

## Housing Activity Update – Quarter 1 2021/22

### **1. Rent Collection and Tenancy / Estate Management**

#### **1.1. Rent Collection and Arrears**

- 1.1.1. Whilst we resumed sending formal arrears letters in August 2020 we only began serving notices for rent arrears in late June 2021, focusing on tenancies where rent accounts were over 6 months in rent arrears and the tenant is not engaging. All of our contact with tenants in arrears has continued to take a supportive approach, supporting tenants to maximise income and benefit entitlement, refer to other agencies etc. where appropriate.
- 1.1.2. 655 tenants began a claim for Universal Credit in quarter 1, meaning that over 16,000 tenants have now made a claim since Universal Credit was introduced. The number of tenants moving onto Universal Credit has reduced significantly from the levels at the start of the pandemic and are currently lower than pre-pandemic levels. We have continued to provide support to tenants who are newly claiming Universal Credit.
- 1.1.3. Breathing space legislation came into effect in May 2021, available to anyone with a debt to give them legal protection for a period of time (standard breathing space is for 60 days, mental health crisis breathing space is for period of crisis treatment plus 30 days) . During the breathing space period no enforcement action can be taken. During quarter 1 Housing Leeds were notified of 37 cases.
- 1.1.4. At the end of quarter 1 rent collection was at 96.01% (up from 94.53% at the end of Q1 20/21) and rent arrears were 3.24% (down from 3.94%), an extremely positive position compared to other social landlords.

#### **1.2. Tenancy Management**

- 1.2.1. Much of our tenancy management continued to be undertaken remotely where possible throughout quarter 1, but with home visits undertaken where needed in relation to tenancy breaches or tenancy management issues. Block inspections and stage 2 fire safety checks continued throughout the pandemic.
- 1.2.2. The Annual Tenancy Contact (ATC) programme for 2021/22 (replacing the Annual Home Visit programme) will be made up of a mixture of visits, telephone contacts and online contacts. Visits resumed as part of this programme in late June, focusing initially on the most vulnerable tenants, e.g. history of hoarding, safeguarding concerns, poor property condition. Only 1.93% of tenants had been contacted as part of the programme at the end of quarter 1. During quarter 1 we also piloted an Online Tenancy Check-In for 1000 tenants where issues had not been raised in previous Annual Home Visits.
- 1.2.3. Quarter one was a busy period for lower level ASB / nuisance behaviour for Housing with a total of 386 case opened through the Triage Team. This was down from previous quarter four, which saw 508 cases opened (a 24% reduction). Changes in how the Triage Team assess cases may have contributed to the reduction sign posting tenants to correct departments or partner agencies.
- 1.2.4. Noise complaints are still the most reported problem along with neighbour disputes, which the government stay at home guidance will have contributed to. With more people working from home and children been home schooled, tenants

are identifying noise that they may not have previously witnessed. Out of the 386 cases we have also identified numerous tenants with support needs, and in turn making some investigations more complex and support led

- 1.2.5. During quarter 1 we increased our presence out on estates, responding to estate management issues, messy garden cases and environmental issues on estates. We increased the number of estate walkabouts, undertaking 237 walkabouts in quarter 1. Key issues identified in quarter 1 were overgrown gardens and hedges, fly tipping, some issues with missed grass cuts land not included on grounds maintenance contracts / self seeders. Actions have been undertaken to contact tenants with overgrown gardens, taking tenancy enforcement action as appropriate and liaison with other Council teams in relation to wider grounds maintenance issues. As other Council teams were working through work backlogs and the Community Payback scheme was not yet mobilised there were some delays encountered in the resolution of environmental issues.

