

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date 08 July 2021

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive Officer

Subject: Tenancy Management, Repairs and Maintenance Report

SUMMARY

This report provides the Panel with information about the housing management and maintenance services provided by the Neighbourhood Team and the Repairs and Maintenance Team.

RECOMMENDATION

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

INTRODUCTION

1. The Council owns 2431 homes comprising general purpose and sheltered housing properties. This stock figure is affected by Right to Buy sales, re-purchases, new builds, demolitions and other disposals such as sale on the open market or change of use.
2. A breakdown of our properties by size, type and area can be seen at Appendix A.
3. We also own 582 garages which are let to tenants and private residents.

NEIGHBOURHOOD AND SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICES

4. The team responsible for the delivery of tenancy services to our residents is split into two distinct teams. Officers in the Neighbourhood Team are all based at the Civic Offices and each have their own geographical 'patch' of properties within the Borough. The Sheltered Housing Officers are based at our core sheltered schemes and provide on-site or mobile support to our older residents.
5. The functions provided by the teams include the following:
 - Tenancy & Estate Management
 - Rent Collection
 - Tenancy Sustainment and Welfare Support
 - Right to Buy
 - Mutual Exchanges
 - Tenant Engagement and Involvement
 - Tenancy Fraud
6. The team also work closely with the Repairs and Maintenance team in the management of our empty properties and adaptations for disabled tenants.

TENANCY & ESTATE MANAGEMENT

7. Tenancy and estate management encompasses a wide range of functions including lettings and new tenancy sign-ups, neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour, dealing with resident enquiries and concerns, all with the aim of enabling our tenants to live independently in safe and secure homes.
8. Over the last 12 months, we have seen a rise in neighbour disputes as tenants spent more time at home. In the majority of cases, issues were resolved quickly and simply however more serious cases of anti-social behaviour required the involvement of partner agencies, such as the Police, Adult or Children's Services, NHS and other specialist organisations.
9. There has also been an increase in the levels of fly tipping and dumping of household waste in our bin areas and other communal spaces. We have worked hard to engage with tenants to advise them of their responsibilities and to the risks such actions pose

to them and their neighbours.

RENT COLLECTION

10. Income from rents for the current financial year is £12.2m. For most of our tenants, we charge 'social rent' (set using a Government formula and typically 50% of market rent) but for those in newly acquired properties or some new-build properties, an 'affordable rent' (80% of market rent is set).
11. In addition to the weekly net rent, many tenants pay a service charge for the following:
 - Sheltered Housing Support & Management
 - Cleaning of communal areas
 - Grounds Maintenance
 - Heating
 - Water Rates
 - Communal laundry facilities
 - Motor Scooter Storage
12. The gradual replacement of Housing Benefit for Universal Credit over the last three years has increased the level of rent arrears across the social housing sector nationally. Housing Benefit is paid weekly, directly into the tenant's rent account, whereas the housing element of Universal Credit is paid directly to the tenant and generally at least one month in arrears.
13. This national picture has been replicated in Fareham and we have seen arrears rise from 3.43% (of the projected annual rent collectable) in April 2019 to 4.83% in March 2020 which correlates with the gradual transfer of tenant's Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.

