicants with family commitments who were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation for six weeks or more was comparable to the final outturn of one in 2018/19. Although this indicator did not meet its target, in circumstances where securing alternative accommodation was becoming

increasingly challenging, only three households surpassed the six week timescale, compared to 41 households in 2017/18.

- 3.4.9. The Private Sector Housing Team removed 1000 category 1 and 2 Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) hazards from private sector properties in 2019/20. This represents an increase of 104 (12%) on the 2018/19 outturn and exceeds the target by 100 hazards in total.

#### **4. Housing Development – New Build**

##### **4.1. HRA New Build Programme**

- 4.1.1. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) new build programme will deliver in total 117 new Council homes for rent. The properties will be a mix of houses, low rise flats, maisonettes and bungalows. The budget for the programme is £32.53m as agreed within the HRA Capital Programme. HRA rents are being set at 70% of local market rents under the affordable rent regime, and all subject to a local housing allowance cap.

- 4.1.2. To reduce annual costs on the HRA for the new schemes it is proposed to utilise Right to Buy Receipts which would otherwise potentially need to be paid to the government along with interest at 4% above the base rate. Sufficient unallocated receipts of £9.8m have been identified to partially fund this programme.

- 4.1.3. Cabinet agreed on 13 March 2019 that a housing development pipeline be prepared to seek to deliver up to 500 new Council homes for Thurrock over the next 5 to 10 years to be funded within the Housing Revenue Account. A process to identify potential sites for Housing Development was agreed by Cabinet in January 2020 and in line with that process update reports are presented regularly to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- 4.1.4. Individual Housing Revenue Account schemes that are funded and on-site are listed below and a brief commentary provided on Thurrock Regeneration Ltd.

##### **4.1.5. Alma Court, Argent Street, Grays**

Alma Court, formerly known as the Tops Club scheme, was handed over in July 2020 and provides 29 units of 1, 2, 3 bed flats and maisonettes all for rent within the HRA, together with an enhanced playground for residents. All properties were let successfully

##### **4.1.6. Heathlyn Close/Claudian Way, Chadwell**

This is a 53-unit scheme consisting of a mix of bungalows, houses and low rise flats, all for rent within the HRA. A number of properties were handed over into Housing stock in September 2020 and have now been let. The remaining houses and bungalows to be handed over by the end of November 2020 and at the time of writing the flats are scheduled to be handed over in December 2020.

#### 4.1.7. **Calcutta Road, Tilbury**

This development of 35 flats is for people approaching retirement and beyond. The scheme accords with the 'HAPPI' principles ('Housing our Ageing Population – Panel for Innovation') which will ensure good design appropriate to the age group. Work on-site is underway and completion is currently planned for Summer 2021.

### 5. **COVID-19 Impact and Response**

- 5.1. Much like the wider organisation, the Housing Service implemented a number of measures to address the challenges brought by COVID-19, particularly in response to the announcement of the Government's 'Stay at Home' guidance on 23 March 2020.

The Housing service acted to protect the health and wellbeing of its staff and those who use its services from the risks posed by COVID-19. Close attention was paid to statutory responsibilities, new and existing legislation, and changing Government guidance.

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.

- 5.2. A number of services and processes were 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. Many of these services have now restarted, in part or in full, where it has been safe to do so.

The choice based lettings process was initially suspended, however it restarted on 11 June 2020 alongside an upgraded Housing Online customer portal.

The delivery of aspects of the Transforming Homes programme was suspended but has also recommenced. The restarted programme features revised working practices to ensure that works are completed safely and in line with Government guidance and accelerated output to deliver works within existing timeframes.

Scheduled resident engagement activity which was due to take place physically had been cancelled in March 2020, including resident meetings, events in communal halls at sheltered housing complexes, and the planning for the 2020 Tenant Conference. Resident engagement activity has continued using virtual platforms, such as through the use of social media, whilst restrictions still remain in place for larger physical meetings.

There has been no court action taken on those in arrears or for anti-social behaviour, which was a position reflected nationally due to a moratorium on

eviction proceedings. The Rents and Welfare team have worked rigorously to contact tenants who have fallen into arrears, or were at risk of doing so, and have provided support accordingly.

- 5.3. As almost all members of Housing staff continue to work from home, teams across the department have had to alter the way in which they provide their services. Interactions which would ordinarily have taken place face to face are instead being undertaken by telephone, by video call or online.

In line with Government guidance, the service greatly expanded its support for those rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping by providing accommodation and food, giving opportunities for self-isolation and therefore reducing the risk of infection in this particularly vulnerable group. Further detail is provided later in this report regarding this.

Additional support was also provided to tenants from a tenancy management perspective. Tenancy Management Officers increased and their levels of Contact with vulnerable tenants to ensure that appropriate support was being provided, including holding in-person visits where contact with tenants could not be established.

Sheltered Housing Officers increased the frequency that health and wellbeing calls were being made to tenants in Sheltered Housing. Officers were asked to attempt to make these calls with all tenants at least twice a week and additional time has been spent on each call to ensure that tenants feel safe and to alleviate any feelings of isolation. Since 23 March 2020, in excess of 60,000 contacts have been made with tenants by the Sheltered Housing Officers.

