

## **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP**

### **21 JULY 2020**

### **BUILDING & HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY DURING THE PANDEMIC**

**Cabinet Member(s):** Councillor Simon Clist  
**Responsible Officer:** Mrs Claire Fry, Group Manager for Housing Service

**Reason for Report:** To provide an update on the work of the Building and Housing services during the national emergency arising from the Covid 19 pandemic

#### **RECOMMENDATION: That Members note the report**

**Financial Implications:** The activity of the Housing Service spans both General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The HRA is ring fenced and subject to specific financial controls.

**Budget and Policy Framework:** Policies agreed by the Homes Policy Development Group govern the work of the Building and Housing Services. There are budgets set aside within the General Fund to finance work relating to homelessness and strategic rehousing. Additional funding to support work with rough sleepers has also been obtained in partnership with East Devon District Council for use this year. The provision of telecare is a General Fund function but is self-financing. The HRA is funded in large part by rental income and therefore maintaining the revenue stream must be a key priority for the Housing Service.

**Legal Implications:** Service delivery funded by the General Fund encompasses the prevention and management of homelessness; and the administration of the housing register. There are many statutory obligations associated with these activities arising from provisions of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Repairs and maintenance of the Council's housing stock and tenancy management are funded through the Housing Revenue Account. The tenancy agreement defines the Council's relationship with tenants and sets out the rights and responsibilities of both parties. This takes account of legal and regulatory requirements. The Housing Act 1985, the Localism Act 2011 and the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 contain many provisions which must be taken into account by the Housing Service

**Risk Assessment:** Failure to meet statutory obligations relating to homelessness could result in judicial review which could prove costly. Such an outcome also has the potential to impact the reputation of the Council in a negative way.

The landlord service has approximately 3000 homes in management which represents a huge investment. Failure to provide effective maintenance services and a tenancy management service has the potential to result in failure to meet legal and statutory obligations including those relating to health and safety issues, tenancy fraud, and potential negative publicity in the event of, for example, a serious fire or anti-social behaviour leading to residents on an estate feeling stigmatised. Failure to collect rental income could impact the ability to fund necessary management and maintenance activities

**Equality Impact Assessment:** As stated, the Council has a number of statutory obligations arising from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and therefore all those presenting as homeless to the Council must be assessed regardless of the section of society from which they come to see whether or not the duties apply. Failure to treat homelessness clients who are eligible fairly could result in judicial review.

The Council uses the Devon Home Choice scheme to manage the Housing Register. The use of the needs assessment framework in all cases helps to ensure that the scheme is consistent, open and transparent, and monitoring reports are available which demonstrate this.

The Housing Service uses the Devon Home Choice scheme to allocate and let homes in the retained housing stock and in this way no one case is given any more or less favourable treatment than any other.

There is a suite of housing related policies. The use of these helps to ensure that service delivery is consistent and fair. There is a regulatory requirement for registered providers of social housing to tailor their service to meet the needs of the tenants and the Housing Service requests diversity data from tenants to enable compliance to be monitored.

**Relationship to Corporate Plan:** Homes and the environment are a priority for the Council and this includes increasing the supply of affordable homes in the District and also supporting and growing active tenant engagement.

**Impact on Climate Change:** We recognise that the provision of sustainable communities is important. As part of our commitment to meeting the provisions of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard within the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing, the Council offers a menu of involvement which provides opportunities for tenants to get involved in service delivery. We use social media to promote sustainability and publish information relating to a variety of topics including fuel efficiency, recycling and healthy living.

With regard to the homes in our management, our repairs and improvements strategies are informed by the need to reduce carbon emissions; and the need to reduce fuel poverty is also a key consideration.

Officers sometimes have to respond to emergencies such as those associated with the prevention and management of homelessness and also those arising from serious incidents of anti-social behaviour. In such cases, safeguarding concerns will take priority in order to minimise risk and it is accepted that the ability to manage such issues effectively may have an environmental impact which would not occur if work can be planned in advance and managed in a more co-ordinated way.

## **1. Introduction/Background**

1.1 The Government implemented restrictions on movement with effect from 23 March 2020 and advised that those who could work from home, should do so. In recent weeks, restrictions have eased and the Building and Housing Services have been implementing their recovery plans.

