

## Report of Chief Officer Housing

### Report to Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities)

Date: 15 October 2020

Subject: Update on Housing Leeds' COVID response and remobilisation

Are specific electoral wards affected?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If yes, name(s) of ward(s):	
Has consultation been carried out?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Will the decision be open for call-in?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, access to information procedure rule number:	
Appendix number:	

#### 1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 To provide a further update to Scrutiny Board members on Housing Leeds' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and remobilisation following on from the last update on 18 June 2020.

#### 2. Background information

- 2.1 On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the UK Government introduced restrictions on movement, social contact and business practices aimed at controlling and limiting the spread of the Covid-19 global pandemic.
- 2.2 In response to these restrictions Housing Leeds responded quickly to ensure that measures were put in place to safeguard residents, employees and partners, whilst also maintaining essential service delivery. An essential service offer was in place throughout lockdown, ensuring that services were provided in line with national guidance and harmonious with other local authority housing service providers. A big focus of this essential offer was on maintaining the safety of homes and customers during lockdown. This essential service offer remained in place until restrictions were lifted from May onwards.
- 2.3 From May onwards Housing Leeds began its remobilisation of services on a phased basis, as and when restrictions were lifted.

#### 3. Main issues

- 3.1 Housing Leeds has taken a robust approach to the remobilisation of services, in line with the Council wide approach. A weekly meeting has been in place with Trade Union colleagues since May to discuss remobilisation plans and to review risk assessments linked to the resumption of each activity. All risk assessments were developed in close consultation with Health and Safety colleagues and activity approved by Bronze and Silver Group as appropriate.
- 3.2 During lockdown, many teams worked flexibly across the wider service to ensure that essential services were provided and that customers were supported. As services have been remobilised staff teams have worked hard to ensure that we remobilise safely and with customers at the heart of everything we do.
- 3.3 Outlined below is an update on each of the areas of Housing Leeds activity, with any volumes / performance reported as at the end of August 2020.

#### **3.4 Responsive Repairs**

- 3.4.1 Since the start of 'lockdown' a total of 47,982 repairs have been completed across the city. Completions have risen significantly since the previous reported period (14,199) with the number of weekly repair completions doubling from 1,385 per week to 2,768 at present. This movement reflects the service resuming the completion of non-essential repairs in July and the return from furlough of external contractor resources by the end of the period. At the end of August, the service has returned to a 'business as usual' service offer with the reintroduction of appointment slots for tenant's citywide going live the first week in September.

Total repairs completed since 23-3-20	47,982
Weekly Completions (Current 4 weekly average)	2,768
Reported repairs not completed	18,852
Assessed non-reported repairs	56,828

- 3.4.2 Across the city, work is ongoing to clear the backlog of 'non-essential' repairs which had accrued since lockdown began. This number is currently standing at 18,852. Plans are in place with repairs partners to achieve this by mid-October however this may take longer to deliver for a small number of trades such as plastering where the pull on available resources has had to be managed along with other key priority services (such as voids), and because of nationwide shortages in materials that delayed initial progress.
- 3.4.3 It remains the case that the volume of new repairs reported is significantly lower than the same period in previous years and whilst order raising has steadily risen since the previous reporting period, it is currently circa 30% lower than historic volumes. As such, analysis of the repairs volumes for the last 3 years indicates that a demand of an additional c.57, 000 repairs is likely. The return of Annual Home Visit activity, albeit some virtual, it's likely to generate an increase in orders reported along with the delivery of a business as usual service offer that will hopefully continue to drive confidence in the service.

#### **3.5 Gas Compliance**

- 3.5.1 Domestic gas compliance is a legislative requirement for Leeds City Council as a landlord. The services are delivered by external contractors and work to maintain gas safety inspections where safe to do so has been a key focus for the Mechanical and Electrical team and repairs partners. National guidance has been closely followed to ensure Leeds remains in step with industry and government guidance.

Gas Safety Inspections Completed since 23-3-20	21,172
Current Properties Overdue	284
Gas Compliance %	99.32%

- 3.5.2 Of the 42,382 Leeds City Council homes with domestic gas, 284 are currently overdue which represents a significant positive movement since the previous reported position when this number stood at 773. The main reasons behind this improved position have been the ending of shielding for vulnerable tenants (who have subsequently rearranged the visits), the ability for Housing Leeds staff to engage more proactively with tenants who will not allow access and most recently, the reopening of the courts for warrant applications (where tenants refuse access) through a virtual platform. All properties that are overdue have a plan in place to address this.
- 3.5.3 It should be noted that through benchmarking undertaken, the Leeds position remains relatively strong compared to that of our peers.

