

16 March 2021		ITEM: 10
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Housing Service COVID-19 Response - Update		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
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 is the fifth to be presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which details the Housing service response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This update report provides additional information on the continuing action taken by the Housing service due to the challenges faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In line with government guidance and legislation, the Housing service has taken action to restore, in part and in full, specific aspects of suspended and altered service delivery to ensure that key elements can be provided while staff and people who use Housing services continue to be best protected from the risks posed by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to test the resilience and planning of the Housing service, and this report records the ongoing action which is being taken to maintain critical services in these challenging times.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the contents of this report which sets out the continued 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, 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. Since this time, the Housing service has continued to react and respond appropriately to further changes in guidance as restrictions have been eased and tightened.

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.

2.1.1 It is important to note that the Housing service did not act in isolation in developing its response to COVID-19, and this approach has also been followed as steps are now being taken to restore services that were suspended or reduced.

The Housing service continues to be represented within the council's Tactical Coordination Group and the Thurrock Stronger Together partnership and has interacted with the Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA) as well as a range of other cross-service, cross-directorate and cross-organisation groups and forums during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. **High-level summary of changes to service delivery**

2.2.1 **Suspended services**

A number of services and processes were suspended across Housing, not only as a result of service-led reviews but also due to measures that 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 following a change in government guidance in May 2020, this process restarted on 11 June alongside an upgraded Housing Online customer portal. Since this time, the advertising and letting of properties have continued.

The delivery of aspects of the Transforming Homes programme was suspended, and this has also recommenced now. The restarted programme features revised working practices to ensure that works are completed safely and in line with government guidance. Contractors have also accelerated their output in order to successfully deliver their works within the 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 this year's Tenant Conference. Since this time, resident engagement activity has continued using virtual platforms, such as through the use of social media, whilst restrictions remain in place for physical meetings.

The wider use of sheltered housing complex communal halls continues to be suspended due to ongoing social distancing guidance and the range of local and national lockdown measures which have been in place since March 2020.

There continues to be no court action taken on those in arrears, which is a position reflected nationally due to a moratorium on eviction proceedings. The ban on evictions is now in place until the end of March 2021, with notice periods having been extended from two months to three months and subsequently increased again to six months at present.

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.

2.2.2 Altered services

As almost all members of Housing staff continue to work from home in line with the current national lockdown restrictions, interactions that 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.

The ongoing closure of the Civic Offices has resulted in homeless applications being made by telephone, email, or through an online portal. Whilst this has enabled applications to be made, the reduction in face-to-face interaction has made the verification of documents challenging and has added to pressure on officers across the authority.

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 had been impacted by shielding and self-isolating residents.

2.2.3 Reduced services

It has been possible, and in some cases vitally important, for some services to continue, albeit at a reduced level. Tenancy sign-ups continued for homeless households and applicants whose safety was at risk where they

were living during the start of the first national lockdown. Tenancy sign-ups have since been restored, albeit with additional measures to ensure social distancing guidance can be followed.

Estate caretakers have been key in ensuring that our communal areas remained safe and clean for those who live in and travel through our estates, and priorities were adjusted to focus more heavily on sanitising. Although full operating hours resumed in July 2020, recent restrictions have again affected day-to-day operations.

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

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 were not made available for applicants to place bids on through this process, provision was made to ensure that direct offers could 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.

Choice-based lettings resumed on 11 June 2020, which coincided with the release of an upgraded Housing Online customer portal.

Significantly in this financial year, the 29 properties at the new Alma Court development and 53 properties at the Claudian Way/Heathlyn Close development have been allocated and/or let.

3.2. Anti-Social Behaviour and Housing Safeguarding Team

Cases of anti-social behaviour have increased in the 2020/21 financial year compared to the year before. In the twelve months between April 2019 and March 2020, 474 cases were reported, of which 22 were complaints regarding noise.

Between 1 April 2020 and 1 February 2021, a total of 887 anti-social behaviour cases were recorded – an increase of 86% compared to the entire 2019/20 financial year. The number of complaints relating to noise or neighbour disputes also increased in this period, with a total of 107 complaints received in this period. These continue to increase as a result of people being at home.

It was observed that reported cases rose during periods when COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, and these cases commonly related to breaches of COVID-19 regulations and groups of young people gathering in groups.