## **2. Agile Working**

- 2.1 Many Officers within both services were used to working from home from time to time on an ad hoc basis and were already using laptops. The transition to a different way of working was therefore relatively straightforward for many in each Service. There were some people, however, for whom working from home was more challenging because they were having to make use of their own machines; or due to connectivity issues arising from poor internet connections. One or two Officers did not have access to any hardware other than their mobile telephones but were still able to work effectively.
- 2.2 Due to the restrictions, many Officers have had to work in very challenging conditions in recent months. In the early weeks of the national emergency, many people had limited access to childcare and were working from home whilst trying to meet the needs of their children or other members of their families. This may have included the need to undertake home schooling activity.
- 2.3 A number of workmen were involved in the provision of emergency repairs services. Other repairs operatives were provided with training to enable them to support the Waste Service in times of need, in order to provide some resilience to a key service within the District. Others were deployed to redecorate buildings within the corporate estate. There was an ability to maintain adequate social distance due to the fact that so many staff were working from home. Priority was also given to making void homes ready to re-let. At the beginning of the pandemic, in line with relevant business continuity plans, Officers were keen to ensure that there were sufficient homes to accommodate those in urgent housing need who were homeless.

## **3 Communication**

- 3.1 Immediately after lockdown, Officers agreed that there was a need to check in with vulnerable clients. Socially distanced ways of working and communication methods were utilised.
- 3.2 Those working with the homeless started undertaking assessments of housing need by telephone.
- 3.3 Housing applicants are required to join the Devon Home Choice scheme, which the Council uses to assess housing need and to allocate and let the homes in our management. This is a digital system with applicants being required to apply online, if possible. This means that there is an ability to communicate electronically with the majority of this client group.
- 3.4 With regard to tenants, records showed that there were approximately 1,500 email addresses on our electronic housing management system.
- 3.5 The Housing webpages of the Council's website were updated and the MDDC Housing Facebook page, MDDC Housing, was used to publicise matters of concern.

- 3.6 Letters were sent to all those residents (including leaseholders and private tenants) in blocks of flats to make them aware of fire safety considerations during lockdown; and then to all tenants about the need to continue paying rent during the national emergency. The MDDC Housing Facebook page was also promoted in these letters as a means of keeping updated. Currently, the page has 835 “likes” and a post about a property available to let on 24 June 2020 reached 1,100 Facebook users.
- 3.7 Officers have tried to ensure that those in need knew where to turn to for help and assistance, especially if they were experiencing financial issues as a result of impact of the pandemic. The help available in Mid Devon to support those experiencing financial distress has been actively promoted.
- 3.8 In recent years, more housing related correspondence has been sent out via a mailing house. Letters generated through our housing management system are sent electronically. This enables the Housing Service to realise savings due to the ability to benefit from an economy of scale. In order to increase resilience, standard letters are being reviewed with the intention to increase the number which are dispatched off site. This reduces the need for anyone to go into the office to print them.
- 3.9 The housing management system also enables the sending of texts and this option is also utilised as a means of making contact with tenants.
- 3.10 Where necessary, Officers from all teams have used a range of methods, as necessary, to engage with clients, tenants and other agencies. Those who have mobile phones provided for work may use WhatsApp and this can be useful especially if photos are required, or if there is a need for a video chat. Zoom, MS Teams and Skype, for internal communications, have also proved invaluable during the time when Officers have been working remote from the office and/ or from each other.
- 3.11 The Group Manager for Housing Services also set up a tenant focus group, emailing those tenants for whom we had an email address, and posting about it on the MDDC Housing Facebook page to generate interest. There are 35 tenants in the group and the Group Manager is in regular communication with these individuals discussing recovery plans, the work of the Building and Housing Services and responding to issues raised.
- 3.12 Officers publicised a document setting out the phases of the recovery so that our tenants know what to expect, and when.

#### **4 Support for Vulnerable People**

- 4.1 The Government initially said that those who were rough sleeping should be brought in and therefore our Navigator visited those individuals who were out on the streets in an effort to engage with them and to encourage them to work with the Council.
- 4.2 In the immediate period following lockdown, the Housing Options team was exceptionally busy managing approaches from those who were homeless or at risk of it. There was a shortage of temporary accommodation after the hotels

were told to close and several Officers were required to liaise with providers in the area in an effort to source more accommodation suitable for those in immediate housing need. This involved making several hundred telephone calls.

