

9 September 2020		ITEM: 7
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Garage Project Update		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris, Corporate Director for Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report identifies and updates on the main focuses of the Garages Action Plan and service improvements which have been made so far.

1. Recommendation:

1.1 It is recommended that Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive this report for information and comment.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Thurrock Council holds a stock of 2482 garages located across the borough. Currently there are approximately 1749 garages let and 733 are void. Of these void garages, there were 244 are free to let and 255 are being held back for major works such as structural repairs, roof replacements or are being considered for redevelopment. The remainder are currently being repaired or awaiting clearance. The scheduled programme of works set up to clear the backlog of void garages is on schedule and it is expected that the rest of the garages in need of repair (excluding major works or redevelopment) will be completed within the next 6 months.

2.2 We acknowledged in the previous report that the garage buildings have been subject to very limited investment in recent years meaning the overall portfolio is now in a "fair" condition and requires a significant level of investment to maintain and improve the assets in the coming years to ensure these remain safe and usable for the residents of Thurrock. Working with our colleagues in Assets and Regeneration, and in line with the stock condition survey, regular inspections and trends in repairs, we have been reviewing long term regeneration and development opportunities across the borough.

- 2.3 One of the primary focuses of the Garage Service over the last year has been to reduce the backlog of void garages, inspect, clear, repair and re-let the empty garages.
- 2.4 Over the last 14 months, we have been working diligently to improve the Garage Services and work through the Garage Action Plan. A Garage Services Manager was permanently recruited in May 2020 and a full time Garage Officer is expected to be recruited in the next 6 months.

3. Garage updates

- 3.1 We have undertaken a comprehensive review of our garage assets across the borough. To date over 1200 garages have been inspected and an ambitious 5 year Redevelopment programme of garage sites has been put together to consider the long term future of these assets, this included site redevelopment, garage rebuilds and major repairs.

From the start of the garage repairs contract in April 2019, repairs and capital works has increased significantly. The table below indicates 2019/20 spend and 2020/21 forecast spend on capital works (i.e. roof replacements, new doors) and repairs (i.e. lock changes, door overhauls):

	2019/20		2020/21	
	Budget	Year End Spend	Budget	Forecast Spend as at Period 3 (June 2020)
Capital	£ 200,000.00	£ 188,170.57	£ 212,000.00	£ 212,000.00
Repairs	£ 75,000.00	£ 67,444.97	£ 75,000.00	£ 75,000.00

- 3.2 Garages services back office processes are under review and a number of documents have been considered and updated with our Legal Services to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose. For example, the Garage Tenancy Agreement has been reviewed and updated and we have introduced a Garage Plot Licence agreement for Parking. The Garage Plot tenancy agreement is currently under review as is other garage documentation.
- 3.3 We have been reviewing front office processes in order to improve the customer experience of Garages Services. There has been significant progress made to improve the garage re-let turnaround times and many garages that have been unused for years have now been let. The timely processing of the garage waiting list has also greatly improved with over 800 hard copy garage applications being uploaded, the waiting list reduced from 1600 applicants to just under 1000. There continues to be a high demand for garages across the borough with approximately 30 to 40 applications being submitted on line each week, though this does include a number of duplicates. Lettings continue to be carried out in line with waiting list

and garage demand. Information on the Thurrock website is also being reviewed and updated to ensure it is sufficient, clear and easy to use.

- 3.4 We have eliminated paper based applications and over the coming year we will be looking at improving the front end garage process further for lettings, enquiries and terminations linked through Northgate. This will include showing available garages locations on the website so residents can identify availability in their preferred area and an easy to use tracking system so applicants can check where their application is in process. We have a streamlined process for dealing with garage enquiries which is working well and handles approximately 20 to 30 enquiries each month, and set up a dedicated email address for applications.
- 3.5 Critical to customer satisfaction and building the reputation of the service is improving ways we engage with residents. We value the importance of good working relationships with internal and external colleagues in order to meet the changing needs of residents and provide a relevant, efficient and customer led service. We do this by collaborating with the Tenancy Management Officers, Neighbourhood Officers, Mears, Police and local resident groups. In collaboration with the Community Payback team we undertook a garage door decorating project at West Road at the end of last year. We acknowledge there were some teething problems with this scheme and lessons learned to ensure any future projects are more closely scrutinised. The garage door painting project in Springfield Road has been through a consultation process, however, has been delayed due to Covid-19. We will be reviewing this in the next few months to agree a start date.
- 3.6 In order to demonstrate we are a value for money service, significant efforts have been made to reduce the number of garage voids and increase income by improving turnaround for both repairs and lettings, further details are given later in the report.
- 3.7 We are currently taking part in the pioneering HUSK project, currently being piloted on Defoe Parade. This disabled-adapted, two bed property being built is a first for Thurrock and is an exciting and innovative housing solution. Other similar builds will be considered in the future to replace some garage sites where demand or need is low.
- 3.8 We continue to support the Council's recycling agenda and our local communities by recycling as much as possible from the garage clearances. To date, over 600 garages have been cleared.

