

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 JULY 2020

Title:

Housing (HRA) Recovery, Change and Transformation Project
Progress Report

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Anne-Marie Rosoman

Head of Service: Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations

Key decision: Yes / No

The Council provides homes across the whole borough.

Access: Public / ~~Exempt~~ / ~~Part Exempt~~

1. Purpose and summary

To provide the Committee with an overview of the Housing Team's Recovery, Change and Transformation Project, following the easing of the Covid-19 lockdown. The report will share the five key project objectives and the progress made to reinstate services for the Committee's scrutiny.

2. Recommendation

It is recommended that the committee review this report and agree any observations or comments it wishes to pass to the Executive.

3. Reason for the recommendation

To share the project objectives and the current and evolving service provision position with Members.

4. Background

Introduction

The Surrey Local Resilience Forum (a statutory partnership of councils and other local public services) declared a Major Incident on 19 March 2020. The Council has had to fundamentally change the way it works for since then in order to respond to the Covid-19 Pandemic. A new Council Objective was set:

Waverley Borough Council will arrange its resources to support the immediate health, wellbeing and safety of local residents, particularly the vulnerable. This includes Covid-19 and non Covid-19 related issues.

Government guidelines to flatten the curve of the pandemic by staying at home, protecting the NHS and saving lives meant that the Housing service could not continue as usual.

Our key priorities are to make sure that tenants, homes and our employees are safe. From 23 March 2020 we followed government guidance and stopped all but emergency, health and safety and/or safeguarding visits to homes but continued to contact tenants by phone or email as necessary.

Following the more recent government change in advice from “stay at home” to “stay alert”, new government guidance was released towards the end of May. Guidance on [working safely](#) and [moving home](#) during the corona virus, together with an open [letter to social housing tenants](#) and updated [guidance for landlords, tenants and local authorities](#) meant that the service could consider how to commence the recovery of services.

The Council has created a Recovery, Change and Transformation (RCT) Programme for ten essential areas to coordinate the approach to getting back to a “new normal” as we move out of the emergency situation and lockdown measures are eased. The Housing Recovery Project reports into the RCT Programme Board and RCT Programme Working Group monthly.

Project Objectives

The Housing Operations service plan has been reviewed and five key objectives were identified as essential to the recovery housing landlord services, with timeframes for returning to Business As Usual (“BAU”):

	Objective	Estimated time to deliver (in months)	Estimated start date (month)
1.	Maximise rental income (support tenants in prioritising rent payments, signpost to benefits, agree repayment plans and consider legal action)	11 months annual rent collection until March 2021	April 2020
2.	Let homes (complete works on backlog of homes and recommence choice based lettings)	12 months to clear backlog and return to BAU	May 2020 “essential moves”
3.	Reinstate responsive repairs and H&S/compliance works (inc Blunden Court works)	12 months to clear legacy works, backlog and return to BAU	Dependent on gov guidelines June 2020
4.	Re/commence capital works programme (complete backlog of works, prioritise and programme on hold/ new requests)	12 months to clear on hold works and return to BAU	Dependent on gov guidelines June 2020
5.	Maintain development programme for new homes	11 months annual development programme	April 2020

Project Actions

The team has started to plan how to restore services and respond to the backlog of requests. A phased approach, fundamentally putting the health and safety of tenants, visiting operatives and officers first, based on agreed priorities and team capacity, is being developed.

The project will plan and deliver key housing services to residents during the changing environment as the pandemic restrictions are eased to meet the Council's landlord responsibilities.

A task focussed project group for each objective has been created to review the former practice and programme, working in a pandemic advice and health and safety guidance to deliver services and create a new or revised work programme.

The task project groups will consider requirements for:

- policy amendments
- budget revisions
- process amendments including use of IT
- prioritisation of work
- capacity of team, and
- communication to residents

The overarching Project Board will support the task groups and manage the project. The success of the project will be monitored through key performance indicators. BAU will be identified as performance targets are met and the backlog of requests and works are cleared.

Project Objectives Progress

Rent - The team have continued to work with tenants to collect rent during the lockdown. Emergency legislation was passed in March to protect social and private rent tenants to ensure that no renter who lost income due to coronavirus would be forced out of their home. Possession notices have been extended to give three months notice and all possession proceedings have been suspended until 23 August 2020 (extended from original date of 23 June). c300 tenants have advised the team that their income has been impacted by the pandemic and there has been c300 new universal credit (UC) claims in the last three months. Previously average 20 new UC per month. There has been an increase in rent arrears, as would be expected, but the figure currently remains within the parameters of the business plan.