- 4.3 In the first few days following the implementation of the restrictions, a decision was made to contact vulnerable tenants. These included those aged 70 or over, those who subscribed to the Lifeline Service and those who lived in flats. The rationale was to discuss fire safety with those who were living in accommodation in blocks.
- 4.4 The Leisure Service made a number of staff available to support this initiative and with their support and also that of some staff from the Building Service, our team was able to contact over 2200 tenants, aged 45 and over. Over 400 of these people requested regular call backs and our Community Housing Support Officers undertook to make these telephone calls. As a result of these welfare checks, advice and information on community initiatives was given which, in some cases, enabled individuals to access food parcels and prescriptions.

## **5 Tenancy sustainment**

- 5.1 Shortly after the restrictions were implemented, the Government published some guidance for tenants and landlords. One important point to note is that although tenants were reminded of the need to pay their rent during the pandemic, the ability to take tenancy enforcement action was removed and possession action and evictions were effectively “paused”. From 27 March 2020, there was a stay on these for 90 days. This was subsequently extended until 23 August 2020.
- 5.2 The Housing Service therefore moved to a different way of working with the emphasis being on a more collaborative approach. This is informed by an understanding of the economic impact of the national emergency. Tenants have been encouraged to work with our Officers to share information about their circumstances. Our Income Team has been signposting and referring these individuals on to other agencies which can help and trying to agree realistic arrangements, where appropriate.
- 5.3 Our Community Housing Support Officers are currently supporting new tenants and making early intervention calls for the Income Team to see if any tenants need support.
- 5.4 Officers in the Housing Service have used every contact as an opportunity to gather feedback, to find out what tenants need now and to get an up to date picture of their circumstances to include, their health needs, appropriate housing, employment situation and financial situation. This has resulted in the data on our housing management system being updated which will support work on profiling and customer intelligence going forward.
- 5.5 The caretaker is now back on the estates cleaning blocks of flats as a first priority. He continued to test fire alarms throughout the national emergency.

5.6 The Neighbourhood Officers in the Estates team are now undertaking estate inspections and checking blocks of flats to ensure that the communal areas are clean and clear.

## **6 Partnership working**

6.1 Our Officers have been working closely with other agencies in order to support clients and tenants.

6.2 The Council works in partnership with other strategic housing authorities and other providers of social housing in connection with rehousing. Other registered providers have come forward to support work to rehouse homeless people by offering their vacant homes in Mid Devon for use by this client group.

6.3 Officers have been working closely with other partners in the East and Mid Devon Early Help Locality Partnership in order to safeguard children and families.

6.4 The Housing Options Manager has been involved in weekly county-wide discussions regarding the management of homelessness and has also had regular virtual meetings with the Liaison Officer with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

6.5 Liaison with the Department of Work and Pensions has been good, which is especially important given the increasing number of tenants making claims for Universal Credit.

6.6 The Group Manager for Housing Services has been involved in discussions regarding the Shielding Hub (now stood down) which was able to provide food to the extremely vulnerable with no other support across the District; and has also provided a resource to support the work of the Covid 19 Financial Hardship Fund in Mid Devon.

6.7 The Housing Service continues to work closely with CHAT (Churches Housing Action Team), based in Tiverton. CHAT offers a valuable resource to those in the District who may be experiencing homelessness and Officers see this as an important part of the offer from the voluntary sector to those in most need in Mid Devon. CHAT also accepts referrals from our Neighbourhood team to support tenants experiencing financial difficulties. During the pandemic, our Caretaker worked with CHAT to assist them to deliver food parcels to those in need.

6.8 Wiser£money provides a money advice service to those in need in Mid Devon and during the pandemic has been working closely with CHAT to deliver services associated with the Covid 19 Financial Hardship Fund.

6.9 Officers have also engaged with other agencies, as appropriate, including the Police, Social Services and Devon Mediation Service.