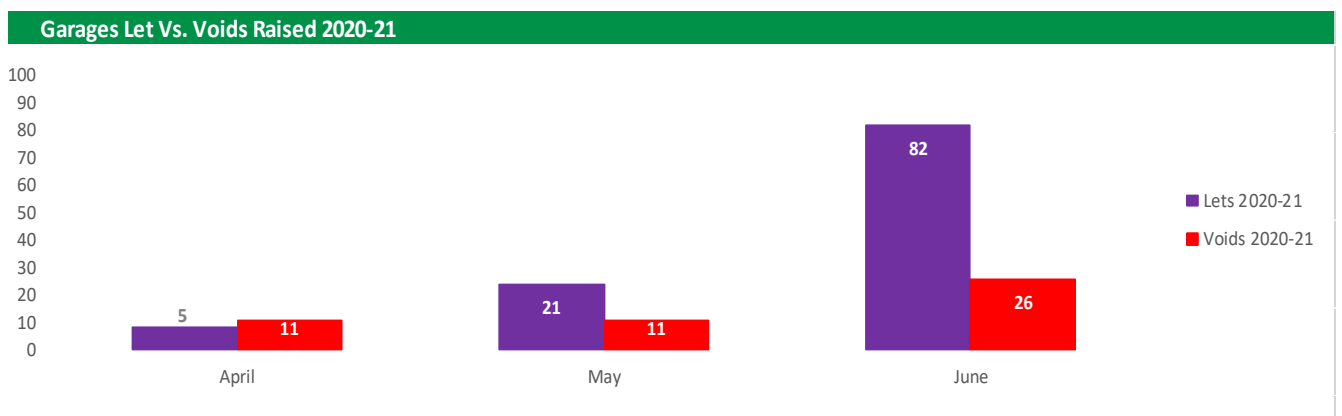
As part of the garage clearance phase, the reuse and recycling initiatives we have in place include:

- Working with book recycling organisations to recycle over 2500 books
- Recycled 4.18 tonnes of scrap metal and generated over £290 to go towards the Mayor's Fund
- Recycled over 200 white goods and electrical items, and 23 mattresses and 40 tyres.
- Working with the Local Area Co-Ordinators and Headstart Housing to identify families and individuals in need, we have donated 31 items of furniture and household equipment to date.
- Working with recycling companies to recycle over 2000 records, CDs, DVDs, video and cassette tapes.

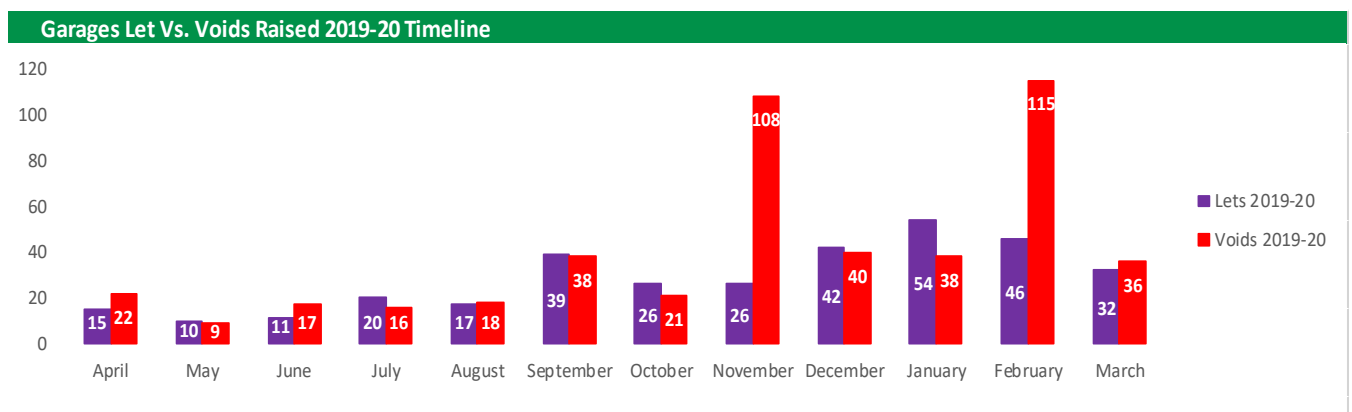
- Working with local charities and textile recycling services to recycle over 60 large bags of textiles.
- Distributed 8 large crates of unused stationery to various Housing teams
- Recycled 44 large bags of personal documents left by residents in the garages, this is approximately seven 660 litre euro bins of paper. All personal documents have been disposed of securely via the confidential waste disposal service. Approximately six 240 litre wheelie bins of other recyclable paper has been disposed of.

