

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Date: 23 March 2021

Reporting officer: Daniel Killian, Assistant Director (Housing)

Subject: Housing Services Portfolio COVID Update Report

Purpose and summary of report:

To provide Members of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee with an update against how the council has responded to the COVID pandemic, both in terms of specific activities in response to the pandemic and how the council has managed to maintain service delivery across council services.

Recommendations:

None – the report is for information purposes only.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The practical impact of the global Covid-19 health pandemic for the council emerged in late 2019-20, principally through the Prime Minister's speech to the nation on 23 March 2020 and the enactment of the Coronavirus Act 2020. This resulted in the Council undertaking a number of different work streams in order to support the community and the Council's employees during the pandemic.
- 1.2 In June 2020, a report was presented to the Committee to set out the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon the practical delivery of the respective services within the portfolio.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Members on the approach to the pandemic, both throughout the first lockdown and in response to any additional work streams that have been implemented as a result of the subsequent lockdowns announced by central government in November 2020 and January 2021. In addition, it provides an overview of how the Council has continued to deliver its services, despite the additional pressure brought about by the pandemic.

2. Response to the COVID work streams

2.1 Throughout the pandemic, the Council has taken responsibility for providing support to thousands of residents and local businesses across the Borough, both in response to Government initiatives but also in its role as a community leader. Specifically in relation to the Housing Services portfolio, the following actions have been taken:

2.1.1 Approach to rough sleepers at the time of the pandemic

The Government introduced the 'Everyone In' campaign, a national programme to facilitate a transition for rough sleepers from the streets into safe accommodation and to support those who were homeless at the time of the pandemic through the forthcoming weeks and months. This initiative called on councils to accommodate all rough sleepers by 30 March 2020

The Council provided accommodation for residents of the Winter Night Shelter when it closed prematurely on 22 March 2020. Under the 'Everyone In' initiative, the council placed 23 people in temporary accommodation, including 4 rough sleepers identified during an early morning street count on 24 March.

Council officers were able to respond to the additional demands placed on them with the assistance of partners and implemented a central point of contact to enable clients to get in touch with the council quickly and easily.

2.1.2 Homelessness support services

The Winter Night Shelter provisions were reviewed to mitigate the risk of Covid-19. Officers worked with local community groups to open a ten-bedroom provision, so rough sleepers could have their own rooms. Originally, this facility was only to be used overnight for sleeping, but as a result of the most recent lockdown, officers worked with Gravesham Sanctuary to enable rough sleepers to remain in the property throughout the day.

Council officer's successfully maximised opportunities to bring additional funding into the service and this has enabled the Council to continue to accommodate and resettle rough sleepers.

2.1.3 Managing rent arrears

Specifically in relation to rent arrears a campaign was deployed using social media, the council's website and Your Borough to encourage anyone who was finding it difficult to pay their Council housing rent to make contact. As a result many tenants did contact the Council and through an open dialogue officers were able to assist tenants with household budgeting and arranging revised payment plans to help them continue paying their rent through this very difficult period of time. Working with our tenants in this way has also helped to reduce our year-end rent arrear forecast by £250,000 and arrears at Gravesham are some of the lowest within the South East region.

The Income Team have built exceptional internal and external partnerships with organisations such as Universal Credit, Housing Benefit and many local charities to ensure that our tenants receive as much support as possible to enable them to continue to make rental payments and maintain any arrears repayment plans.

2.1.4 Winter Support Fund

Working closely with the Town Centre and Cultural Services Team, Housing Services were able to secure £15,000 of the available funding to help some of our tenants most in need, by providing support with food and fuel. Whilst this funding is not solely for those affected by Covid, many of our tenants have found themselves in financial hardship due to increased food and fuel costs as a result of repeated lockdowns.

3. **Delivering on the Corporate Plan and maintaining Council services**

3.1 Despite the substantial challenge presented by the pandemic, with the authority having to divert significant resources and, equally, adapt to a suite of new statutory requirements introduced by the Government's legislative programme, the Council has continued to deliver quality frontline community services and commitments made within the Corporate Plan (2019–23).

3.2 For the Housing Services portfolio this includes but is not exclusive to:

- 100% emergency repairs completed on time.
- 90% routine repairs completed on time.
- 20,000 repair jobs completed with 96% of the work being kept in house.
- 99% tenants satisfied with the repairs service.
- 35,000 calls received within the Housing Operations Team (Repairs & Housing Management).
- 200 empty Council properties repaired, improved and re-let.
- 98.75% housing rent collected (including arrears).
- 3.02% current tenant arrears as a percentage of total rent due with the national average being 4% for social landlords.
- 1,370 people approached the Council for housing options advice.
- 200 people had their homelessness either relieved or prevented.
- 38 people applied for and had their disabled facilities grant approved.
- 172 people assisted with their hospital discharge to return home as soon as possible.

For ease of reference, Members may wish to review Appendix 2 which provides the latest quarterly performance report as considered by the Housing Services Cabinet Committee on 4 February 2021. The report presents a statistical analysis of the Council's frontline service delivery for the portfolio throughout the pandemic.

3.3 Alongside the levels of performance achieved by its core frontline services, the Council has also worked throughout the pandemic to implement a number of new projects and initiatives specifically designed to deliver on the pledges made within the authority's adopted Corporate Plan (2019-23).

3.4 For the Housing Services portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:

3.4.1 **Phase 2 Workforce Expansion** - full Council agreed to the Cabinet recommendation to expand the in-house DSO Building Management workforce by an extra 23 members of staff to further assist with efficiency savings and improving the quality of work.

3.4.2 **Active Housing** - implementation of a repair diagnostic and reporting portal that allows tenants to easily diagnose their repair, self-appoint a time slot and manage their appointment in terms of cancelling and re-scheduling.