## 7 Income Collection

- 7.1 As stated, there has been a change in emphasis with regard to the way in which Officers try to collect the rent. Tenants have been informed in writing that recovery processes including letters will be reinstated in due course. Other standard letter templates have been amended to reflect the support available for tenants.
- 7.2 The current working arrangements have offered opportunities which have been utilised to enable Officers to engage with tenants in a different way. Those who have been looking after children or home schooling have had to maintain flexible working arrangements, making calls in the evening rather than during the day. This has brought about change to the way in which some business is transacted and allowed Officers to connect with those who may not have responded to contact during the day, in the past.
- 7.3 Reduced workloads in respect of the routine administration associated with possession action have provided an opportunity to streamline processes to ensure that there is more capacity going forward with regard to service delivery to vulnerable people in need of help and assistance. Indications are that the economic impact will negatively affect many tenants from late August onwards.
- 7.4 The level of rent debt is monitored weekly and data shared with Senior Officers, the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Chair of the Homes Policy Development Group.
- 7.5 The number of tenants in receipt of Universal Credit is rising. At the end of the week commencing 6 April 2020 (week 1) there were 533 tenants in receipt of Universal Credit, which is paid in arrears directly to the tenant (in most cases). By the end of week 12 (that commencing 22 June 2020), this had increased to 558.
- 7.6 Over the same period the level of current rent debt increased from £136,953.25 (1.06% of annual rent debit) at the end of week 1 to £206,205.68 (1.61% of annual rent debit) at the end of week 12.
- 7.7 Internal modelling, which is not an exact science, suggests that the debt relating to current tenants could be £217,749.30 or 1.68% of annual rent debit at the end of the financial year. The Council subscribes to a benchmarking service and in line with their prediction, the debt would rise to a maximum of 1.55% of the annual rent debit in quarter 2, falling to 1.16% of the annual rent debit in the final quarter of the year. However, these predictions must be treated with caution since they are a “best guess” and not a definitive commentary as to what may happen.
- 7.8 At the start of the pandemic, one Allocations Officer was redeployed to work on refunding credits to those who wanted or needed these monies. In total, she contacted 69 tenants regarding these credits and refunded £4,963.46. Of those who were current tenants, just over 50% asked that the credit be left on their rent account due to the uncertainty around their work, or their ability to make payments, at this time, which equated to around £14,000. £827.51 was transferred to tenants or former tenants with other current rent accounts and £1279.92 was transferred to Council Tax accounts.

## **8 Gas safety**

- 8.1 In line with guidance issued by the Government, the Building Service was required to continue routine gas safety checks, which has been extremely challenging given issues relating to access, social distancing and service to those who are self-isolating or shielding due to vulnerabilities.
- 8.2 The contractor, Liberty Gas, continues to follow the same usual procedures which allow for three attempts at access for the non-isolating properties. Attempts are then made to co-ordinate a joint visit with any other operative visiting the property. Due to the pause on possession proceedings, options for further action under these circumstances are somewhat limited.
- 8.3 For properties choosing to self-isolate, for whatever reason, which may include because they are shielding (due to being extremely vulnerable), vulnerable or fearful of a visit, there are no reactive calls. Where a tenant requests that Liberty Gas attend site, an engineer will be assigned on the understanding that the safety inspection and service must take place at the same time.
- 8.4 Properties identified as self-isolating have been contacted intermittently to assess their willingness to agree access for the inspection/service to take place. This reflects the requirements of the Regulator for Social Housing; their Chief Executive on 22 June 2020 stated that landlords should continue to try to negotiate access arrangements if a gas safety check is due.
- 8.5 Our Officers monitor compliance, access and duration of self-isolation. As yet there have been no reported safety issues but a number of self-isolating properties have chosen to allow access to an engineer rather than be left without heating and hot water.

## **9 Repairs and maintenance**

- 9.1 With regard to working in let properties, the risk assessment and review work has been completed and routine repairs visits recommenced successfully from the start of June. This included recommencement of our routine repairs. In the second week following this start, Officers managed to book in appointment slots of around 95% of capacity (up from 90% the previous week). There are some jobs where social distancing is not practicable so this small percentage of jobs remains on hold.
- 9.2 The Building Service has written to all tenants who are waiting for adaptations asking them if they would like requested works to commence. Around 75% responded positively and were therefore supplied with all relevant risk assessments and an explanation of how the works will be carried out safely. Since this work recommenced, tenants have been very helpful with regard to the cleaning of areas requested of them each day before the workmen start. Survey work undertaken on behalf of Public Health Service in relation to private sector Disabled Facilities Grant works has also been re-started.