4. Performance

4.1 The table below shows there were 108 garages let and 48 garages made void in the first quarter of this year. This is a very good start to the year, particularly as there was a restriction of interactive duties, including lettings due to Covid-19 during this period.

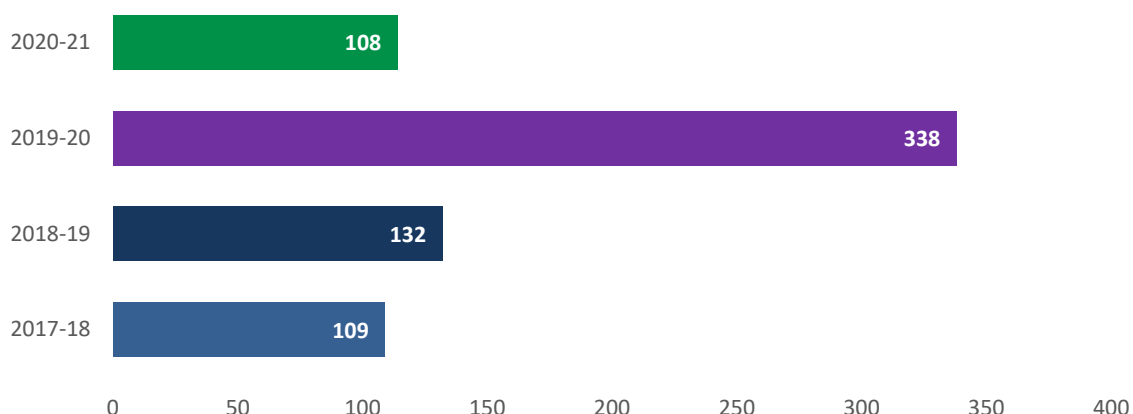


4.2 The table below shows there were 338 garages let and 478 garages made void in 2019-20. There is a discernible spike in the number of voids in November and February and this was due to a desk top exercise carried out during these months whereby a high number of let garages which had historically been used for Housing storage were returned to void status.



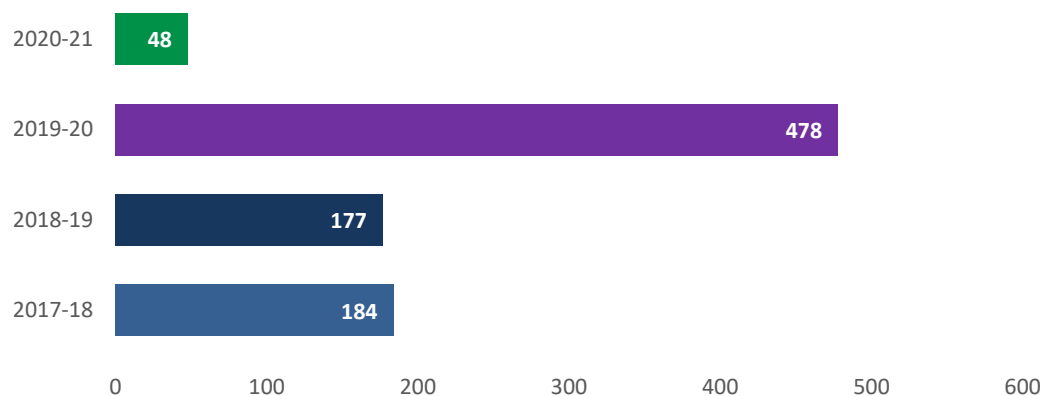
4.3 The table below shows that there has been a significant - nearly three-fold - increase in the number of garage lets in 2019-20, compared to the previous two years. Staff resources have continued to focus on lettings in the first quarter of this financial year in order to increase rent revenue.