## **2. Responsive Repairs and Maintenance**

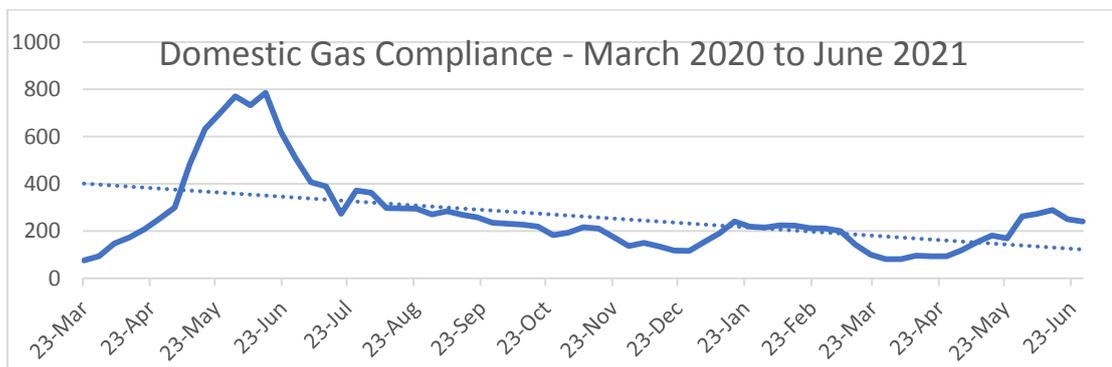
### **2.1 Responsive Repairs**

- 2.1.1 The combined impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to present significant challenges to the repairs service. Nationally there has been a well documented impact in the supply of construction materials with manufacturers, merchants and service providers all reporting lengthy delays in the supply of many of the materials required to support the repairs service.
- 2.1.2 Additionally, across the UK there are shortages in the availability of skilled tradespeople as services and projects that were suspended now remobilise. This means that, although the repairs service is able to offer a full range of repairs, some types of repairs are taking longer to complete, with plastering, joinery, plumbing and glazing highlighted as areas of particular pressure. This has resulted in a backlog of around 6,000 repairs across the city, which represents significant progress from the backlog of non-essential repairs generated during the initial phase of the pandemic, which peaked at c.19,500 repairs. All the repairs raised during the initial Covid-19 phase have now been completed with the 6,000 referenced above representing a 'secondary backlog'.
- 2.1.3 Although the service continues to try and identify opportunities for additional capacity to be introduced to accelerate completion of the backlog, due to the factors identified above this is proving to be incredibly challenging and a position that is being reported nationally and across the sector. Demand for the repairs service has returned to pre-pandemic volumes, which again is impacting on the timescales associated with completion of some repairs.
- 2.1.4 Recovery plans have been developed for clearing the remaining backlog of repairs, with the end of the calendar year the target for completion, although it should be noted that there are a number of variables that may impact on this target, such as the severity of the winter weather and of course any future peaks in Covid-19 levels that may again result in additional restrictions.

### **2.2 Gas Compliance**

2.2.1 Domestic gas compliance is a legislative requirement for Leeds City Council as a landlord. The services are delivered by external contractors and have continued throughout the course of the last 18 months with national industry guidance followed. Leeds City Council owns 42,382 homes with domestic gas.

2.2.2 The graph below illustrates the number of overdue gas properties throughout the period March 2020 to June 2021. As previously reported, the number of overdue gas inspection peaked in June 2020 at 786 overdue. The position at end June 2021 was 241 properties overdue (99.43% compliant). This is higher than the pre-Covid 'norm' of around 100 properties overdue at any one time (c.99.75% compliant).



2.2.3 Housing Leeds continues to work pro-actively and collaboratively with tenants who do not yet feel comfortable allowing access for purposes of this and other essential maintenance. All overdue properties are monitored daily. Where tenants are not prepared to engage with the team a legal process is followed.

2.2.4 It should be noted that through benchmarking undertaken, the Leeds position remains relatively strong in relation to that of our peer group.

### 2.3 Other Compliance

2.3.1 Property Management is responsible for the delivery of a number of statutory compliance obligations that the council must undertake in its capacity as a landlord. These include gas safety, electrical safety, fire safety, water hygiene and asbestos management.

2.3.2 Many of these obligations relate to communal facilities / areas of buildings. As such, these areas have been less impacted by the restrictions brought about by Covid-19 and a strong compliance position has been maintained.

2.3.3 Fire safety compliance has remained a key priority for the service throughout the reporting period with compliance across all high rise and Retirement Life schemes remaining at 100%.

2.3.4 Water hygiene and asbestos inspections have also remained in excess of 99% with only very few inspections outstanding where buildings have been closed for extended periods.