Letting homes – The team suspended all lettings as the lockdown was implemented and works on empty homes stopped as the contractor furloughed operatives. Government guidance on essential moves was released in early May and the team began to review homes suitable for those identified as essential movers eg homeless applicants, those leaving hospital and victims of domestic abuse. Three homes were let in May to those requiring an "essential move". Further guidance on moving home the following week and the government letter to social housing tenants meant that with appropriate safeguards tenants could move home. The contractor's operatives have begun to return to work and empty homes prioritised. Working practices and viewing and sign up processes have

been reviewed and updated to comply with working during the coronavirus guidance. Works are being prioritised and the team have contacted all applicants offered homes before lockdown to assess ability to move and update on timescales. Council homes have been advertised through choice based letting since the end of May and applicants are bidding. There is a backlog of homes as at end May there were 81 empty homes including ten senior living homes. Resulting in a potential void rent loss of £400k in 2020/21.

Responsive repairs and compliance – the team suspended all but emergency works as the lockdown was implemented. As the government guidance changed the team held contractor meetings to discuss working regimes under new measures, the expectations of the Council and contractor capacity with operatives returning from furloughed status. The outstanding repairs were reviewed with Ian Williams and an action plan developed. Ian Williams Hub is contacting all tenants who had an outstanding repair before lockdown to arrange convenient appointments and explain the safety measures. A letter to tenants advising of the resumption of repairs service was sent on 5 June 2020. Through out the lockdown the team continued with compliance works including water hygiene and gas servicing. Electrical checks and associated works have were reintroduced in June too. Due to the suspension of works during the lockdown there is a potential underspend on responsive repairs of £400k.

Capital works – the team reviewed the capital work programmes and held contractor meetings to discuss working regimes under new measures, the expectations of the Council and contractor capacity with operatives returning from furloughed status. They identified that some external capital works programmes could recommence - roofing and external decorations programmes. Kitchen and bathroom replacement works remain on hold due to the number of people required to enter a home and the timescale of the works. There is an expected underspend which will be added the HRA reserves.

New homes development – the team have been able to continue business as usual. Handover of 11 homes at Ockford Ridge with viewings and sign ups arranged mid June. The team adapted the future procurement process by splitting the contract into two phases (pre construction/design and JCT/construction) to give flexibility and prevent delay claims. The team have continued during lockdown to make planning applications, budget checks, publish tenders and progress the acquisition of land.

Conclusion

The team have identified the key service areas for its recovery plan. These areas will be closely monitored by the Head of Service through key performance indicators and budget reports.

5. Relationship to the Corporate Strategy and Service Plan

The five key services areas of the project reflect the HRA Business Plan and Housing Operations Service Plan and the Council commitment to promote “*housing to buy and to rent, for those at all income levels*”.

6. Implications of decision

6.1 Resource (Finance, procurement, staffing, IT)

Project acknowledges impact from 12 week lockdown increase in void rent loss and underspend of capital works and responsive repairs.

6.2 Risk management

A risk assessment has been completed for the project and mitigations identified to be monitored by the Head of Service.

6.3 Legal

Throughout the lockdown period the Housing team has taken advice from Legal Services to ensure that the activities that have been progressed during the lockdown period have been carried out in line with Coronavirus regulations laid down by the Government, and to focus on the health and safety of both staff and tenants (including those who are shielding). This work continues through the continuing lockdown and into the recovery phase of the Council's response to the pandemic, with careful assessment of the Council's statutory responsibilities to its tenants – both in terms of its Business As Usual statutory functions and the continuing requirements of the Coronavirus statutory regulations.

6.4 Equality, diversity and inclusion

An equality impact assessment has been completed for the project. Noted the positives of increased communication by phone with all customers including disabled and older tenants to explain working practices and safety processes during the corona virus. During lockdown the team contacted all older tenants to complete a welfare check and as services are restarted tenants are contacted to risk assess before any visit.

6.5 Climate emergency declaration

The lockdown has demonstrated that some services can be managed remotely. There has been a reduction in travel and move to reduce paperwork by offering digital services.

7. Consultation and engagement

Liaised with Tenants Panel, portfolio holder for housing, housing team and to be presented to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee 6 July 2020.

8. Other options considered

Two other options were considered and immediately ruled out.

“Do nothing” is not recommended as the service would continue to lose rental income from vacant homes, depreciate the asset of homes as responsive work, cyclical and improvement works are not completed. Failure to provide homes to those in housing need, increase dissatisfaction with service and risk of legal

challenge.

Reinstate service “as was” is not recommended due to the risk of spreading the coronavirus and putting lives at risk.

9. Governance journey

9.1 Housing O&S and Executive as part of Housing O&S minutes/recommendations

Background Papers

There are no background papers, as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972).

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Agreed and signed off by:

Legal Services: 22 June 2020
Head of Finance: 18 June 2020
Strategic Director: 25 June 2020
Portfolio Holder: 18 June 2020