There have been significant arrests on the Garrison Estate of young people in possession of drugs and causing vandalism and damage to a value in excess of £22,000. An increase in the numbers of reports of young people using off-road motorbikes in various locations around the borough has also been noted.

The Housing Safeguarding Team have also experienced an increase in cases between January 2020 and January 2021. During this time, the teams engaged in a total of 685 cases.

The team have managed to adapt their processes in order to do this work remotely and refer local support services which are still operating, as well as facilitating the 'move-on' process from Thurrock Women's Refuge to free up much-needed spaces.

During this challenging period, the team continue to work to introduce the new Domestic Abuse Bill, which will create a statutory duty for housing services to provide a domestic abuse support service and help people into safe accommodation.

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.

Overall, crime levels have decreased in the borough in line with the national picture across the UK. However, reports of anti-social behaviour have increased in relation to breaches of coronavirus measures to Essex Police and the council.

A total of 844 camera incidents have been logged between April to December 2020, and 336 video packages have been produced for housing enforcement and police investigation. Video packages are produced to help enforcement agents investigate criminal offences or tenancy breaches against a tenant.

Throughout the pandemic, crime and anti-social behaviour occurrences due to more people being at home have been captured on camera, primarily through fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour observed on housing land.

Although many forms of crime have fallen in the borough, some individuals have used periods of lockdown and restriction as opportunities to commit offences against the person and property, such as robbery, theft, vehicle crime, and violence.

The council's surveillance cameras continue to protect residents and public spaces and pursue those who set out to harm communities and the environment in partnership with enforcement authorities.

3.4. Estate Caretaking

An altered service is currently in operation for Estate Caretaking due to ongoing national lockdown restrictions; however, this will again revert to usual operations once these restrictions end.

Despite this alteration, the out of hours provision remains unchanged, offering a 24-hour service, with a member of the team available outside of usual operating hours during the week, as well as all weekend and on bank holidays. This service has continued to assist with calls to Careline by accompanying the alarm wardens throughout the night.

A number of battery-operated atomisers have been procured for the team, which are used to spray a disinfecting food-safe solution that sanitises on contact and dries in 60 seconds. These are used in all communal areas and lifts, including the Sheltered Housing complexes, where caretaking services have been increased and are now visited daily during the week.

3.5. Homelessness

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 February 2021, temporary emergency accommodation had been provided to 75 individuals (72 'households' comprised of 66 single people and three couples) who were rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping.

Each individual accommodated by the council received an assessment by the team's Senior Mental Health Practitioner and has been offered robust care, housing and support assessments undertaken by the council's support provider to generate a clear understanding of each individual's support needs.

Tailored offers of support were provided, including with Thurrock Mind, and the team have had a high rate of success in the levels of engagement in this process.

Support has also been provided to individuals to make positive transitions into independent living. To date, a more than 50 households have moved on from the temporary accommodation which had been provided by the council, including 34 households who have moved into the private rental sector after council support. Regular contact continues to be made to all those whom the council is providing ongoing accommodation as part of this work.

3.6. Private Sector Housing

MHCLG has regularly published specific guidance for local authorities regarding enforcing standards and landlords' obligations to meet their legal duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. The council's Private Housing team have followed those recommendations, including the suspension of property inspections unless there is an imminent risk to health.

The Private Housing team have found new ways to triage complaints, working closely with landlords and tenants to provide higher levels of informal advice (1812 instances, increase of 163%) and early mediation (1167 instances, increase of 255%) when compared to the previous year, and this approach will continue until restrictions are further eased.

Landlords have adapted to virtual property management and the Private Housing team continue to negotiate and mediate solutions between landlords their tenant, to ensure that landlords comply with their legal obligations.

However, in cases of very serious risk to the occupier, to ensure tenants are kept safe, enforcement action is necessary on an assessment of risk under the Housing Act 2004. Enforcement action has increased during the pandemic in private rented properties compared to 2019/20, in particular with improvement notices (14 instances, increase of 600%) and public health notices (3 instances, increase of 200%).

Despite the challenges of the past 12 months, there are no current indications of landlords in the borough seeking to exit the rental market after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.7. Right to Buy

Due to COVID-19, the Government issued guidance that clarified that the requirements for the administration of Right to Buy applications are set in primary legislation. Consequently, it was not possible for Right to Buy to be suspended or amended in the short term.

