

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date **05 NOVEMBER 2020**

Report of: **DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

Subject: **COVID-19 IMPACT ON HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS SERVICES**

SUMMARY

This report focusses on how each of the Housing service areas were impacted by the pandemic and highlights actions that were taken to enable the continuation of essential services, respond to Government directives and ensure the safety of our residents and staff.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members consider the contents of this report and make any comments or raise any questions for clarification.

INTRODUCTION

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the Council and our community. Immediate response efforts were required to maintain key Council services and to rapidly adapt to new requirements which helped to support residents and businesses in the Borough.
2. The Chief Executive's Management Recovery Team met regularly throughout the pandemic in order to manage the Council's response.
3. In order to guide the on-going recovery process following the lockdown, a COVID-19 Recovery Framework was developed to focus on key areas of recovery. This was approved by the Executive at the meeting of 3 August 2020 as were a set of Recovery Plan Objectives for the Council to follow.
4. This report focusses on how each of the Housing service areas were impacted by the pandemic and highlights actions that were taken to enable the continuation of essential services, respond to Government directives and ensure the safety of our residents and staff.

BACKGROUND

5. The Housing department began preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 by reviewing our Business Continuity Plans and services were prioritised in anticipation of possible staff shortages. Service reviews took place regularly in the lead up to the official national lockdown announcement.
6. On 18 March 2020, the Government stated that vulnerable groups should 'shield' and work from home. This resulted in a reduction in the number of front-line staff within Housing services and from 23 March 2020, the majority of staff began working from home in accordance with Government guidelines.

HOUSING BENEFITS & COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

7. The Benefits service saw an immediate increase in calls and emails from residents requesting advice on what help they may be entitled to when wages reduced due to the furlough scheme and/or subsequent loss of employment.
8. We saw a marked increase in the workload for existing Housing Benefit cases with us needing to update the current income information held due to it reducing. We also saw a marked increase in claims for Council Tax Support. We initially prioritised cases where the benefit needed to increase or was being awarded for the first time and stopped resourcing certain activities such as case reviews so as to concentrate on the real time need for fast payments.
9. We streamlined the demand routes into the service to ensure we had sufficient resources behind each route. Limiting the demand routes enabled us to concentrate on what mattered which was getting through advantageous changes and new claims quickly and it did not cause any problems for the customer as there were no direct complaints as to not being able to speak to someone immediately or to visit the office. In fact our productivity increased as we were able to target the work demand flow and very quickly we started to receive comments from customers surprised at our ability to get back in contact with them within 24 hours and our ability to speed through their applications.

10. The team adapted very quickly while contending with daily bulletins from the Department for Work and Pensions explaining how to treat furlough payments, self-employed support grants, what income to include in any assessment and what was to be disregarded and other welfare/support measures introduced..
11. We undertook mass caseload updates in order to incorporate the reassessment of claims due to the increase in Universal Credit allowances and Tax Credit disregards and ensure customers understood the impact of these changes on their Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support.
12. On 27 March 2020, the Government announced the launch of a Hardship Fund which would enable local authorities to provide a further reduction in the 2020-21 Council Tax liabilities for working age people in receipt of Council Tax Support. Following the testing and implementation of the necessary software changes, all cases were re-assessed and awarded a further reduction in their Council Tax bill of £150.
13. We have recently implemented the Test and Trace Isolation Support Payment Scheme and are currently monitoring the impact on our resources as this evolves particularly if COVID-19 transmission rates rise locally.
14. We are expecting to see another surge in claims from the end of October as the Government's furlough scheme changes again and further changes to the financial support provided to the self-employed. We are also preparing for further rises in unemployment locally and the subsequent increase in Universal Credit and Council Tax Support claims.