### **3.6 Other Compliance**

- 3.6.1 In addition to gas compliance, Property Management teams worked to maintain other compliance obligations throughout lockdown which meant that the overall position was reasonably healthy once lockdown measures were eased. These include Fire Risk Assessment, water hygiene inspections, asbestos inspections and electrical inspections.
- 3.6.2 In total, over **6,000 compliance inspections** have been completed since 23 March 2020 (1,200 at the previous reporting period), including 353 Fire Risk Assessments (95 at the last reporting period). These visits are all essential to maintaining the safety of Housing residents and properties. Due to the intrusive nature of Electrical Periodic Inspections inside tenant's homes, this activity was paused at the initial onset of lockdown measures however this programme resumed in July and a catch-up programme is now being delivered.

### **3.7 Investment Programme**

- 3.7.1 The Strategy and Investment Team has achieved 100% remobilisation of the Capital Investment programme since activity recommenced on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020. There are currently 20 projects actively delivering improvement projects to resident's homes and across the wider HRA estate. The importance of getting remobilisation of activity in and around people's homes right was recognised therefore additional time was invested in communicating with residents with over 5000 letters issued. These included assurance on how Health and Safety would be prioritised along with contact details for the team for any queries or concerns. Feedback from elected members during this time was both supportive and positive. The re-opening of schemes was undertaken over a period of weeks starting first with external, communal and environmental schemes and gradually moving to work inside properties, (where safe to do so).
- 3.7.2 Current active projects cut across 60 High Rise blocks in the city including major projects such as: District Heating; CCTV; Ground Source Heat Pumps; Communal Rewiring; Fire Safety and Sprinkler installation. There is ongoing improvement to several hundred individual homes (kitchen/bathrooms/ re-roofing/windows and doors) running concurrently. In order to maintain our forward plan of investment activity new contracts have continued to be procured, with contracts to the value

c£15.2m being awarded since lockdown. Major projects currently within the tender process include 6 new District Heating Clusters (24m) and Ground Source heat pump Phase 2 (£1.5m). To support our data led investment approach we have completed comprehensive stock condition surveys in more than 50% of our tower blocks since restrictions were eased and took the opportunity created during lockdown to refresh our asset data and review the HRA Asset Management Strategy which is intended to go live in November 2020.

### **3.8 Voids and Lettings**

- 3.8.1 In accordance with national guidance, lettings were suspended between late March and mid May, and only critical moves took place in accordance with the Emergency Lettings Policy, introduced in late March. Up to the end of August 149 applicants were rehoused into Council homes and 26 into Housing Association homes via the Emergency Lettings Policy.

- 3.8.2 The total number of voids at the end of August is outlined below:

Total Voids (23/03/20)	510
Total Voids (31/08/20) Of which:	833
• Properties Ready to Let	204
• Properties with Contractor / in voids process	629
Of 833 voids 31/08/20:	
• No. void 23/03/20	65
• No. void 29/06/20	229
• No. become void since 29/06/20	539

- 3.8.3 Throughout lockdown, void property repairs continued so as to maintain an appropriate pool of ready to let properties that could be utilised in-line with the emergency lettings policy. The void repairs service returned to a business as usual service offer in early June albeit with some restrictions due to the need to maintain social distancing at all times (restricting the number of operatives that can work in a property at any one time) and also some delays in the supply of materials due to the impact of the pandemic on supply chains.
- 3.8.4 Housing teams began to let homes which had been offered prior to lockdown in mid-June, and Choice Based Lettings resumed on 24 June. For the first few weeks a small number of Council and Housing Association homes were advertised and this has increased on a phased basis back up to pre-COVID levels, with 546 Council homes and 88 Housing Association homes advertised up to the end of August. The Emergency Lettings Policy remains in place, to ensure that critical moves linked to COVID impacts can be facilitated.
- 3.8.5 The total number of voids peaked at 897 in early July and reduced to 833 by the end of August. 337 Council tenancy commencements took place between June and the end of August. 539 of the 833 voids at the end of August had become void since 29/06/20.
- 3.8.6 The backlog is taking longer to reduce than expected for a number of reasons. There have been higher than usual tenancy termination levels since restrictions on moving home lifted, the letting of new build homes handed over during lockdown, a higher than usual level of tenant transfers (particularly for the new build homes) and team pressures of processing additional homes with enhanced risk assessment