As a result, the service explored ways to continue to meet the statutory targets and mitigate the risk of potential non-compliance. The process and situation were carefully managed by working with the external property valuer to adjust the method of valuing properties, taking them from physical to desktop valuations.

Other elements of the Right to Buy process were reorganised and re-engineered to make the process efficient, and applicants were contacted to clarify that these adjustments were necessary and would not affect their right to buy the property.

The service has continued to meet the strict targets during the lockdown, and the number of applications has increased from approximately 2 per week to approximately 10 per week. This increase can be attributed to the Government's announcement of a Stamp Duty Tax holiday, which was

extended during the Budget announcement in March 2021 until the end of June 2021.

3.8. Rent and Welfare

At the end of the 2019/21 financial year, 2317 of the council's tenants were receiving Universal Credit, with a total arrears figure of £863,867.36. As of the end of January 2021, 2993 tenants are reported to be receiving Universal Credit, representing a 29% increase compared to the year before. Arrears for this cohort have also increased and now total £1,187,554.30. This amount reflects 63% of the council's overall tenant arrears, which were £1,897,766.57 at the time of writing.

All of the council's Rent Officers are able to give general budgeting and debt advice, and the team of Financial Inclusion Officers support tenants with more complicated needs or vulnerabilities. In the first ten months of this financial year, the Financial Inclusion Officers have provided support to 1105 tenants, helping them to secure additional income to the combined value of £376,486.00

Financial Inclusion Officers contact all new Universal Credit claimants to make them aware of the way that payments are made to them and how payments for rent can be made. Those receiving support have also had assistance completing Discretionary Housing Payment claims, Council Tax benefit claims, Personal Independent Payment claims and many other income-related benefits. They also provide food vouchers if needed.

The Rent Officers continue to contact tenants who have fallen into arrears and complete budgeting forms, and make affordable payment arrangements. Where tenants have consistently not engaged, despite officers attempting many different means of contact, an arrears letter is sent. Since August 2020, officers have started sending notices seeking possession to tenants where arrears continue to increase.

All court action regarding arrears have been suspended since March 2020, meaning that no cases have been taken to court during this financial year; however recent changes to government guidance mean that some cases have been passed to the council's Legal services to request court hearings.

The pre-court panel and arrears panel had both been suspended from April 2020 until November 2020. Both panels were reinstated in December 2020, providing an extra opportunity for tenants and senior officers to engage before any further action is taken.

3.9. Repairs and Planned Maintenance

The council have continued to deliver a full repairs service since 8 June 2020, following which there was a sustained increase in responsive repairs demand for a period of 12 weeks. This had been due to residents raising their unreported repairs from the beginning of the pandemic, in addition to

normal repair demand. At its peak at the end of August, weekly repair demand was 44% higher than usual demand levels for the comparable time of year. Repair demand has since returned to normal levels.

A total of 919 backlog repairs were registered by Mears for completion prior to services resuming in June. Of these, 911 repairs (99.1%) have been completed, seven repairs (0.76%) are being held at the residents' request, and one repair (0.10%) has a future appointment.

For the 2020/21 year to date (at the end of December), 98.5% of responsive repairs have been completed within priority timescales, and 92.5% of tenants were satisfied with the repairs carried out in their homes, with 77% "very satisfied".

All planned maintenance works have continued in line with statutory obligations, and all programmed visits have been completed.

Gas servicing compliance stood at 99.91% at the end of January 2021. Between April 2020 and the end of January 2021, there were 8119 properties that were due a gas service. Of these, 8112 properties have had their gas service undertaken. The remaining seven properties are due to be completed by the end of February. Any resident who is in self-isolation will continue to have their appointments booked for when their self-isolation period ends accordingly. The council and its contractors continue to work in line with government guidelines when entering homes, including the use of PPE and social distancing measures.

3.10. **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).

During the first lockdown period in March 2020, Sheltered Housing Officers have been carrying out increased health and wellbeing calls to tenants. 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. From 23 March 2020 to January 2021, nearly 100,000 health and wellbeing contacts have been made.

The Sheltered Housing service achieved a sustainable weekly shopping and prescription collection provision during the first lockdown, and this has continued throughout all of the lockdowns.

