

Housing Scrutiny Commission

Housing Division COVID Response & Update Members Briefing

Housing Scrutiny Commission : 7th July 2020

Lead Member : Cllr Elly Cutkelvin
Director of Housing : Chris Burgin

1. Background.

1.1 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK Government announced a range of lockdown measures which have had a significant impact on the delivery and performance of the Housing Division.

1.2 As reported as Overview & Scrutiny Commission on the 21st May 2020, the Council's housing service has worked exceptionally hard in very challenging circumstances to support some of the most vulnerable in the city.

- The service sourced an additional 221 units of additional temporary accommodation, ensuring we have had availability throughout the pandemic.
- Helped in excess of an additional 150 individuals with advice and assistance, including accommodation in most cases and when needed

- In addition to the above the service has also provided in excess of 1,000 meals have been delivered to people housed in bed and breakfast accommodation, Dawn Centre & Food Support packages to those in self-contained properties
- The Homelessness Outreach Team, alongside Inclusion healthcare and Turning Point have provided help and advice as required.
- The Homeless Emergency Duty line has been available seven days a week to ensure anyone facing homelessness can get help.
- The Repairs, Gas and Voids service have continued to provide Emergency & urgent services throughout the pandemic. Our Gas team have also undertaken Gas Servicing to ensure LCC is legally compliant and tenants safe.
- District Housing staff have continued to work behind the scenes to ensure that we successfully maintain important Fire Safety checks and work with a focus on larger tenanted buildings safety
- The Housing Income Management team have worked hard to support and help people that are facing changing personal circumstances and are having difficulty paying their rent.
- Housing's wider work and focus has been to support those that are vulnerable in our Council tenancies and facing homelessness , making over 6000 calls to check on tenants welfare and providing assistance where necessary.
- The STAR (Supporting Tenants & Residents team) have continued to support over 600 of our more vulnerable tenants. The Income management team has been working to help those with changing financial circumstances to apply for relevant benefits.
- A number of staff that are unable to undertake work in their own areas have moved over to work on the Corporate Shielding Work. 25 staff including Administration staff and Housing Transformation Team have been making thousands of calls to people in these groups to check on them and help.

1.3 The priority throughout the pandemic has been to ensure staff and tenants are safe while maintaining important Housing services. Positively, many of our services have stayed open in some form during the pandemic, our priority now is to safely get these back up to fully operational

2.0 Recovery Planning

2.1 Many of our services have stayed open in some form during the pandemic, our priority now is to safely get these back up to fully operational.

2.2 For all our services the Senior Management team is working together to coordinate, plan and take forward recovery. Our priority is to get services back up and running as quickly as possible. We are working on a Divisional Plan and Each Head of Service is working on service specific plans for recovery. Full Recovery will need to be

phased over a number of weeks and months, prioritising the most important areas first and will be dependent on further Pandemic COVID spikes and lockdowns.

2.3 To ensure it is done safely for our tenants and also for staff we need to undertake risk assessments and method statements to make sure we have safe working practices for all work we do, making sure we mitigate the risks of COVID 19 and ensure we utilise the correct PPE.

2.4 We also need to get our buildings ready for staff to use to do their job. Because of social distancing this is likely to mean that we are only going to be able to fit in about a third the number we did before COVID19. All safety items (as you see in shops) need to be installed and we need to make sure offices can be used safely.

2.5 Because of the office situation we need to plan and implement people continuing to work from home, or to start to work from home for the longer term. This means ensuring they have the right equipment and laptops to do this. This will take time to put in place.

2.6 We will be making sure we clearly communicate on the website what services are open and when services will be coming back online.

3.0 Challenges

- Due to the pandemic we have seen a rise in the rent arrears and this continues to rise even with the hard work and effort of our IMT. - (Going up by about £78k a week).- Overall our rent arrears have gone up from £1.5m to £2.1m
- Addressing unreported and reported non-priority repairs that have built up and are outstanding.
- We have work to do to catch up and be compliant with our Gas Servicing
- We have over 200 in temporary accommodation and need to find these clients positive move on solutions
- Much of our capital work on properties including our new builds stopped during the pandemic

4.0 Addressing the Challenges

4.1 Income Collection (Rent Arrears)

4.1.1 There was a sharp increase in rent arrears since lockdown, they have increased by an average £87k per week due to Covid-19. It's anticipated that the arrears performance will remain unstable and likely to increase due to current national economic challenges the pandemic has brought about.

4.1.2 LCC suspended all rental possession and eviction proceedings on the 18th March until further notice and the government suspended all housing possession cases in the courts for a 90-day period from 27th March. A further extension was announced by the Housing Secretary on 5 June 2020, which now takes the moratorium on evictions to a total of 5 months up to the 23rd August 2020. This is making it

challenging for the team to maximise rent collection alongside not being able to take punitive actions if non-payment of rent continues.