Garages Let 2020-21 Vs. 2019-20, 2018-19 and 2017-18



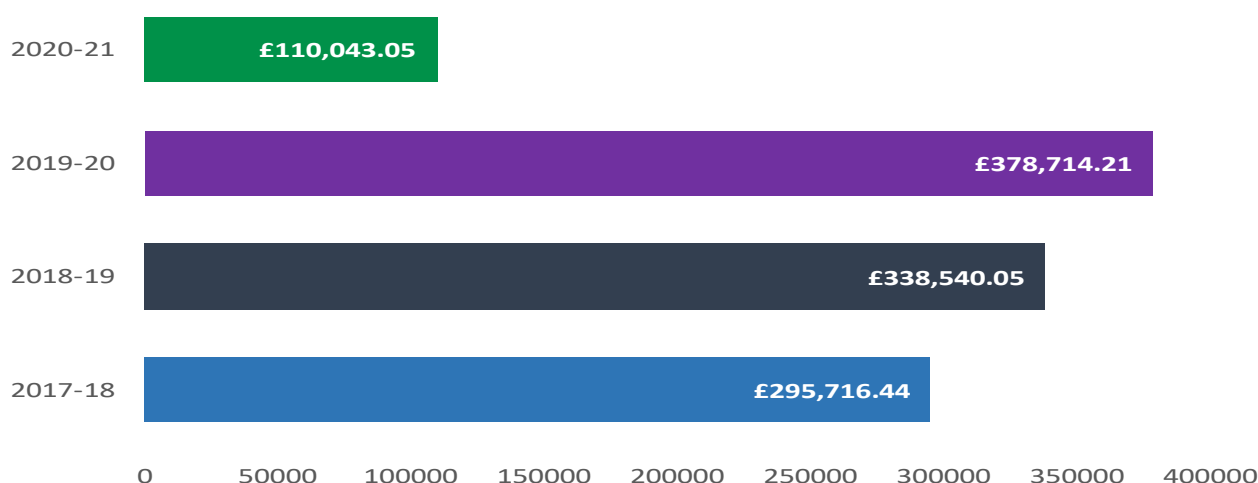
- 4.4 The table below shows the number of garage voids comparatively over the last three years and this year's first quarter. In particular it is important to note that there has been an increase in the number of garage voids in 2019-20, compared to the previous two years. This was expected due to the re-instatement to void of approximately 200 garages which had historically been used for storage by Housing. The long term benefit of clearing and returning these garage to void status is the potential for re-let. Over time these garages are being let and rental income will increase and the garage void loss will go down.

Garages Void 2019-20 Vs. 2018-19 and 2017-18



- 4.5 The financial void loss at the end of 2019-20 was higher than the previous year's figures and there are number of contributing factors that have influenced this performance. In particular, the increase in rent charge in April 2019 meant that rent loss did not go down despite a higher number of lettings carried out. The increased number of garages becoming void also contributed significantly, as did closer monitoring of rent accounts, and subsequent action taken to terminate garages with high arrears where necessary.

Garages Void Loss 2020-21 Vs. 2019-20, 2018-19 and 2017-18



5. Reasons for Recommendation and Considerations

- 5.1 This report has sought to provide an overview of the service improvements, challenges and actions to date, but also an indication of our continued commitment to improving Garage Services for residents.
- 5.2 There are a number of opportunities open to the authority in regards to the future approach to garages and the sites that they are located on, for commercial and income growth and to establish high functioning systems and processes to meet future demand.
- 5.3 It is acknowledged that historically providing efficient and effective garage services has been a challenge for the Housing Service, however, significant strides have been made over the last 18 months, and particularly over the last 6 months, despite the challenges of Covic-19. A dedicated team of a Garage Services Manager and a temporary Garage Officer has resulted in a significant increase in the number of lettings, high turnover of garages through repairs and clearance in order for them to be re-let and a clear direction of service development for major works, redevelopment and regeneration being established. This will lead to an increase in rental income, reduction of the number of voids and better processing of garage applications.

6. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 6.1 This report is an update of garage services in Thurrock, including the current position and planned actions. No consultation was required or undertaken at this time. However, the Council will consult with residents in line with particular actions from the Garage Action Plan including where garages are proposed for redevelopment.

7. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

7.1 The implications of the recommendations in this report may require a review of local policies and procedures.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial

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

The Council has an ongoing repairs budget of £0.075m, and an additional 2020/21 of Capital funding of £0.212m has been identified with the HRA reserves. This will support the delivery of the project outcomes, and is included within the overall HRA business plans.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Law and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Since this is an update report there are no direct legal implications arising specifically from this report. By virtue of Section 8 of the Housing Act 1985, in order to deliver its strategic housing role, the Council, as the local housing authority, is empowered to undertake a periodic review of its housing needs, identify housing priorities to reflect trends and dynamics, and the views of local people and stakeholders. In doing this it is imperative that where necessary, the Council should undertake consultation with residents in line with the requirement of the Garage Action Plan, especially where the garages are to be subject to redevelopment.

8.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

Whilst there are no direct implications at present arising from this report Community Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out in future against proposals where required.

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

There are no other implications arising from this report.

9. Background papers used in preparing the report

None

10. Appendices to the report

None

Report Author:

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Housing