Throughout all of the lockdown periods, tenants have been kept informed on government guidelines via posters produced by communications as and when changes have occurred. The communal halls have remained closed,

and life in sheltered housing for the staff and tenants has changed drastically.

Sadly, during the most recent national lockdown, there has been an increase in deaths within Sheltered Housing due to COVID-19 and support provided by the team through calls has been crucial for tenants and their families. Sheltered Housing Officers continue to provide daily support for tenants who have lost loved ones and friends, inside and outside of Sheltered Housing.

Members of the Sheltered Housing Team have continually remained available on site when required to support emergencies, tenants and legislative fire health and safety checks.

3.11. Tenancy and Neighbourhood Team

Tenancy Management Officers have let 324 properties this reporting year, with sign-ups completed in line with government guidance. New ways of working have been introduced, which have significantly reduced the time spent face-to-face with others. Vulnerable tenants continued to receive regular contact to ensure that appropriate support is being provided, including in-person visits where contact with tenants could not be established.

The process for holding tenancy audits have continued with initial telephone calls during the current restrictions; however, these will be completed once the team resume non-essential visits. Work has also commenced in relation to the annual fire evacuation plans, which are also being part-completed by telephone and will continue with visits once the team are able to.

The Travellers' sites are visited daily to check they are safe, and residents are contacted on a regular basis; this particular approach has been well received by the residents.

Garage lettings have continued to take place, and a total of 175 new garage lets have taken place since April 2020. The team is continuing to work with contractors to clear and repair a number of garages, and a number of developments projects are being explored and progressed.

The Neighbourhood Officers have completed inspections in locations where there is no caretaking service on a three-month cycle. Issues identified and reported to date include fly-tipping, repairs requirements, anti-social behaviour, as well as grounds maintenance and environmental concerns. A number of improvement projects have also been completed.

Resident Engagement has continued to grow virtually, using social media as the main platform and instigating and supporting a number of garden projects across the borough, which has been greatly appreciated by residents. The work has also included raising awareness of a number of issues with residents, such as domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour and providing a platform for partners to share information and outcomes.

3.12. Transforming Homes

Transforming Homes contractors are continuing to deliver external improvement works to blocks and individual dwellings as programmed.

Works are completed according to revised working practices which are in line with government recommendations. At the same time, enhanced liaison with residents is providing reassurance of the measures being taken to maintain the safety of all parties.

During 2020/21, the Transforming Homes Programme has delivered external improvements to 63 blocks of flats. Window upgrade works have also continued, and 439 individual households have now benefitted from new double glazed units.

Works to void properties have continued without disruption.

3.13. New Build Housing Development

In the 2020/21 financial year, the council took practical handover of both the Alma Court and Claudian Way/Heathlyn Close developments, adding 82 properties to the council's own housing stock.

The local lettings plan for Claudian Way/Heathlyn Close set out that 75% of the first offers of flats and houses within the plan would be made to current residents of Chadwell St Mary. This meant that of these 32 dwellings, 24 would be offered through the local lettings plan.

The 21 bungalows at this site, including a number which had been specifically adapted for wheelchairs and other accessibility requirements, were not included in the local lettings plan as a reflection of the borough-wide need for these types of properties.

Of the 22 flats at this development, 15 were allocated to applicants within Chadwell St. Mary, as well as all ten houses. This means that a total of 25 of the 32 flats and houses have been let to households from Chadwell St Mary.

In addition, six of the 21 bungalows have been let to households from Chadwell St Mary, however as outlined above these properties were let through the usual processes as set out in the council's Housing Allocations Policy, rather than through the local lettings plan for this development.

The Calcutta Road project timeline remains unchanged, with handover anticipated in Summer 2021.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to test almost every aspect of resilience and business continuity planning. This report serves as a further record of the action taken to achieve the aim of maintaining a Housing service that provided 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. Implications

5.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Hannah Katakwe**
Housing Accountant, Finance & IT

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. A continued increase in the number of existing tenants claiming Universal Credit poses significant financial risk to the stability of the Housing Revenue Account.

5.2. Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Legal 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.

This report sets out the actions taken by Housing, in line with government guidance and relevant legislation, in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The service demonstrated its commitment to meeting its statutory obligations whilst balancing the health and safety of staff and residents.

5.3. 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.

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

Not applicable

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. **Appendices to the report**

- None

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