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| 9 September 2020 | | ITEM: 6 |
| Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee | | |
| Housing Service COVID-19 Response - Update | | |
| Wards and communities affected: All | Key Decision: N/A | |
| 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 follows the Housing Service COVID-19 Response paper which was presented to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2020. This update report provides additional information on the continuing action taken by the Housing service due to the challenges which have been faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In line with Government guidance and legislation, Housing 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 has tested the resilience and business continuity planning of the Housing service, and this report records the continuing action which is being taken to maintain critical services in these challenging times.

1. Recommendation

- 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.

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 which 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 which have been implemented nationally by the Government. Many of these services have now restarted, in part or in full, where it has been safe to do so.

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

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 still remain in place for larger physical meetings.

There has been no court action taken on those in arrears or for anti-social behaviour, which is a position reflected nationally due to a moratorium on eviction proceedings. The Rents and Welfare team have worked rigorously to contact tenants who have fallen into arrears, or were at risk of doing so, and have provided support accordingly.

2.2.2 Altered services

As almost all members of Housing staff continue to work from home, the interactions which would ordinarily have taken place face to face are instead being undertaken by telephone, by video call or online.

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

A plan has been provided to MHCLG which detailed the next steps the Council is taking as it continues to work to support those who were rough sleeping, or were at risk of rough sleeping.

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

2.2.3 Reduced services

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

Estate caretakers were vital in ensuring that 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. Since 1 July 2020 full operating hours have resumed and as such a normal caretaking service is being delivered again.

It was possible to continue to deliver emergency repairs to properties, with additional arrangements made to record requests which were received for routine repairs so that these could be addressed once it was safe to do so. The full repairs service resumed on 8 June 2020 with a backlog of 919 repairs which had been requested – the majority of which have now been completed or booked for completion.

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. At the time of writing, nine rounds of property advertisements had been completed since the resumption of choice based lettings, with a total of 170 properties advertised. Since the start of June 2020 up until the end of July 2020 a total of 143 new tenancies were created, including the 29 properties at the new Alma Court development in South Grays.

3.2. Anti-Social Behaviour and Housing Safeguarding Team

The Anti-Social Behaviour Team has continued to provide a service to tenants remotely. The number of cases reported to the team decreased slightly between February 2020 (34) and March 2020 (25). In April 2020, 27 cases were reported, and the majority of these were neighbour disputes and noise complaints, with a decrease in complaints regarding more serious criminal activity on estates.

Reports have been received regarding groups of people gathering on estates, both inside and outside their homes, during this period. A process was established with the Police which allows this intelligence to be reported, which in turn allows the Police to monitor the reported areas.

Since the relaxation of 'lockdown' restrictions, the Police have identified a significant increase in anti-social behaviour, noting a 17% increase in ASB reports in June 2020. The cases reported to the ASB team have remained stable during this period with 31 cases in May 2020, 25 cases in June 2020 and 21 cases in July 2020.

The Housing Safeguarding Team experienced higher levels of domestic abuse reports in February 2020 (99) and March 2020 (89) however, there was a significant reduction in April as referrals to the team fell to 50. Of these referrals, approximately half were repeated presentations. The referrals have increased since COVID-19 guidelines have been relaxed, with 61 in May 2020, 65 in June 2020 and 74 in July 2020.

Referrals appear to be increasingly complex in nature, in particular those from partner agencies, and there has been an increase in Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) enquiries.

There have been no overall increases in the number of sanctuary referrals from the police or requests from residents for additional security and, where social distancing has been achievable, sanctuary measures have continued to be installed.

The Housing Safeguarding Team continue to provide a service to all residents of Thurrock by way of welfare calls, text messages and other virtual, secure and safe means. The team currently use facilities at the Tilbury Hub and Piggs Corner to ensure face to face meetings are conducted, where necessary. This is a means for officers to exercise their professional judgement and ensure high risk cases are captured, even when victims are minimising.

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.

From April 2020 to June 2020, the total number of crime incidents captured on camera was 123. This included motor vehicle crime, non-domestic burglary, fly tipping, theft, anti-social behaviour, and the total number of council incidents was 41, including fly tipping, criminal damage, and anti-social behaviour.

The CCTV team will form part of a newly formed Community Safety Partnership Town Working Group including Essex Police, Licensing, and Environmental Enforcement to reduce ASB on local businesses in our high streets and shopping centres to make customers feel safe and secure shopping locally.