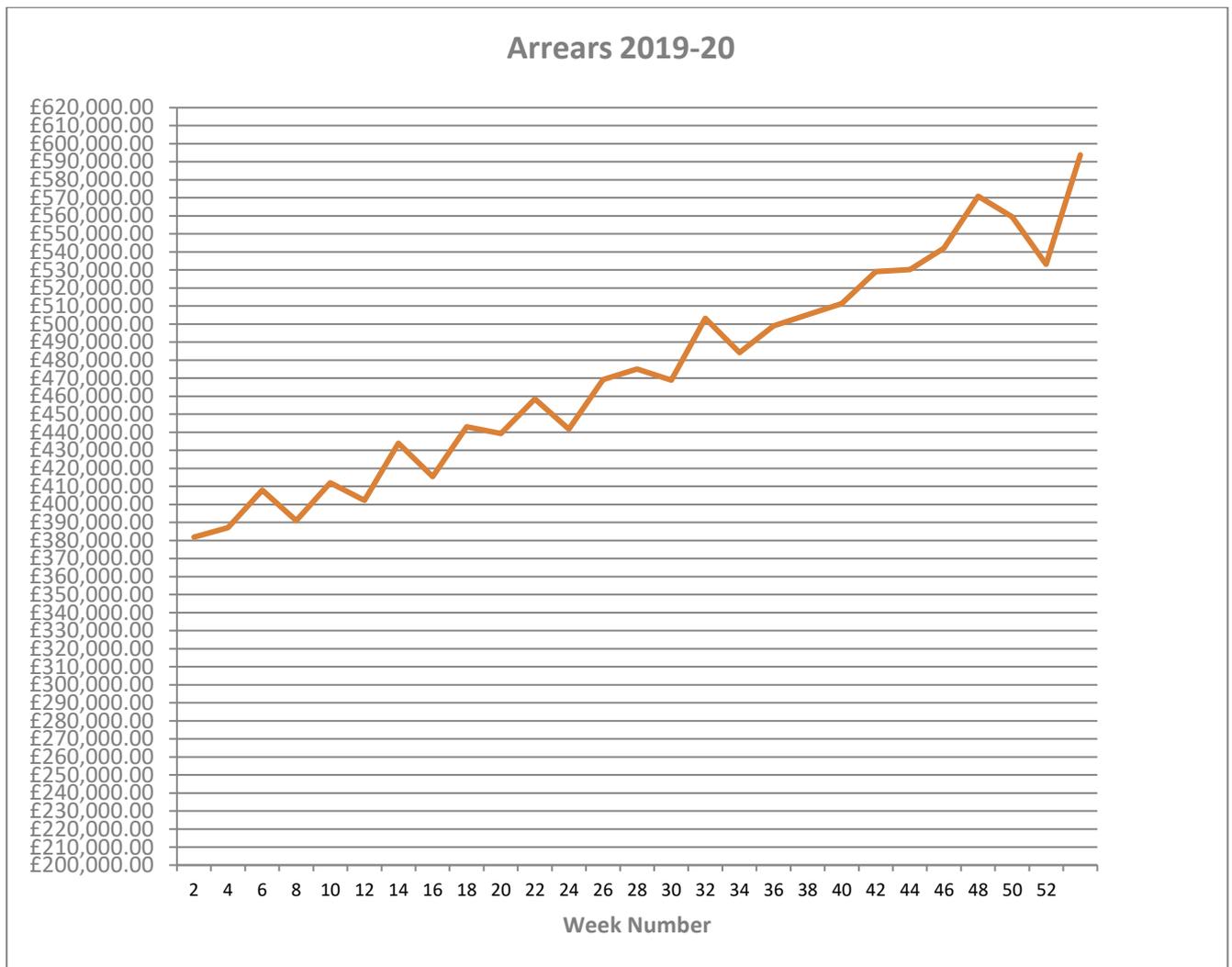


Figure 1

14. Rent arrears continued to rise during the pandemic and in November 2020, an additional dedicated Rent Recovery Officer was employed. Their focus was to contact all tenants in arrears, making payment arrangements and monitoring these. It was at this point we decided to change our approach to recovering rents and instead of focussing on normal process driven exercises which involves sending out letters and issuing notices seeking possession, our approach was to focus on individual tenants and use the phone and text as well as emails and personal letters in order to engage tenants in conversations with us, showing them we have empathy for their situations and having conversations about what is expected of them in paying rent and how we can move forward with them in reducing their arrears.
15. All staff are empowered to make payments arrangements with tenants based on their individual circumstances and if necessary will refer tenants on to our Welfare Support Officer to assist tenants with other debts they have and offering assistance with food parcels and other necessary household items via charities such as Acts Of Kindness.
16. All officers have worked closely with the Benefits Team and been able to agree some awards of Discretionary Housing Payments to reduce arrears where the pandemic has severely affected the financial circumstances of a family. In some circumstances the Neighbourhood Officers have been able to downsize tenants to more manageable accommodation thus ensuring arrears do not increase further and any incentive

payments due to the tenant used to reduce arrears.