2.3.5 The electrical inspection programme does require access to individual homes and has therefore been impacted over the course of the last year, falling from c.95% to

74.95% of homes having received an inspection in the last 5 years. A recovery action plan is in place for this workstream.

### 3. Voids and Lettings

#### 3.1 Voids

3.1.1 In accordance with national guidance lettings resumed in mid-2020. As previously reported, a backlog of properties in void had been generated during the lockdown period and clearing this backlog was identified as a key strategic priority for Housing Leeds in order to meet the demand for council homes and also to minimise rent loss associated with void properties.

3.1.2 The total number of void properties at the end of June 2021 is outlined below:

Properties in Void Process	580
Ready to let	138
TOTAL EMPTY	718
Average Relet Times	77.8 days

3.1.3 The number of empty properties in the city (718) represents a positive trend and reduction from 763 at the end of the financial year (March 2021). The position at last reporting period (August 2020) was 833 properties in void.

3.1.4 An action plan has been agreed and put in place with the void service providers, LBS and Mears, with a target to achieve 1% of properties in void by the end of the current financial year. 1% equates to around 531 properties.

3.1.5 A number of variables are impacting the pace at which these recovery plans are able to be actioned. These include:

- **‘Covid-safe’ working practices** - the impact of the need to follow COVID 19 Risk Assessments has meant the working within the empty properties has been impacted – put simply, work takes longer to complete than pre-pandemic rates.
- **Material shortages** – globally the supply of construction materials, such as windows and doors has been significantly impacted. This remains a key pressure to the service.
- **Labour market pressures** – despite continued attempts to procure additional resources to accelerate service delivery this has proved extremely difficult owing to the national shortages of skilled tradespeople.
- **Transfer of delivery arrangements in South**– as with any service transfer of this scale and complexity this has impacted short term of performance.

3.1.6 Void recovery remains a critical priority for Housing Leeds and every effort continues to be made to identify additional capacity to accelerate the recovery programmes.

### **3.2 Lettings**

3.2.1 In quarter 1 there were 688 lettings, with a total average relet time of 77.8 days. Demand for Council homes continues to increase, with an increase in the number of people on the Leeds Homes Register from 24058 at the end of 2020/21 to 26028 at the end of quarter 1. Linked to this we saw a further increase in the average number of bids per property from 287 per property in quarter 4 2020/21 to 324 in quarter 1.

3.2.2 The Emergency Lettings Policy which has been in place since March 2020 came to an end in July 2021 in line with the lifting of most national restrictions. Whilst in place the policy enabled the rehousing of 257 lettings of customers whose circumstance made them more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID19, e.g. enabling discharge from hospital or emergency accommodation. Of the 257 lettings, 228 were into Council housing and 29 into Housing Association homes.

## **4. Asset Management and Investment**

4.1 Strategy and Investment team have worked in collaboration with University of Leeds to develop a new model that enables analysis of stock data to identify and target investment through retrofit/ upgrade works in homes where the biggest thermal improvement can be made to council owned homes. As part of our planning and delivery processes we also consider the operational carbon impact of the different options available, favouring schemes that promote the retrofitting and improvement of existing homes.

4.2 The Capital investment programme sets out the plan to deliver over £100m of renewable heating and energy efficiency projects in the next five years. Since the last update, Ground Source Heat Pumps have been installed at four high rise blocks and a further six blocks due for completion by March 2022.

4.3 Alongside this, the Clustering for Warmth project to create 6 new district heating networks has had a contract awarded for the first two clusters of ten high rise blocks to have Ground Source Heat Pumps installed. By mid-2022 twenty high rise blocks will have moved from electric storage heating to this new green technology, benefitting 944 homes.

4.4 A small pilot project using the most recent Air source heat pump technology was recently completed to 14 homes and the learning and insight gained from this will be used to inform future investment decisions.

4.5 Planning and consultation for the regeneration of the Priority Neighbourhood Lincoln Green has been ongoing since the last update and some initial work on site has begun. Roxby Close has been the first of the high rise in the area to have whole building improvement work which includes the installation of external wall insulation, reducing heat loss and increasing thermal comfort.