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

15. Following the start of lockdown, all contact with our tenants was made by telephone or email and a voicemail service was implemented so if contact was made by telephone, customers could leave their details and an officer would call them back. This has proved to be a very efficient way of dealing with our tenants as most calls were returned within the same day and issues often resolved during that call. This system is still in operation whilst there is a reduced number of officers working in the Civic Offices.
16. From 27 March 2020, all housing possession action already in the court system or any about to go into it was suspended. This suspension was initially set to last for 90 days (to 25 June 2020) but was subsequently extended until 20 September 2020. This prevented the team from taking any formal action in respect of rent arrears throughout this time. The Neighbourhood Officers were instructed to contact their tenants with rent arrears to discuss how the lockdown had affected them financially and to provide appropriate guidance and support. Those tenants who were experiencing financial hardship due to lockdown were encouraged to keep in regular contact with their Neighbourhood Officer and to pay as much rent as they could during this time. Unsurprisingly, the level of arrears has increased, in part due to a larger number of our tenants now receiving Universal Credit which is paid monthly in arrears but is also attributable to tenants struggling financially whilst on the furlough scheme.
17. In recognition of the increasing rent arrears, a new temporary post has been created within the team to engage with all tenants who have rent arrears and agree mutually acceptable repayment arrangements. Full support will be given to those tenants who "can't pay" however formal action will be taken against those who "won't pay".

Progress will be included in the Tenancy Management Report due to be presented to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in March 2021.

18. Multi-agency meetings have continued throughout this period using remote working technology such as Microsoft Teams
19. We saw an increase in bulky waste being dumped in the communal bin areas at some of our blocks. Our colleagues from Streetscene Services responded to all reports thereby ensuring the health and safety of our tenants and members of the public. Letters were sent to all our tenants living in accommodation with communal areas to remind them of their responsibility to keep communal areas clear and tidy.
20. We also experienced an increase in calls relating to anti-social behaviour between neighbours and claims of people not adhering to the Government's social distancing rules. This proved quite challenging to manage as officers were working from home so with the help of the Neighbourhood Police Team, we addressed these issues either by telephone, email or letter and in the most extreme cases, the Police visited on our behalf.
21. From 23 March 2020 to 4 July 2020 we were unable to facilitate any house moves unless an emergency arose. Since the lifting of restrictions, lettings have commenced again with appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety of our staff and tenants.
22. Our Welfare Support Officer has maintained contact with her customers throughout lockdown via phone, email or letter and liaised with other agencies on their behalf to ensure that existing debts were still paid, or arrangements made.
23. Sheltered Housing Officers have continued to provide support to our elderly and more vulnerable tenants. All communal areas such as community lounges and kitchens have been closed to residents since 23 March 2020 and will remain closed until the Government announces that these restrictions can be lifted. The cleaning of our core Sheltered Housing Schemes has increased to ensure more regular cleaning of touchpoints and communal areas such as the corridors and laundry rooms. Sheltered Housing Officers responsible for a core scheme have remained on site since March undertaking phone welfare checks instead of visiting tenants' flats. The out-of-hours service and emergency service has remained in place and officers have been provided with the appropriate PPE to enable them to undertake visits where absolutely necessary. Visits to our dispersed sheltered schemes by Sheltered Housing Officers were also suspended and replaced by weekly telephone welfare checks. Visits have recently started again with most tenants happy to be visited however some are still very anxious and have continued with a telephone welfare check

BUILDING SERVICES

24. Upon lockdown, the maintenance service immediately moved to delivering urgent and essential repairs and services only. All non-essential reactive repairs were held off, details of repair requests were logged until it was possible to respond in accordance with government guidance. Fortunately, demand for non-essential work was very low during this period and because many contractors furloughed their employees, Council trade operatives were redeployed to work on void properties in a successful effort to provide emergency housing during this period. The Responsive Repairs service desk operators worked from home to manage calls from our tenants and deploy operatives and contractors where appropriate. A core team comprising the Maintenance

Manager, Voids Inspector and Maintenance Surveyor remained at the depot to oversee and support all areas of the service.

25. All planned maintenance was put on hold to concentrate our resources to urgent and essential repairs, and voids.
26. Most of the servicing and compliance work, undertaken by specialist contractors continued in accordance with government guidance, e.g. gas servicing, fire alarm equipment, lift maintenance etc. Periodic electrical inspections were suspended however have now resumed.
27. During the summer, contractors gradually started providing COVID safe risk assessments and method statements to undertake non-essential works in an effort to normalise the service. Our in-house operatives have recently started to undertake works that are 'safe to do' whilst protecting those that are more vulnerable by enabling them to undertake tasks that are outside or limited contact with tenants. However, while the repairs service is quickly moving back to "normal", there are some non-essential tasks are still not safe to do within homes due to the location of the task and proximity to vulnerable tenants.