3.4. 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 July 2020, accommodation had been provided to 50 individuals (48 'households' comprised of 46 single people and 2 couples) who were rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping.

Temporary accommodation for 23 households has been provided locally, with 25 households provided with temporary accommodation in nearby areas. Support services and voluntary organisations have worked alongside the Council to provide food and supplies to those who have been accommodated throughout.

Each individual accommodated by the Council has received an assessment by the team's Senior Mental Health Practitioner, as well as being offered a robust care, housing and support assessment undertaken by the Council's support provider, to ensure that there was a clear picture of each individual's support needs.

Tailored offers of support have subsequently been provided and the team have had a high rate of success in the levels of engagement in this process.

The team are continuing to work to ensure that no-one accommodated returns to the street. A recovery plan (submitted to MHCLG) has been developed to steer the Council to meet its aim to provide settled accommodation that will provide long-term housing for these individuals and to support them to make positive transitions into independent living.

To date, a total of 15 households have moved on from the temporary accommodation which had been provided by the Council. Six of these households have been assisted to find and secure accommodation in the private rental sector, of which five are located within Thurrock. Nine households have moved on from the temporary accommodation of their own accord. Regular contact continues to be made to all those who the Council continues to accommodate as part of this work.

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

In order to successfully achieve this goal, it is crucial that the Council works alongside a range of partners to develop new initiatives and creative ways to best help those in need of assistance and to engage those who can assist. There has been evidence of successful outcomes for those at risk of rough sleeping through this approach already through the improved referral pathway between the Council and Thurrock Mind, and with the Thurrock Homelessness Partnership Board and emerging Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan there is ample opportunity to continue to drive this forward.

The total number of households which approached the Housing Solutions service between 23 March 2020 and 31 July 2020 was 562. During the same period in the 2019/20 financial year 697 households approached the service. This means that around 20% fewer households approached the Housing Solutions service, which can in part be attributed to the moratorium on evictions.

This national ban on new evictions is now due to be lifted on 20 September 2020, and the service is already preparing for the possibility of a spike in eviction notices once the courts reopen. Contact has been made with the local courts in Basildon and Southend in order to understand the level of

possession orders which were granted in the Thurrock area which were subsequently put on hold.

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

3.5. Private Sector Housing

MHCLG has regularly published specific guidance to local authorities on how to enforce standards and landlords to meet their legal duties and initiatives to support tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Council's Private Housing team have followed those recommended changes.

Although there have been restrictions in place which has limited the ability to physical attend or inspect properties, the team has continued to take informal action to ensure landlords comply with their legal obligations, tenants are supported and private rented properties are kept safe.

Between April 2020 and June 2020, 340 landlords/tenants were provided with informal written advice, and there were 212 instances of landlord/tenant mediation.

The team have continued to publish articles and press releases to emphasise the importance of keeping properties safe, including a reminder to landlords to have an Energy Performance Certificate rated E or above to continue renting lawfully, unless they have a valid exemption certificate in place. From 1 July 2020 financial penalties of up to £5,000 can be imposed against landlords.

3.6. Right to Buy

Due to COVID-19, the Government issued guidance which 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 was 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 reengineered to make the process more efficient, and applicants were contacted to clarify that these adjustments were necessary and would not affect their right to buy the property.

The service continued to meet the strict targets during the lockdown, and the number of applications have increased from approximately 2 per week at the end of March 2020 to approximately 8-9 per week at the end of June 2020. This increase can be attributed to the relaxation of 'lockdown' restrictions and the Government's announcement of a Stamp Duty Tax holiday until March 2021.

3.7. Rent and Welfare

The Rent and Welfare team have faced significant challenges, not least due to the increased number of tenants who have started new Universal Credit claims.

In the week of 16 March 2020 there were 2,252 of the Council's tenants in receipt of Universal Credit, however by 17 May 2020 this number had increased by 12.75% to 2,538. In comparison, in the weeks between 3 February 2020 and 23 March 2020 new Universal Credit claims increased by 4.55%. As at 26 July 2020, 2,666 of the Council's tenants were receiving Universal Credit.

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 continued financial inclusion support during this time.

Since the start of the 2020/21 financial year over 370 customers have received direct support from a financial inclusion officer. Those receiving support have had assistance with completing discretionary housing payment claims, council tax benefit claims, benefit claims (including Universal Credit), and referrals for reductions in water charges.

The total amount of additional income received in the current financial year as a result of the work by the financial inclusion officers is over £95,000.

