

**WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**28 SEPTEMBER 2020**

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**Title:**

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

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**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Anne-Marie Rosoman, Portfolio Holder for Housing,  
Community Safety & Emergency Planning

**Head of Service:** Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations

**Key decision:** No

**Access:** Public

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**1. Purpose and summary**

To provide the Committee with an update report on the Housing Team's Recovery, Change and Transformation Project, following the easing of the Covid-19 lockdown 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 progress made against the project objectives and the current and evolving service provision position with Members.

**4. Background**

**Introduction**

The Committee received an initial report providing the background to the project, the project five objectives, project actions and sharing the progress made at their July 2020 meeting.

**Project Objectives**

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)
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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 developed a plan 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, was developed.

The project has planned and delivered key housing services, to residents during the changing environment, as the pandemic restrictions were eased, to meet the Council’s landlord responsibilities.

Each objective has a task focussed project group 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 considered 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. The teams focus is support tenants to pay rent, reassure them of security of home and maintain income. 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 were originally extended to give three months notice and all possession proceedings were suspended until 23 August 2020 (extended from original date of 23 June). On 21 August, the stay on possession proceedings was extended by a further month. Further measures to support tenants were announced by Housing Secretary on 10 September increasing the notice periods to six months with exceptions for the most serious circumstances, due to pressure placed on landlords, tenants and local communities - including cases of anti-social behaviour or fraud. In terms of rent arrears, from 29 August notice periods must be at least four weeks where over six months' rent is due (if less than six months' rent is owed then six months' notice must be given). The Courts will start to hear possession hearings again from 21 September but which will be subject to new court processes and procedures developed by the Judiciary. 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 reviews homes suitable for those identified as essential movers eg homeless applicants, those leaving hospital and victims of domestic abuse. Further guidance on moving home was issued the following week and in line with the government letter to social housing tenants meant that with appropriate safeguards tenants could move home. The contractor's operatives began 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. . The contractor is taking ten homes a week and has increasing sub contractor labour. An implementation plan has been agreed to address the backlog of relet homes by end October. Council homes have been advertised through choice based letting since the end of May and applicants are bidding – with 30 homes relet in August. There remains a backlog of homes as at end August there were 81 empty homes including 18 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. The team are receiving 40-50 requests a day. 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. As at end August there

were 17 homes without a gas safety certificate due to access difficulties (99.61% compliance). Due to the suspension of works during the lockdown there is a potential underspend on responsive repairs and staffing of £1.2m.

**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. 30% of the annual budget has been invoiced/or committed. 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. Bathroom replacement programme recommenced at end of July with a five day replacement programme for 20 homes with non shielding/vulnerable tenants. 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. 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. The new home objective has been successfully completed and the team return to Business As Usual with adapted working practices and updated programme.

## **Conclusion**

The team have progressed work identified in the key service areas to recover services. New ways of working have been implemented to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of residents, officers and contractors. These areas continue to be closely monitored by the Head of Service through key performance indicators and budget reports until backlogs have been cleared and business as usual.

## **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, government guidance and to focus on the health and safety of both staff and tenants (including those shielding). This work continues 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**

Ongoing liaison with Tenants Panel, portfolio holder for housing, housing team and progress reports to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee. All tenants information letters sent in March, May and June and tenants newsletter planned for October 2020.

### **8. Other options considered**

Two other options were considered for the project 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: 15 September 2020  
Head of Finance: (18 June 2020 )  
Strategic Director: (25 June 2020)  
Portfolio Holder: 14 September 2020