HOUSING OPTIONS AND HOMELESSNESS

28. Following the start of lockdown, all contact with Housing Options customers was made by telephone or email and a voicemail service was implemented so if contact was made by telephone, customers could leave their details and an officer would call them back. This system is still in operation whilst there is a reduced number of officers working in the Civic Offices. We initially saw a reduction in the number of people contacting the service for housing advice, presumably as a result of the suspension of possession proceedings, however since the commencement of court actions in September 2020 enquiries and requests for help have increased.
29. People experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping are at an increased risk of COVID-19, due to their poor underlying health and difficulties in self-isolating should they contract the virus. Following the Government's 'Everybody In' directive issued on 26 March, FBC sourced and offered accommodation to all known rough sleepers and customers contacting us to say they were threatened with homelessness.
30. Since that date, 49 individuals were provided with emergency accommodation in local hotels and guest houses, Fareham Borough Council voids and other vacant accommodation units. Two individuals continued to refuse offers of accommodation throughout the lockdown period and remained on the streets.
31. The cost of providing this accommodation throughout lockdown has been significant and whilst we received some funding from Government in May and have been able to offset some expenditure through Housing Benefit, the cost has been predominately charged to the Council's General Fund. A small sum of money from Hampshire County Council's Local Welfare Assistance Grant was made available to us for the purchase of basic furniture and equipment where needed.
32. On 2 May, the Government announced a new government taskforce to assist and advise local authorities on plans to support rough sleepers into long-term accommodation once lockdown was lifted. Subsequent to this, the Next Steps Accommodation Programme was launched, aimed at providing financial resources to

local authorities to ensure as few individuals as possible return to the streets following time spent in emergency accommodation as a result of the pandemic. We submitted two bids and have received funding to ensure the longevity of the supported housing scheme in East Street and at the time of writing, we are awaiting a decision on the other bid which will enable us to provide further emergency accommodation in the borough.

33. Settled accommodation has been found for the majority of individuals accommodated during lockdown through a combination of private rented sector tenancies, allocation into social housing, supported housing or sub-let arrangements with Two Saints.
34. Whilst the hostels have plans in place for infection control, there is still a high likelihood of outbreaks as the opportunities for viral containment is minimal. Shared spaces, such as communal lounges and kitchens present challenges to managing risk and relies upon compliance by residents to self-isolate and therefore manage an outbreak. Public Health England have powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to impose proportionate requirements and restrictions on individuals whom they suspect are infected and there is a risk that they will infect others. Use of these powers is a last resort when all other options to support and encourage the individual to self-isolate have been exhausted. To support the need for self-contained accommodation where individuals fail to comply, we are currently keeping four council-owned bedsits empty.
35. All local authorities are required to have adequate provision in place to ensure rough sleepers have access to overnight accommodation during severe weather, especially in winter months. In previous years, Fareham Borough Council and Gosport Borough Council have jointly funded emergency access beds at 101 Gosport Road between November and March as an alternative to B&B. Under current restrictions, this dormitory style arrangement would not be permitted due to the risk of infection in such communal settings therefore alternative provision is currently being investigated. On 13 October 2020, MHCLG wrote to all local authorities confirming additional support would be made available to them to ensure rough sleepers have overnight accommodation during severe weather and we are currently awaiting the detail about how we access this winter funding.

CONCLUSION

36. Whilst social distancing measures remain in place, the Government's metre-plus guidelines have allowed more staff to return to the office and for operational staff to work with greater ease. As a result, most of the Housing services are now operating effectively within the constraints of complying with Government guidance.
37. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-changing guidance continues to provide new challenges for the service. Overall, the service has adapted well to the new way of working and the unprecedented demand placed upon it since March 2020.
38. Our response is largely thanks to the dedication, resilience and flexibility shown by the team throughout this incredibly challenging time.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman (Ext. 4645)