- 17. Universal Credit payments have also been rigorously checked and where tenants have been identified as vulnerable or falling into arrears, the housing element is paid directly into their rent account.
- 18. We have been able to secure a Single Point of Contact within the Universal Delivery Centre to deal with enquiries and payment anomalies where the tenant is unable to do this themselves. This has been particularly effective for us in relation to those tenants who have drug/alcohol/mental health problems and are unable to deal with these issues and has also been effective for those tenants who have not engaged with us but there is an issue with their rent account.
- 19. The graph below shows the impact of the pandemic on rent arrears during the financial year ending 31 March 2021. Arrears rose to 5.98% (of the projected annual rent collectable) in October 2020 but has now fallen to 4.62% which is below the level recorded in April 2020.

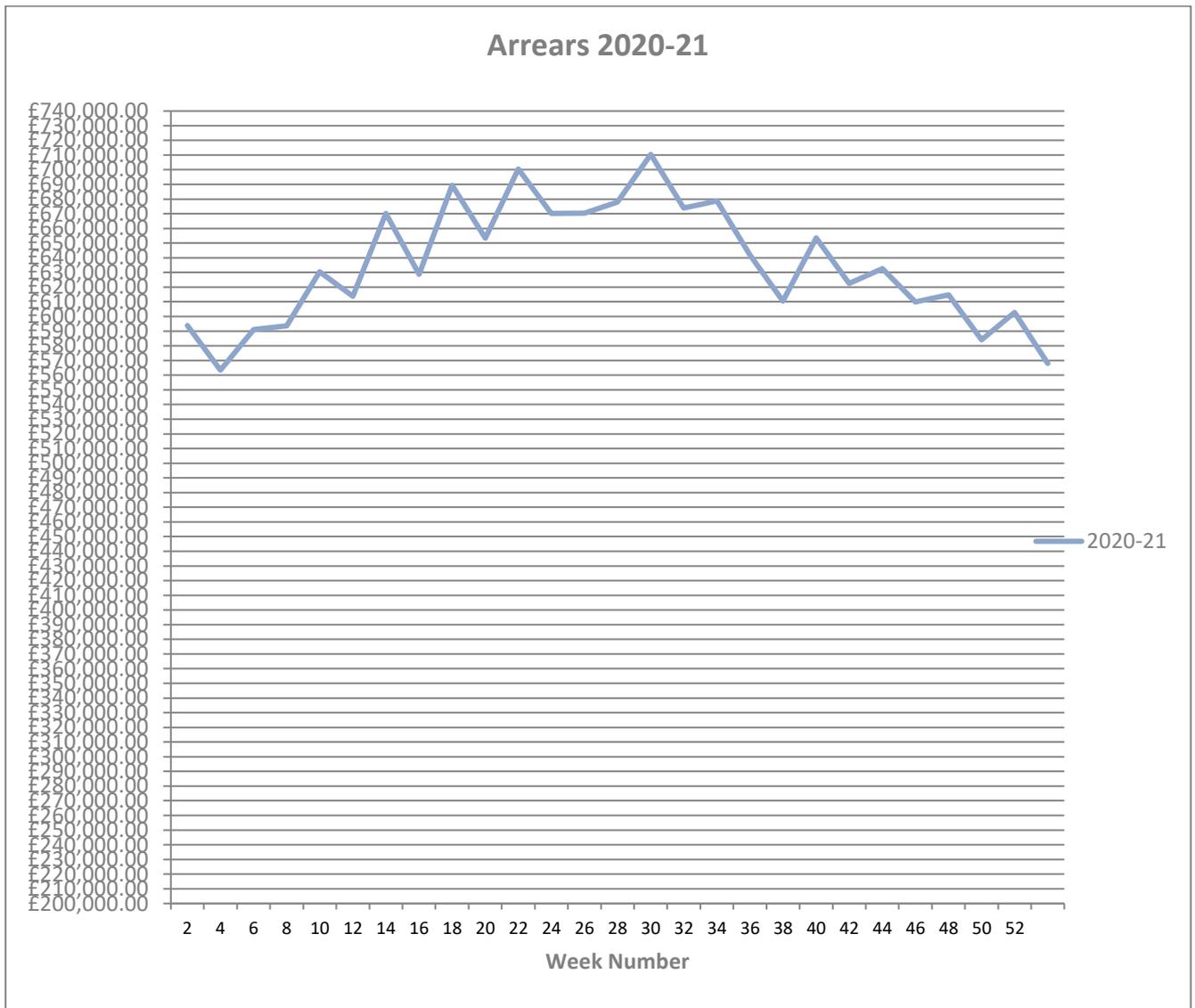


Figure 2

RIGHT TO BUY AND MUTUAL EXCHANGES

20. Most tenants who hold a secure tenancy for at least 3 years are eligible to purchase their home through the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme. This however does not apply to tenants who do not have a secure tenancy and those tenants who live in accommodation which is designated for the elderly and some accommodation which is designated for the disabled.

21. Under the RTB scheme, tenants can claim up to 70% discount off the purchase price subject to a maximum discount amount of £84,600

22. Over the past 5 years, 61 properties have been purchased through the RTB scheme:

Year	1 bed-flat	1 bed-bungalow	2 bed-flat or maisonette	2 bed-house	3 bed-house	4 bed-house	Total
2016	2	0	4	0	5	0	11
2017	1	0	7	0	6	1	15
2018	0	1	4	1	5	1	12
2019	1	0	4	2	9	0	16
2020	2	0	2	0	3	0	7
Total	6	1	21	3	28	2	61

Table 1

23. Tenants who hold a secure tenancy have a right to exchange (swap) their home. This is a mutual agreement with two or more parties who must have the written consent from their landlord.

24. Exchanges are a preferred housing option for many social housing tenants who may be adequately housed but want to move to a different area or are looking for a move to a larger or smaller home.