measures in place to ensure the safety of staff and residents. Whilst the majority of issues around material supply have been resolved now, this has impacted on the initial pace at which homes could be repaired and the restrictions around social distancing continue to impact on repair timescales given the restrictions that remain around numbers of operatives in properties at any one time. All external contractors, staff and operatives have now returned from furlough and the recovery plans in place have brought in additional resources in-order to clear the backlogs.

- 3.8.7 Voids are a critical priority for the service, and a plan is in place which is being monitored and managed via weekly meetings of senior managers. This plan aims to address the backlog by the end of November.

### **3.9 Rent Collection**

- 3.9.1 In line with national guidance all formal arrears and possession activity was suspended at the start of lockdown, with a primary focus on supporting tenants who were having difficulties paying their rent. During April arrears increased by £590k and in the first four weeks of lockdown we saw a spike of 1498 Universal Credit claims.
- 3.9.2 From May onwards the number of Universal Credit claims has returned to pre-COVID levels of around 300-400 per month. Housing Teams have been in regular contact with tenants in arrears to offer support to maximise benefit / income entitlement, make affordable arrears payment plans and encourage payment. This supportive approach has been effective for most tenants. On 24 August pre-notice formal arrears activity resumed, with 3.5k formal arrears letters being issued within the first week. Next steps are being considered for re-introducing the serving of notices and pre-court activity in due course, but these stages will only be followed once all other options have been exhausted, and in accordance with national guidance.
- 3.9.3 Following the immediate increase in arrears in April to 4.01%, arrears have gradually reduced and by end of August rent collection performance was 96.33% compared to 95.96% in August 2019, and rent arrears were 3.47% (£7.3m) compared to 3.3% at the end of August 2019.

### **3.10 Tenancy Management / Tenancy Support**

- 3.10.1 Housing teams continued throughout lockdown to carry out essential tenancy management activity remotely, managing customer contact by telephone, text and email. Most site based tenancy management activities were suspended, including annual home visits, estate inspections / walkabouts and block inspections.
- 3.10.2 During lockdown the main focus was on supporting tenants. We made telephone contact with 12,400 tenants over 60 or with a known vulnerability to check their wellbeing and signpost to additional support where needed. We also contacted 4,000 tenants who were shielding to encourage tenants to register with the national helpline and to signpost to additional support where needed. Where there were concerns about a tenant and contact couldn't be made then a home visit was undertaken to check a tenant's wellbeing.
- 3.10.3 Whilst Annual Home Visits have not been possible, we have introduced an Annual Telephone Contact, focusing initially on tenants where there are no tenancy issues or arrears, no repair issues and no vulnerabilities / concerns identified at the last AHV. To date 3613 of these Annual Telephone Contacts have been undertaken.

3.10.4 As measures have been lifted almost all on site tenancy management activity has been remobilised, including home visits linked to tenancy breaches, suspected abandonments and estate / block inspections. Where contact can be managed by phone and email activity is continuing to be managed remotely, and so in most cases New Tenancy Visits and Annual Home Visits have been replaced with a telephone contact, reserving a visit only for tenants where this is needed.

3.10.5 10,000 wellbeing telephone calls per week were made to Retirement Life tenants throughout lockdown, with a small number of visits for particularly vulnerable tenants. Communal lounges were closed. Some doorstep visits resumed in August, but the main service offer remains by telephone. Individual building risk assessments are underway to consider if communal lounges can reopen as COVID secure venues over the coming weeks.

### **3.11 Leeds Housing Options / Homelessness**

3.11.1 Leeds Housing Options has continued to support vulnerable homeless customer with additional emergency accommodation, via hotels, which peaked at over 230 units during the pandemic. Through robust move-on work and proactive engagement with partners, this number has now reduced to less than 60 hotel rooms still being used and around 80 customers in total in temporary accommodation.