4.1.3 The Income Management team are working hard to have early conversations with tenants and agree payment plans if tenants are struggling to pay their rent. This includes reaching a temporary agreement for a period and accepting a lower level of rent or agree a plan to pay off arrears at later dates. All tenants have received a letter offering support. The team are supporting tenants facing hardship and increased expenditure due to Covid by maximising the use of DHP. Staff are prioritising contact with those tenants that have been identified as 'no rent paid'

4.1.4 Rent Management Advisors are supporting tenants claiming Universal Credit, regularly conducting research and sharing information within the team so we can respond to tenants needs and provide the most appropriate advice. The team are working closely with the Department for Works & Pension (DWP) partnership managers on a regular basis, to raise any issues / concerns and obtain updates on welfare benefits enabling us to best support our tenants and maximise their incomes.

4.1.5 Tenants who have been furloughed may get benefit top-up's and will have means to pay rent. For those tenants who have lost their jobs they will be able to claim Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. If a tenant is worried about being unable to pay their rent, or if we become aware of tenants who may be in financial difficulty, referrals are considered to agencies like Cittal and Community Advice and Law Centre for more specialist support.

4.1.6 For tenants that are sick or facing hardship due to Covid, they are supported by the Income Management Team to claim Discretionary Housing Funds (DHP) for help with Housing / Council Tax costs and additionally, being referred for food parcels. Some tenants who are shielding or in self-isolation and that ordinarily pay rent by cash are encouraged to start considering other payment methods. Elderly, vulnerable residents or those in self-isolation with access to cash / Post Office accounts only, may need to consider if friends /relatives can make payments on their behalf either online, or by using alternative methods. Those without families / friends will be requested to set money aside to pay rent when it's safe to and until such time we anticipate the increased rent arrears. We will however pause any rent recovery action on these accounts.

4.1.7 Our STAR team (Supporting Tenants & Residents) continues to provide direct support to over 600 of our most vulnerable tenants and Housing staff have maintained contact with other vulnerable or shielding tenants to provide help and support on this and other matters making many thousands of calls to stay in contact with people.

4.2 Homelessness & Housing Advice

4.2.1 As of 10th June, there are 156 homeless single people in Covid 19 temporary accommodation. We have used hotels and some self- contained flats to achieve this. Through the lockdown period we have been able to engage and support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers and bring them into temporary accommodation. This has been an opportunity and in the main most of those accommodated have remained safe and well. We have developed a Next Steps Strategy to continue with this important work with the principle objective that no one will return to the streets. It is not

anticipated at this stage that there will be any need for long-term changes to policies and procedures.

4.2.2 A draft Rough Sleepers Strategy Next Steps has been developed and in conjunction with partners is being set in place. This aims to;

- Ensure No-one who has been placed in emergency accommodation in response to the Covid-19 public health crisis is asked to leave that emergency accommodation without an offer of support into alternative accommodation options based upon individual needs.
- Resources are developed, including additional move-on accommodation to ensure as far as possible there is capacity and capability to deliver and implement offers of support
- Continued protection from Covid-19 is provided for those who need it including supporting and assisting Asylum seekers
- There is an integrated housing approach with health and care to secure access to services and continuity of care
- The roll out is gradual, to avoid a 'cliff edge' and overload of services as lockdown is lifted.

4.2.3 To date the service has managed to achieve over 40 positive move on's out of B&B's and Hotels into more appropriate housing. A further 20 are in progress and each will have individual move on plans to give the best chance of success.

4.2.4 As an authority we are already working to amass 170 additional units to meet this challenge, mainly through LCC stock, Additional private furnished accommodation and newly purchased & leased properties. To achieve this we do need to utilise 60 of our existing Void properties and prioritise getting these ready first and this has been the main reason for the delay in reopening Leicester Homechoice.

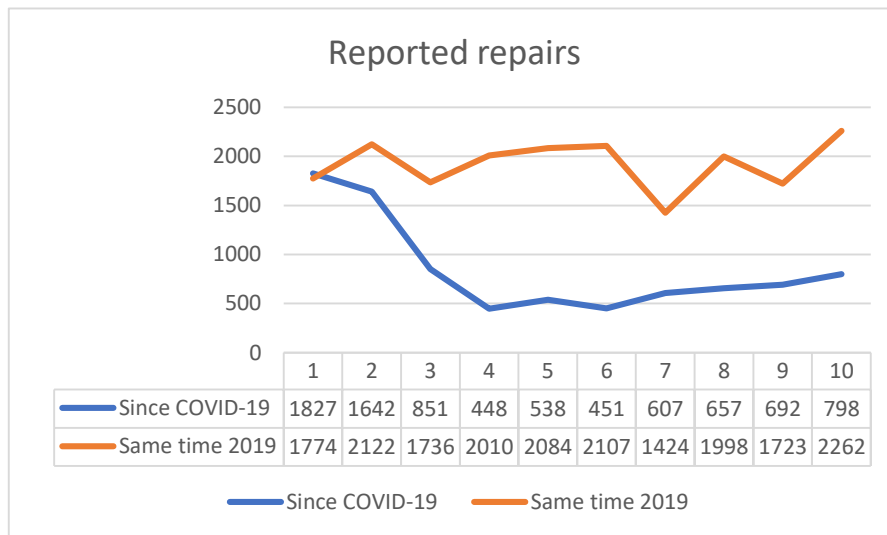
4.2.5 The Housing Register and the Choice based Letting (CBL) system have remained closed during the pandemic and available Housing stock has been utilised for emergency moves linked to those already in temporary accommodation and those facing domestic violence, harassment or serious anti social behaviour. We responded to the pandemic by suspending housing register activity, in line with national advice, with just under 6,000 on the register and it is a priority to now re-open this important service.