25. The Council has signed up to a national exchange scheme called HomeSwapper and all secure tenants are eligible to apply through the scheme to exchange with another social housing tenant almost anywhere in the Country. On applying to HomeSwapper, tenants are asked to provide information about their present property and say what property they are looking for.

26. The HomeSwapper scheme will match applicants' needs and notify them of potential exchange opportunities. When tenants believe they have identified a property they are interested in, they contact the Council to obtain our written consent. On receipt of the exchange application and confirming eligibility, housing officers arrange an inspection of the property together with a building surveyor and both parties to the exchange. The purpose of this visit is to identify and agree work that will be carried out by the Council and any work that the outgoing tenant needs to carry out prior to the exchange. In some cases, the ingoing tenant may accept responsibility for the future maintenance and upkeep of any non-standard fixtures and fittings.

27. In the event that other parties to the exchange are social housing tenants of another local authority or housing association there will be an exchange of tenant references before any consent is given.

TENANT ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

28. We offer a range of involvement opportunities and consultation events enabling tenants to be involved in the services we provide and to play a key role in shaping and monitoring housing services. To ensure tenants are able to fulfil this vital role, we fund training and allocate resources where necessary.

29. Due to the pandemic, it has not been possible to hold our regular Tenant and Leaseholder Forums, however it is envisaged that these will commence again in the Autumn.

TENANCY FRAUD

30. Tenancy fraud occurs when one of our properties is occupied by someone who is either legally not entitled to be there or has obtained use of the property fraudulently. Therefore, it is vital that we tackle tenancy fraud to ensure legitimate tenants have access to affordable homes.