3.11.2 Despite increasing demand, the Housing Options service have maintained a positive prevention rate of around 90% - this means that 9/10 people who approach the service in housing need have a positive/secure outcome achieved with the national average being around 50%.

3.11.3 Following a proactive media campaign the private sector lettings team have increased the number of private rented tenancies becoming available for homeless households and are forecast to secure 30% more tenancies than the same period last year.

### **3.12 Private Rented Sector Regulation**

3.12.1 During lockdown the Private Sector Regulation Team continued to address conditions in the private sector wherever possible remotely as per the Government guidance. The service continued to inspect properties where there was immediate risk to any occupiers, ensuring the safety of all concerned. In additional properties offered to provide homes for people as part of the Leeds Landlord Scheme to help with the homeless prevention and support people coming out of the hotels post lockdown were all inspected.

3.12.2 Since the easing of lockdown officers have increased the number of inspections undertaken including empty homes. Since lockdown started at the start of April a total of 302 different visits have been undertaken with 85 in August, the highest number since the end of March.

3.12.3 To support the sector during lockdown the Council suspended requesting fees for all types of licence application, both mandatory HMO and selective licensing. However since the start of August the Council has started to request payment of all fees. The main request has been for around 2800 outstanding selective licensing fees be paid. This will allow both schemes to now progress towards the issuing of licences later in the year / early new year.

### **3.13 Council Housing Growth Programme**

- 3.13.1 The vast majority of the new council housing growth programme continued during lockdown. 59 new build homes were completed and handed over, 12 homes received planning approval and planning submissions were made for 71 homes up to the end of August. During lockdown we also celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> property acquisition of former Right To Buy homes and completed the purchase of 5 off the shelf new homes from a developer.
- 3.13.2 Our ambitious housing growth plans remain largely on track albeit with some delays likely to future delivery as a result of the impacts on the construction industry.

### **3.14 Outbreak Planning**

- 3.15 Housing Leeds has been working closely with colleagues in Public Health to support and plan for further outbreaks. Arrangements are in place to share intelligence of COVID cases in Council owned homes at a higher risk, to enable a proactive response. COVID testing kits are available in extra care schemes, and Support Officers in Retirement Life schemes are able to signpost tenants who are unable to leave the home but need a test to the portal. Housing is also sharing key COVID outbreak messages via social media and with key housing partners, such as private landlords and housing associations. Signage is in place in Retirement Life schemes and high rise blocks encouraging tenants to social distance.
- 3.16 Housing Leeds officers recently supported some local community door knocking in the Harehills area to raise awareness of COVID-19, self-isolation and local testing facilities available.

## **4. Consultation and engagement**

- 4.1 A key priority during the pandemic has been to ensure continued customer access into services and teams. At the start of lockdown as teams shifted to working from home arrangements were put in place to ensure that customer facing telephone lines and email addresses continued to be resourced to meet demand. Call volumes reduced initially into the Contact Centre and Housing Office teams but then returned to pre-COVID levels as services were remobilised. Call volumes into Leeds Housing Options increased significantly as restrictions on moving home were lifted but then gradually reduced up to the end of August. From 1 April to 31 August the Contact Centre answered 95% calls made (72,583 calls) in an average of 129 seconds.
- 4.2 Regular communications have been shared with customers throughout the pandemic. The Council's Coronavirus and Housing web pages have been updated on a regular basis to update customers on customer access and service delivery. Regular emails have been sent to Council tenants with an email address, with more targeted communications to Retirement Life tenants. As lettings were remobilised there was targeted communications with those on the Leeds Homes Register. Key messages have been shared on social media and texting has been used to delivery specific messages to particular schemes or blocks.
- 4.3 Actual meetings with customer groups as part of customer engagement have been suspended since March. All Housing Advisory Panels have now held skype / zoom meetings and are focusing on supporting projects which support COVID impacts on the community. Up to the end of August HAPs have supported 77 projects, of a value of £132,400. Tenant Scrutiny Board are holding regular zoom meetings and are

progressing their new inquiry. Other citywide forums are suspended, but with regular email updates. Instead we are engaging with tenants in different ways. Some online tenant engagement software is currently being piloted which offers a number of different way of engaging with customers, via surveys, polls, forums etc.