In specific instances since mid-July where tenants have consistently not engaged with the team's efforts to make contact and provide the necessary support, the team have started to send 'first arrears letters'. The aim of these letters is to highlight the significance of the financial situation which the tenant is in and to encourage engagement with the team so that appropriate support can be provided, however further failure to engage may instead lead to the issuing of a notice of seeking possession.

3.8. Repairs and Planned Maintenance

A full repairs service resumed on 8 June 2020, and since this time the responsive repairs demand has averaged 635 repairs per week. Normal demand for this period would be 561 repairs per week, meaning that demand is on average 13.2% higher than normal, and is not yet slowing down.

A total of 921 backlog repairs were registered by Mears for completion once the full repairs service resumed. Of these, at the time of writing 840 repairs (91.2%) have been completed, 74 repairs (8%) have an appointment booked to complete the works, and 7 repairs (0.8%) are being held at the request of the tenant. National shortages of materials, such as plaster and plasterboard, extended the length of time before particular repairs could be completed, however as supplies of these have increased recently work was able to resume.

All planned maintenance works have continued in line with statutory obligations and all programmed visits have been completed. Gas servicing compliance stood at 95.63% at the end of June 2020. Any resident who had been due to have a gas service in May 2020 or June 2020 and were self-isolating or shielding now has an appointment booked for when their self-isolation or shielding period ends, and these will be completed by 7 August 2020.

Any resident who is in self-isolation after that period will have appointments booked for when their self-isolation period ends accordingly.

3.9. 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).

Since 23 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 31 July 2020, in excess of 38,000 contacts have been made with tenants by the Sheltered Housing Officers.

The Sheltered Housing service achieved a sustainable weekly shopping and prescription collection provision, meaning that tenants have not had to rely on other areas of the organisation to meet these needs.

Due to the action taken within sheltered housing which aimed to reduce the likelihood of the virus spreading within complexes, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in sheltered housing have been very low. Sadly, to date four residents have died – three of which died in hospital.

Tenants have been kept informed on government guidelines via posters produced by the Communications Team as and when changes in guidance have occurred. When the communal halls at the sheltered housing complexes were closed down a letter sent to each tenant to advise them accordingly.

All fire, health and safety legal requirements on site have been maintained weekly across all the sites, and work is underway to prepare the communal halls with the intention to open them for specific activities with social distancing at two metres.

In the time between choice based lettings resumed in June 2020 and the end of July 2020 a total of 27 new Sheltered Housing tenancies had been created.

3.10. Tenancy and Neighbourhood Team

Tenancy Management Officers have undertaken regular patch inspections and let 113 properties since the beginning of June 2020. These sign-ups have been completed in line with Government guidance and have introduced new ways of working to which has significantly reduced the time spent face-to-face with others. Contact with vulnerable tenants has continued to ensure that appropriate support is being provided, including in-person visits where contact with tenants had not been established.

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

Garage lettings have continued to take place and a total of 127 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.

The Neighbourhood Officers have completed all external inspections in locations where there is no caretaking service, and will now commence inspections of communal blocks. Issues identified and reported to date include fly tipping, repairs requirements and anti-social behaviour.

Resident Engagement has continued to be more virtual, using social media as a main platform and instigating and supporting a number of garden projects across the borough which have been greatly appreciated by residents.

3.11. Transforming Homes

Transforming Homes contractors have revised their working practices in line with Government recommendations and have been able to safely progress with works on site. Programmes for both Wates and United Living have incorporated the acceleration required to ensure the works issued to the end of the contract are completed in timeframe.

Enhanced communication with residents was issued prior to recommencement on site which included details of how contractors are ensuring the safety of residents and workforce. Resident Liaison Officers have also been on site and available via telephone to support residents with any queries or concerns.

Works to void properties has continued without disruption.

3.12. New Build Housing Development

Since the last report the Tops Club site, now known as Alma Court, has reached practical completion. The Council has taken possession of the site, and all units have been allocated.

Both the Claudian Way and Calcutta Road projects are now fully operational and progressing within government guidelines. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed handover on the Claudian Way site, with phases of handover starting in late August 2020 until the last units are completed, which is anticipated to be around September/October 2020.

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

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1.** The COVID-19 pandemic has tested almost every aspect of resilience and business continuity planning. This report serves as a record of the action which was taken to order to achieve the aim of maintaining a Housing service which continued to provide its 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. 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

6. Implications

6.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead, Corporate Finance

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.

6.2. Legal

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

6.3. Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Management 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.

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

Not applicable

7. Appendices to the report

None.

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