31. Some examples of tenancy fraud are:

- Application fraud – a prospective tenant provides false information on their housing application in order to gain a property
- Right to Buy fraud – a tenant knowingly provides false information when applying to buy their home under the scheme
- Subletting fraud – a tenant rents out all or part of their property to someone else without our knowledge or permission
- Succession fraud – a person moves into a property when the legal tenant either dies or moves away and that person does not have the right to live there

32. Prevention is always better than cure. It can be a very difficult and expensive process to end a tenancy or take action against those who have committed tenancy fraud so stopping fraud in the first place is a key priority for the team.

33. We reduce the risk of fraud by carrying out detailed residency and identification checks on all our tenants. These checks are carried out at different stages of a tenancy, including at the start of the tenancy, changes to sole/joint, assignment, succession and Right to Buy. All reports of sub-letting and abandonments are investigated in full and appropriate action taken. Our Investigation Officer undertakes tenancy audits to check that the authorised tenant is living at the property.

34. The counter-fraud work carried out with the Neighbourhood Team, including the numbers and outcomes of fraud cases is reported to the Audit & Governance Committee on an annual basis.

REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICES

35. The main functions provided by the Repairs and Maintenance Services include the

following:

- Responsive Repairs
- Planned Maintenance
- Void Properties
- Fire Risk Assessments and Measures

36. Throughout all these functions the teams work closely with the Neighbourhood and Sheltered Housing Services. They also support wider corporate requirements (such as repairs to public conveniences) and provide services to some of the Borough's Community Associations.

RESPONSIVE REPAIRS

37. The Housing Responsive Repair Service is primarily delivered by directly employed operatives. There are currently 13 operatives employed by the Council who cover specific trades (such as plumbing, plastering, groundworks, electrician etc.) as well as several operatives who are multi-traders.

38. In January 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) a contractor Framework was put in place to enable the Council to easily appoint appropriate external companies to help meet some of the repair requirements. This Framework primarily includes small and medium companies (SMEs) which are local to the Fareham area. There are a series of 'lots' covering trades such as groundworks, fencing and windows. Within each 'lot' there are typically up to six companies who the Council can use, normally for larger or specialist repair works. This helps ensure repair works can be undertaken in a timely manner by negating the need for an individual tender process for each item of work and it also provides some contingency for the Council and helps to manage peaks in workload.

COVID-19

39. During 2020/21 the COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge for repairs in Council properties. National Guidance and the Council's approach on working in people's homes throughout the pandemic has predominately meant only urgent/essential and outside work took place. Alongside this several Council Responsive Repair operatives needed to safeguard themselves due to health vulnerabilities. Together this has inevitably resulted in a backlog of repair works.

40. In April 2021 non-essential/non-urgent work in people's homes recommenced and slow but steady progress into the backlog is now beginning to be made, this using a mix of the Council's own operatives and the contractor Framework.

41. COVID-19 Safety guidance has been (and is still being) used by the teams to ensure the risk of infection is minimised for both Council employees/contractors and our customers.

42. We expect the COVID-19 backlog of repairs to remain in place for some time. Thus far customers have largely been understanding of this due to the unprecedented set of circumstances. Urgent works, particularly those that present a safety risk, will continue to be prioritised but on-going monitoring will also take place to ensure that the backlog of non-urgent work is being addressed in as timely a manner as possible.

43. Additional complexity has and continues to arise around supplies of certain materials. During 2020/21 there have at times been issues with plaster supplies, concrete, UPVC windows and timber.
44. Despite the challenges around the COVID-19 pandemic the Responsive Repair Operatives and surveyors positively embraced the opportunity to be redeployed and use their skills to assist the wider needs of our customers arising from the pandemic. The Responsive Repair Operatives worked on void properties during the pandemic. This was hugely beneficial and meant the Council were able to continue to provide much needed emergency housing for those in need; helping to provide accommodation for domestic abuse victims and to ensure an offer of accommodation could be made to all rough sleepers in the Borough. Their contribution was invaluable.
45. The team also helped with COVID-19 arrangements around the May 2021 elections through the construction of screens; this was completed at a fraction of the cost compared to the Council purchasing these externally.
46. In the coming year the focus will be on continued customer service and addressing the COVID-19 backlog for non-urgent repairs.