- 4.4 Throughout the pandemic Housing Leeds has worked closely with BITMO and BITMO has remobilised its services in close alignment to Housing Leeds. BITMO is also connected into Council wide updates and is promoting key messages to tenants. Housing Leeds has also met regularly with Housing Association partners to share the Council's COVID response and seek their support, particularly to support lettings via the Emergency Lettings policy.

#### **4.5 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration**

- 4.5.1 A key focus of Housing's response to the pandemic has been to ensure that the most vulnerable customer groups remain supported. Council tenants with a known vulnerability, disability or aged over 60 were contacted in the early days of lockdown to check their wellbeing and offer additional support where needed. Tenants who were medically shielding were also contacted to encourage them to register with the national helpline. For a number of these tenants, regular contact continued throughout lockdown to monitor wellbeing.
- 4.5.2 Since March, additional emergency temporary accommodation has been made available to house rough sleepers, including ineligible EEA nationals, to ensure that all residents of Leeds were able to self-isolate as required. This accommodation, usually provided in hotels, helped to ensure a safe place for very vulnerable residents during the pandemic. Work is ongoing to support these residents to achieve a positive longer term housing solution.

#### **4.6 Council policies and the Best Council Plan**

- 4.6.1 Housing Leeds response to the COVID pandemic supports a number of priorities in the Best Council Plan. It supports the Housing priorities of providing housing of the right quality, tenure and affordability in the right places, minimising homelessness and providing the right housing options to support older and vulnerable residents. The response also supports other priorities:
- Safe, Strong Communities - keeping people safe from harm, helping people out of financial hardship and being responsive to local needs, building thriving, resilient communities.
  - Health and Wellbeing – reducing health inequalities and supporting self-care.

##### Climate Emergency

- 4.6.2 Since lockdown in late March most of Housing's workforce (approx. 1100 staff) has worked from home, and where possible managed service delivery by telephone and email. It is projected that Housing will spend £65k less on staff transport costs during 2019/20 linked to an increase in home working.
- 4.6.3 Housing Leeds is piloting software and business process changes which may help to achieve more efficient service delivery and support the Council's client emergency ambitions:

- Customer engagement software – instead of meeting / writing to customers to seek their view, some software is being piloted to seek customers' views digitally via forums, online surveys and ballots.
  - Remote video tool – allowing an officer to view inside a tenant's home via a tenant's smartphone in order to diagnose a repair issue and offer self-help guidance if needed.
  - Digital survey for transactional repairs – via automated telephone call / text message.
  - Some Annual Home Visits for Council tenants are being carried out as telephone calls, where there are no tenancy issues.
- 4.6.4 All services are evaluating lessons learnt during COVID, and considering whether there are some service changes which have been put in place for COVID we may wish to retain as a longer term approach. A focus of this evaluation is on how services can be delivered more efficiently and with a lower carbon impact.

#### **4.7 Resources, procurement and value for money**

- 4.7.1 The pandemic has had an impact on 2020/21 revenue budgets. For the HRA, at the end of August there was a projected additional loss of rental income from voids of £559k, and associated council tax on these voids of £161k along with an increased bad debt provision of £353k. This loss will be funded from savings in staffing costs and associated budgets, and a £4.4m reduction to the capital programme.
- 4.7.2 For the Housing General Fund, the overall budget pressure at the end of August is £2.43m, made up of the provision of COVID related emergency accommodation via hotels at £1.54m, along with £610k security costs. Some of this pressure will be offset by Housing Benefit and the Next Step Accommodation Project grant.

#### **4.8 Legal implications, access to information, and call-in**

- 4.8.1 This report has no specific legal implications.

#### **4.9 Risk management**

- 4.9.1 This report has no specific risk management implications.

### **5. Conclusions**

- 5.1 Since the last update to Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board, Housing Leeds has made considerable progress in remobilising of services and reducing backlogs in service delivery. Many services are now fully remobilised and operating a largely business as usual service.
- 5.2 Remobilisation work will continue alongside planning for further changes to service delivery linked to changes in national or local restrictions and to local outbreaks.

### **6. Recommendations**

6.1 Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board to note and comment on Housing Leeds' work to maintain essential service delivery during COVID-19, remobilise services and prepare for further restrictions / outbreaks.

**7. Background documents<sup>1</sup>**

7.1 None.

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<sup>1</sup> The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.