4.2.6 A robust plan for the gradual re-opening of the register and bidding system by week commencing 22nd June 2020 is in place, with a view to have the register and Leicester HomeChoice bidding almost back to normal by the end of July 2020.

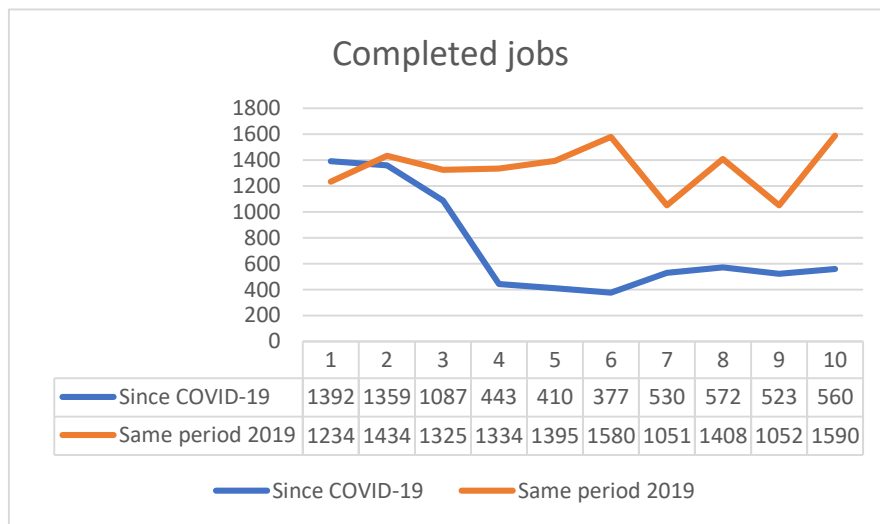
4.3 Housing Repairs/Gas/Voids

4.3.1 The following graphs show the effect the COVID-19 lockdown measures have had on both the volumes of work being reported and the number of jobs completed. The reported periods, 1-10, start w/c 11/03/2020 to w/c 13/05/2020.

Graph 1 - Reported repairs.



Graph 2 - Completed repairs.



4.3.2 Repairs Managers have been busy working on developing a recovery. Including the development of COVID-19 risk assessments and method statements for all types of work activities, in collaboration with our staff, Corporate Health & Safety, and Trade Union colleagues, to ensure all our work is carried out safely. We plan to take a phased approach to returning to business as usual.

4.3.3 During the initial phasing of recovery we will continue to provide an emergency service but will also start to carry out high priority work categories from the outstanding (suspended) workloads. Work will be prioritised to ensure that our most vulnerable tenants are looked after, but we will also prioritise other categories of work where jobs have a direct impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of our tenants.

4.3.4 Extending beyond this phase, we will start the process of building increased capacity within the wider workforce to start increasing the amount of work we can complete from the backlog of outstanding work. Whilst maintaining the emergency repairs service, and working on the outstanding workloads, we will then start to open additional capacity on the appointment system to enable Customer Services staff to raise new non-urgent jobs.

4.4 Tenancy Management

4.4.1 This team has focussed through the pandemic on supporting those most vulnerable tenants through telephone support. It has also prioritised Health & Safety and Fire Safety ensuring our buildings are safe. Work has also been ongoing to manage our estates, working closely with cleansing services to address any localised issues.

4.4.2 The District teams are only just starting to see cases involving domestic violence & harassment and are working to support and help the individuals with what is necessary, including priority moves where required.

4.4.3 This team have throughout the pandemic worked with the CRASBU team and Local Policing to ensure a joined up response and actions to reported serious Anti Social Behaviour.

4.5 Housing Building

4.5.1 While LCC's House Building programme was paused for 8 weeks, builders are now back on site for Phase 1 builds, and work has progressed throughout the pandemic on wider development and new build works including the Saffron Velodrome site, procurement of builders and the submission of planning for the Lanesborough Road site.

4.5.2 Preconstruction work on future phases has continued and whilst there have been minor delays we do not expect them to have a negative impact on the overall manifesto commitment period.

4.5.3 We have continued to negotiate on some larger acquisitions which we still hope will complete this financial year that have, so far, not been affected.

4.5.4 Our council house Acquisition programme has been impacted, we will have completed on 17 properties in the first quarter of the current financial year, this is half the normal number. Fortunately, we are now able to, and have started, viewing potential acquisitions and will look to increase the numbers in the remaining 3 quarters to hopefully mitigate the impact of the reduced numbers in quarter 1.