- 3.4.3 **Estate Management Policy** - creation and implementation of a specific policy to ensure that standards on Council managed-estates are more focused, transparent and engaging. The new policy assists the appropriate service to manage the environment around properties and communal areas more effectively.
- 3.4.4 **Housing Management Team** – a revised staffing structure was agreed to increase operational management in order to provide a greater focus on tenant-case management, improve the quality of work, and the focus on delivering high-quality frontline services to our tenants.
- 3.4.5 **Upskilling Officers** – capitalising on the success and efficiencies realised within the Repairs Team, they were rebranded to become Housing Operations Officers and now provide administration and workforce scheduling services for Housing Management.
- 3.4.6 **Tenant Engagement Team** - rebranding, expanding and refocussing the team to ensure that we engage with our 'hard to reach' tenants and focus on providing engagement specially designed to support our tenants in areas such as social isolation, digital inclusion, employment and training.
- 3.4.7 **Housing IT System** - acquisition and implementation of the new housing system with significant testing and training currently underway to ensure that all staff are competent using the new system when it goes live. This will enable staff to action issues in a far more effective manner, providing more time for the Housing Officers to be out on our schemes with our tenants.
- 3.4.8 **Pathway for Rough Sleepers** - creation of a dedicated move on pathway for rough sleepers, enabled by the purchase of a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO). The new HMO will provide 11 rooms for rough sleepers along with dedicated wrap around support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week that will have a positive impact on rough sleepers and ensure their transition from the HMO into a future secure tenancy.
- 3.4.9 **Housing Allocation Scheme** - revision, consultation and creation of the revised Housing Allocation Scheme to ensure that the Council has a Scheme that provides a greater degree of clarity than the current scheme whilst also ensuring that those with the greatest housing need within the Borough are assisted in order of defined priorities.

4. Next Steps and future work streams

- 4.1 The COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting the Borough of Gravesham, and the entire country, and as such it is necessary for the Council to continue to be responsive to the needs of its community, as well as supporting officers and Members alike.
- 4.2 There are a number of key future work streams that Housing Services will be working on specifically related to COVID-19, some of which are outlined below:
 - 4.2.1 **Resettling rough sleepers** – in addition to the HMO purchased by the Council, officers will work collaboratively with partners to secure as much MHCLG funding possible to ensure that those assisted through various schemes throughout 2020 continue to be assisted into longer-term accommodation and do not return to the streets.

- 4.2.2 **Future Winter Night Shelter provision** – whilst a suitable provision for the current Winter Night Shelter was sourced it is not sustainable in the longer term. Therefore officers will be exploring innovative solutions for rough sleepers in the future whilst making full use of existing assets, such as ex-communal hall at Longferry Court.
- 4.2.3 **Housing Options** – approaches to the Council for housing advice increased throughout 2020, and due to the longer term effects of the pandemic, approaches are unlikely to reduce in the future. Therefore, it is important to ensure adequate resources are in place to respond, and therefore the structure of the team will be redesigned to provide a much stronger focus on homeless prevention in the future.
- 4.2.4 **Re-opening of Community Spaces (Shears Green and Communal Halls)** – because communal spaces were closed at the start of the pandemic to keep everyone safe, and due to on-going restrictions it has been difficult to re-open them safely. However, now more than ever, there is a recognition of the importance of social contact and gatherings and so officers will be working with community groups to ensure our community facilities can safely re-open, once Government restrictions allow.
- 4.2.5 **Tenant engagement** – the team is currently consulting with tenants in order to understand how they would like the housing team to engage with them in the future and on what topics they feel are important. Following the consultation, a tenant engagement strategy will be developed to ensure our services reflect the needs of our tenants.

5. Background papers

- 5.1 Background papers relating to this report are held by the Corporate Change Manager. Anyone wishing to inspect background papers should, in the first place, be directed to Committee & Electoral Services who will make the necessary arrangements.

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
Legal	In response to the pandemic, the Government put in place the Coronavirus Act 2020 as well as updating the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 and other key health-related regulations.
Finance and Value for Money	<p>Specifically in relation to the Council's own budgets, updates have been provided in the quarterly budget reports that have been presented to and reviewed by Cabinet over the course of the year.</p> <p>In relation to funding specifically for COVID, the Council has received funding from central Government in two key areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific grants have been provided to enable the Council to administer the schemes put in place by the Government, such as the various Business Grants schemes that have been put in place. • The Council has also received in the region £1.8m of non-ring-fenced funding from the Ministry of Communities, Housing and Local Government (MHCLG) to help meet the unprecedented pressures resulting from the pandemic.
Risk Assessment	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic presented, and continues to present, significant risks for the Council, particularly in terms of delivery of critical services to the public. As has been demonstrated through this report, the Council's overall response to the pandemic has enabled those services to continue to operate effectively.</p> <p>The pandemic also presented risks to the Gravesham community, both residents and businesses. The Council has been able to support both groups in minimising these risks by ensuring prompt payments of grants and allowances to support them through this tough time.</p>
Data Protection Impact Assessment	<p><i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i></p> <p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of personal data or special category data or criminal offence data? N/A</p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice? N/A</p> <p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at gdpr@medway.gov.uk. N/A</p>
Equality Impact Assessment	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer. No</p>

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
	<p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer.</p> <p>N/A</p> <p><i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i></p>
Corporate Plan	The way in which the council has responded to the pandemic has ensured that services have continued to operate effectively, which is fundamental to the delivery of all objectives within the Corporate Plan.
Climate Change	n/a
Crime and Disorder	n/a
Digital and website implications	n/a
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	n/a