Moving Forward

47. Some revisions to the structure in the Responsive Repair team have also now been made. A new Responsive Repairs Team Leader post and a Responsive Repair Surveyor post have been created and filled. This will continue to improve the workings of the team, including focusing on the COVID-19 backlog. It will also allow the existing Property Manager (Housing) to invest more time in Planned Maintenance and on Fire Risk Assessments & Measures. Further details of the revised structure can be found in paragraph 61 of this report.

PLANNED MAINTENANCE

48. Planned Maintenance is the collective term for all major repairs, cyclical maintenance, and improvements to our properties. This includes improvements such as installation of central heating, fitted kitchens, bathrooms modernisations and double-glazing replacements when they reach the end of their useful life. It also includes any major repairs to the outside of properties such as external redecoration, roofs and balcony repairs as well as improvements to the general environment in hard landscaped areas.
49. In 2019 a Stock Condition Survey was completed for the Council by Rand Associates. This surveyed 20% of the Council's housing stock, with those findings then extrapolated out to inform the condition of the Council's entire stock. The information from the survey has now been fully incorporated into a new Stock Condition system called Keystone. Keystone can then be used to forward plan for works to properties/blocks and to understand the potential costs involved.
50. Understanding future improvement works (and potential associated costs) provides several benefits. This includes (a) being able to consider appropriate budget requirements for future works; (b) allowing more works to be programmed rather than just being reactive; (c) spotting issues earlier (often earlier preventative measures/repairs can be more cost effective than a complete replacement); and (d) to help inform redevelopment and regeneration decisions. An example of the latter was at Menin House where we were able to swiftly understand the future maintenance costs for the Menin House block over the coming 30 years by using the data and

information held in Keystone.

VOID PROPERTIES

51. Void properties are those Council homes that become vacant. Works are normally required to a home before it is let again. This can vary from very simple/minimal work (such as replacing some broken tiles) to a complete property clearance and refurbishment. In a typical year in the region of 215 voids might be processed for or on behalf of the Council.
52. Void works are currently undertaken by Mountjoy as part of a contract arrangement with works and costs overseen by the Council's Void Surveyor. The current contract with Mountjoy has a review period for extension in April 2022 and contract end in March 2024.
53. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic Mountjoy furloughed most of their staff but as referred to in paragraphs 44-45 above, the Council's own Responsive Repair Operatives and surveyors ensured work successfully continued. Mountjoy resumed their work in summer 2020 and continue to undertake work to most void Council homes.

FIRE RISK ASSESSMENT AND MEASURES

54. As part of the Council's fire safety approach officers regularly meet to discuss any national guidance or legislation updates, either in place or emerging.

Fire Risk Assessments

55. The Council have a statutory responsibility to carry out Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) on all communal areas in our buildings (corridors, staircases, lobbies etc.). These assessments are either carried out in-house or by an external independent consultancy. They are undertaken at regular intervals as determined by previous assessments and the risk rating of the building. Any actions from these are prioritised and recorded.
56. There are just over 50 buildings in the Council's housing stock that require a FRA. At the last full review in April 2021 all had a new external fire risk assessment or had been reviewed in the previous 12 months.
57. The actions from the FRAs have been recorded and although there are currently no 'Immediate' (Priority A) actions outstanding, there are several short, medium, and long-term actions that will need to be addressed (see table below). Officers are aware of the importance of this work and will be considering measures to ensure that the actions can be delivered in a timely and appropriate manner. The majority of actions are not easy or quick to address, for instance where they need to include tenant liaison, where there are leaseholders to consider, where planning and/or Building Control approval might be required, and where the process needs to include the appointment of suitable contractors to undertake the work. In the majority of cases work is already underway to move these actions forward.