4.6 Ongoing programmes of core investment activity include the following:

- Replacement kitchen, bathrooms and rewiring

- Fire safety works
- Sprinkler installations
- Communal rewiring
- New communal doors, screens, and controlled entry systems

4.7 The service is working with a range of partners to deliver energy projects into council housing, including:

- Groundwork Yorkshire - engaging Green Doctor services to enable tenants to access advice on fuel tariffs and other energy efficiency measures.
- Leeds Beckett University –measuring levels of embodied carbon to inform the option appraisals process and the fitting of heat/humidity sensors to capture the benefit of energy projects
- Connecting environmental schemes with cycle routes through joint working with Highways
- Pilot scheme to install Electric Charging points in council homes
- A review of green spaces and gardens to increase tree planting, biodiversity and food growing.
- Replacing all lighting with LEDs, offering discounts on the most efficient appliances, creating ‘tool libraries’ for individuals to use, etc.
- Sustainable Energy and Air Quality Team – to secure additional funding / grants
- Joint working with Parks and Countryside - identifying HRA land for tree planting initiative - tree canopy data now included in the GIS mapping portal to inform Solar PV installation.
- Contractors providing residents having renewable heating or energy efficiency work with Green Boxes containing water saving devices, LED bulbs, and energy saving and energy tariff advice.

## 5. Customer Contact / Engagement

5.1 Building on the trial using [Your Voice Leeds](#), during the first quarter eight different consultations were shared with tenants and local residents including a consultation on the design and content of the rent statement, the Greener Gipton and Harehills Campaign and a consultation asking tenants about managing their tenancy online. These consultations attracted over 1,800 visits to Your Voice Leeds, with 385 visitors better informed by drilling down into the page detail about the consultation and 81 tenants and residents actively participating in giving 1 or more piece of feedback.

5.2 During quarter 1 the Tenant Scrutiny Board continued to progress its enquiry into Tenant Engagement. The enquiry is split into 2 phases with phase 1 focusing on how Housing Leeds engages with and hears the wider tenant voice and phase 2 focusing on more formal tenant involvement. By the end of quarter 1 the Board had concluded the evidence gathering phase of stage 1 of the enquiry and were beginning to consider its report and recommendations. Additional support has been provided to the Board on this enquiry, via an independent advisor, to highlight national best practice and support the Board’s independence in undertaking this enquiry.

- 5.3 Local Housing Advisory Panels (HAPs) have met remotely throughout Quarter 1, supporting a total of 39 projects to a value of £71,311. This consists of 25 grants to community and voluntary organisations and 14 environmental projects in response to tenant and resident feedback to help improve the overall environment and neighbourhood as a place to live. Examples include the renewing of old planters and seating, grants to community litter picking groups, improved signage and fencing and bin storage and recycling works.
- 5.4 During quarter 1 we have continued to see significant contact into the service by telephone. The contact centre received 114k calls during quarter 1, answering 93% of calls and housing offices received 40.8k calls, answering 84%. Joint project work between Housing Leeds and Customer Access continues to monitor the nature of contact in order to identify opportunities to reduce avoidable contact.
- 5.5 During quarter 1 73% of stage 1 housing complaints were responded to within the target timescale of 15 days and 61% of stage 2 complaints. This is largely a result of the significant increase in the volume of complaints and the demand this is placing on LCC staff to robustly investigate and respond to the complaints. The increase in the volume of complaints is predominantly a result of the delays in completing some non-emergency repairs, linked to the repairs recovery programme.
- 5.6 Property Management has recently introduced the Intervention Team to the service, aimed at resolving customer enquiries and delivering improved outcomes for customers without the need for a formal complaint. Although still a relatively new initiative within the service, the Intervention Team is proving to be extremely effective in managing this customer contact and finding the most efficient resolution.