Due to the risks identified in gas safety and water testing, statutory compliancy checks for properties in these areas continued, however a number required reprogramming for a future date where access to properties was been impacted by shielding and self-isolating residents. These appointments were rescheduled to take place after shielding was paused on 1 August 2020, and all were due to be completed by 7 August 2020.

- 5.4. It was possible, and in some cases vital, for some services to continue, albeit a reduced level. Tenancy sign-ups for risk-assessed homeless households and applicants whose safety was at risk where they were living continued. Tenancy sign-ups have now been fully restored, albeit with additional measures to ensure social distancing guidance can be followed.

Estate caretakers were vital in ensuring that communal areas remained safe and clean for those who live in and travel through estates, and priorities were adjusted to focus more heavily on sanitising. Since July 2020 full operating hours resumed and as such a normal caretaking service is being delivered again.

It was possible to continue to deliver emergency repairs to properties, with additional arrangements made to record requests which were received for routine repairs so that these could be addressed once it was safe to do so. The full repairs service resumed on 8 June 2020 with a backlog of 919

repairs which had been requested – the majority of which have now been completed or booked for completion.

## **5.5. Homelessness and ‘Everyone In’**

- 5.5.1. Following the Government guidance on 26 March 2020 to ‘bring everyone in’, the Council worked to identify and provide accommodation to all known rough sleepers. By the end of October 2020, accommodation had been provided to 56 individuals (53 ‘households’ comprised of 50 single people and 3 couples) who were rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping.

Temporary accommodation for 26 households has been provided locally, with 27 households provided with temporary accommodation in nearby areas. Support services and voluntary organisations have worked alongside the Council to provide food and supplies to those who have been accommodated in bed and breakfast.

- 5.5.2. Individuals with mental health issues accommodated by the Council have received an assessment by the Senior Mental Health Practitioner in the Housing team. A robust care, housing and support assessment was also undertaken by the Council’s support provider Sanctuary Housing to ensure that a clear picture of needs for each individual.

Tailored offers of support have been provided and the team have had a high rate of success in the levels of engagement in this process, particularly in ensuring that the Council engages with both the landlords they are placed with through the Landlord and Tenant Liaison Officer, and the applicants and potential employment providers through the Community Engagement and Employment Officer.

- 5.5.3. The team are continuing to work to ensure that no-one accommodated returns to rough sleeping. A recovery plan, submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been developed to steer the Council to meet its aim to provide long-term, settled accommodation for these individuals and to support them to make positive transitions into independent living.

To date, a total of fifteen households have moved on from the temporary accommodation which had been provided by the Council. Fourteen of these households have been assisted to find and secure accommodation in the private rental sector, of which five are located within Thurrock. Nine households have moved on from the temporary accommodation of their own accord. Five returned to prison. Regular contact continues to be made to all those who the Council continues to accommodate as part of this work.

- 5.5.4. The Council is taking a proactive approach through its Rough Sleeper Project to engage with those who are at risk of rough sleeping, understand their circumstances, build a positive relationship with them, and work alongside those individuals to guide them into suitable accommodation.

In order to successfully achieve this goal, it is crucial that the Council works alongside a range of partners to develop new initiatives and ways to best help

those in need of assistance and to engage those who can assist. There has been evidence of successful outcomes for those at risk of rough sleeping through this approach already through the improved referral pathway between the Council, Sanctuary Housing and Thurrock Mind, and with the Thurrock Homelessness Partnership Board and emerging Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan there is ample opportunity to continue to drive this forward.

- 5.5.5. The total number of households which approached the Housing Solutions service between 23 March 2020 and 31 October 2020 were 1051. During the same period in the 2019/20 financial year 1283 households approached the service. This means that approximately 18% fewer households approached the Housing Solutions service, which can in part be attributed to the moratorium on evictions.

This national ban on new evictions was lifted on 20 September 2020, and the service is already preparing for the possibility of a spike in evictions from early 2021. With the new lockdown, we await further guidance from central government on dealing with rough sleepers

- 5.5.6. New roles have been created in the service with specific regard to homelessness prevention. Where it is appropriate and safe to do so, it is essential that the service assists households to sustain their tenancies and remain in their existing properties. Work is underway to identify a continuous flow of suitable private rental sector properties in Thurrock for those who are unable to remain in their property, which will also mean that temporary accommodation can be retained for use in emergency cases where there is a need for immediate action.

## **6. Conclusion**

- 6.1. The Council continues to provide many key Housing services for tenants and residents across the borough. Performance in a number of areas remains strong and good progress has been made in others.
- 6.2. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of Housing services since March 2020. Whilst there has been a level of disruption, officers from across Housing have worked to minimise and mitigate this wherever possible whilst ensuring that services could continue to be provided to those who need them.
- 6.3. Work will continue to identify areas for refinement and improvement, in order to deliver value for money for Thurrock residents as well as a greater customer experience and overall levels of satisfaction for those using Housing services.

## **7. Appendices to the report**

None.