Type	Timescale	Total (April 2021)
Priority A	Immediate	0
Priority B	Short Term – Within 3 months	134

Priority C	Medium Term – Within 6 months	72
Priority D	Long Term – at refurbishment etc.	62

Table 2: FRA Actions

Smoke Detection Checks

58. Annual smoke detection checks had been successfully undertaken in the year up until April 2021. As shown in the table below there are currently (as at June 2021) only 14 outstanding checks out of over 2,000 relevant properties, representing over 99% completed. Where checks are outstanding, this is typically associated with difficulties in obtaining access into the property or contact with the tenant. When this occurs the relevant Neighbourhood Officer is involved in working with the tenants to ensure that the checks can be undertaken.

	Compliance %	Number Outstanding
Sheltered Housing	100%	0
General Purpose – Gas heated	99.8%	3
General Purpose – Electric Heated	95%	11

Table 3: Annual Smoke Detection Checks at April 2021

59. Officers will also be ensuring that future editions of Tenant’s Voice include a seasonally appropriate fire safety article, for instance messages around BBQs on balconies in the summer.

60. Moving forward some alterations to the wider structure of the Housing Team are expected to improve the synergy between the Repairs and Maintenance Services and the Council’s growing pipeline of new build homes (i.e. Housing Delivery). This will ensure the physical side of the Council’s housing stock come more closely together.

61. An overview of the current structure within Housing Delivery (which includes Repairs and Maintenance) is provided below.

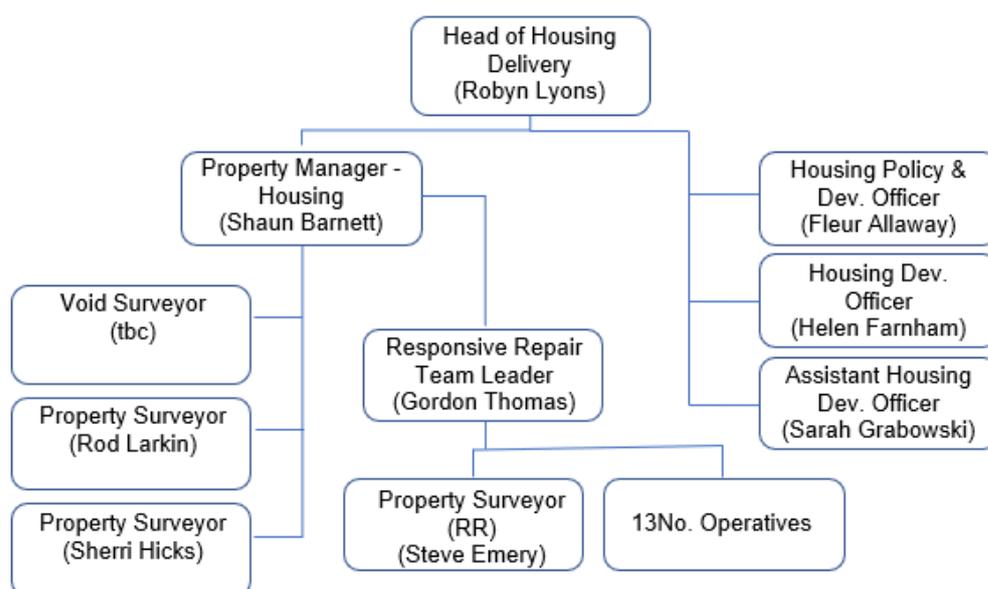


Figure 3

RISK ASSESSMENT

62. There are no significant risk considerations in relation to this report

CONCLUSION

63. This report provides panel members with an update about the work of the Neighbourhood and Maintenance Services.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Council owned homes by size, type and area.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman (Ext. 4645) or Robyn Lyons (Ext. 4305).