## **6. Retirement Life / Adaptations**

- 6.1 During most of quarter 1 wellbeing contacts to Retirement Life tenants continued in the main by telephone with some visits to more vulnerable customers. Following a tenant engagement exercise to understand longer term tenant preferences preparations were made to roll out the longer term wellbeing service offer which offers a mixture of visits and telephone contacts up to 5 days per week, to meet the preferences of each tenant. This longer term service offer started from 5 July.
- 6.2 The adaptations service continued during quarter 1 to complete adaptations in the public and private sector. The service has been impacted by materials shortages, labour market pressures and COVID working practices as with the repairs and maintenance service which has impacted on performance. In the public sector 74% adaptations were completed within timescale and 81% in the private sector.

## **7. Homelessness / Housing Options**

- 7.1 Leeds Housing Options has continued to excel at early intervention, accepting 76% of homelessness assessments at the point of the applicant being threatened with homelessness, rather than when actually homeless (the national average on this is 42%). This has resulted in high levels of prevention outcomes being achieved, with 89% of applicants who approached when threatened with homelessness

being helped to secure an accommodation outcome that is available to them for a minimum of 6 months. In turn, this has resulted in consistently low temporary accommodation figures: the current figure is 53.

- 7.2 The service has been successful in securing funding for a specific Domestic Abuse Housing Advice team, who will be offering an enhanced specialist support & advice service for DA victims.
- 7.3 It also continues to work closely with Street Support and Commissioning colleagues to try and reduce the number of rough sleepers found in Leeds and has been heavily involved in the introduction of new 'Housing First' style accommodation, as well as more traditional hostel style provision.
- 7.4 The service is liaising closely with various social and private landlords in anticipation of the arrival of families fleeing Afghanistan who will need help with rehousing in Leeds.

## **8. Private Sector Regulation**

- 8.1 During the quarter 1, services have continued to be delivered in line with Government guidance. This involved continuing to try to resolve issues remotely where possible, with inspections and visits taking place when required. 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.
- 8.2 In October last year the Council recommenced the collection of licence fees which it had suspended in the first lockdown to support the sector. This has allowed us to continue to process licences especially those linked to the selective licensing schemes in Beeston and Harehills. So far over the 2 schemes we have received 5414 applications which are currently live, we have issued 3834 draft licences, 2940 actual licences, and had 352 applications deemed withdrawn by the applicant for non-payment. We continue to receive applications with 221 received in the last 3 months alone. COVID restrictions have meant a different way of working with reduced office capacity, which has impacted on the service's ability to process the licences resulting in our not being able to progress the issuing of them as quickly as initially planned.
- 8.3 As part of the scheme unfortunately several landlords have failed in their legal duty to apply for or hold a licence. Failure to do so is an absolute offence leading to potential legal action, namely a civil penalty of up to £30k or prosecution in the courts. So far 208 properties have been identified as potentially operating without a licence, resulting in evidence against 147, 52 where no evidence was found, and the remaining cases still being investigated. This has so far resulted in the issuing of 109 intention to issue a civil penalty, of which 79 have now had the final notice issued with 22 appeals received in relation to landlord's civil penalties.
- 8.4 The service continues to work with partners to target criminality in the sector. This way of working has continued to develop with improved understanding of roles and actions partners can take, improved intelligence sharing and joint visits to properties. In the last 6 months by working in this way and closer together, it

has contributed to £4m worth of cannabis being removed from properties through targeted action.

## **9. Housing Strategy Review**

9.1 The current Leeds Housing Strategy is a 5 year strategy for the period 2016-2021. A review of the strategy had been planned to begin in early 2020, but was put on hold during the initial lockdowns due to other workload pressures. A review of the strategy is now planned to take place during late 2021 with a view to developing a final updated strategy by March 2021.

9.2 The Leeds Strategic Housing Board met in September to agree the proposed approach to the Housing Strategy review. It is proposed that the review takes the following approach:

- The strategy is closely aligned to the 3 strategic pillars of the Council.
- Discussions with Council officers and relevant Boards, e.g., Health and Wellbeing Board. to ensure that the strategy is aligned to wider strategic priorities.
- A workshop with Board Members and key partners to review the strategy themes and priorities.
- Wider engagement with partners and the housing sector via online survey, meetings etc to ensure that there is collaboration across the wider housing sectors.
- Citizen engagement – via online survey / engagement and Tenant Scrutiny Board.
- Equality Impact Assessment – equality considerations of the strategy.