- 9.3 The window replacement contract remains on hold. All the site workers employed to work on the Council's contract were furloughed but it is hoped that work will recommence soon.
- 9.4 The modernisation contract is currently on hold.
- 9.5 The roofing contractors are all on site and are working by the agreed restrictions.
- 9.6 The painting contract has recommenced after agreement was reached regarding a one year extension to the previous contract.
- 9.7 Most of the work associated with the asbestos contract have been put on hold, apart from urgent works or works required in void properties.
- 9.8 Servicing to emergency lighting and smoke alarms in communal areas in blocks of flats have commenced, as have domestic electrical installations.
- 9.9 Solid fuel servicing has commenced and the compliance rate is 99%.

## **10 Voids and lettings**

- 10.1 Work to make empty properties ready to let continued during the lockdown period as social distancing could be maintained.
- 10.2 During the weeks after lockdown commenced, the Government guidance initially stated that all but essential lettings should be paused. This approach changed at the end of May.
- 10.3 Allocations have been made since then and some properties re-let. Procedures have been streamlined to deliver safe lettings and as part of this the team will be trialling a product which provides electronic signatures. This together with virtual viewings and the use of key safes will enhance existing procedures designed to maintain the health and safety of staff and prospective tenants.

## **11 Antisocial Behaviour**

- 11.1 The Housing Service received reports relating to social distancing and general nuisance and annoyance during lockdown. Mental health issues appeared to become more pressing after the restrictions and the Neighbourhood Officers in the Estates team were required to work closely with the Police and other agencies especially in relation to safeguarding issues.
- 11.2 The Council obtained Court Orders to close a number of properties in Tiverton just prior to the restrictions being implemented in March. Due to the pandemic, the Council had to re-apply back to Court to extend the closure orders on the properties in June, and the request was heard at a virtual hearing. The action was successful. The pause on possession action meant that there could be no work started until after 23 August with regard to applying to regain possession of each property. The Court awarded the extension of the closure orders and

these properties will remain closed until September 2020. Offices appreciate that the properties look unsightly whilst they remain boarded up, however the properties have to remain secure in order to avoid any unauthorised access.

## **12 Telecare**

- 12.1 The Lifeline Service is provided through the General Fund and the clients live in a range of housing tenures.
- 12.2 In order to trial the use of digital smart hubs, last year, the Housing Service purchased a number for use in a pilot project. The advantage with regard to these hubs is that they can be programmed remotely and that they can be installed with minimal interaction with clients. The older equipment requires plugging in and an attachment to a telephone line which requires a longer visit.
- 12.3 During lockdown, Officers have been reviewing policies and procedures with the aim of streamlining the application process for new clients. Clearly, there is an opportunity to increase the take up of the service in the current circumstances because the technology enables those using it to summon help by pushing a button to connect with the Call Centre.
- 12.4 Given the need to reduce risk to a mostly elderly and generally vulnerable clientele, the decision was taken not to take on any new clients during lockdown. However, more digital smart hubs were ordered to build capacity to replace any faulty units with the new technology thereby reducing the need for further visits. The Building Service has assisted with this at times during lockdown when our own caretaker was unavailable, for whatever reason.

## **13 Homelessness**

- 13.1 Workloads are increasing. The Officers who are responsible for preventing and managing homelessness in line with the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 are now seeing more clients in private sector accommodation who have been served with section 21 notices by their landlords. These notices are a formality for a landlord who is planning to end an assured shorthold tenancy. The number of clients approaching is likely to increase as the contraction of the economy continues, due to the fact that many landlords with buy-to-let properties may find that they need to move back into their properties themselves; or to sell them.
- 13.2 As at 26 June 2020, there were 36 households which had been accommodated on a temporary basis by the Housing Options team.
- 13.3 There were 138 cases being managed by 6 Housing Options Officers, 5 of whom do not work on a full time basis. The case load managed ranged from 17 which were assigned to a 0.5 full time equivalent officer (FTE), and 32 where a 1 FTE was the Case Officer.

## **14 Strategic Rehousing**

- 14.1 Initially, interest in rehousing diminished in the first few weeks of lockdown. The Officer responsible for administering the Devon Home Choice housing

needs assessment framework remained in the office throughout the time when the restrictions were in place and was engaged with other work besides this. He is currently seconded to work on the Covid 19 Financial Hardship Fund, when the need arises. One of the Allocations Officers was able to provide some support with the completion of outstanding assessments of housing need in line with the Devon Home Choice policy before the need to allocate and let our own stock became a priority again.

14.2 In recent weeks, interest in rehousing has increased and as at 26 June 2020, the following work was outstanding:

- New applications: 26 (No change from previous week)
- Change of Circumstances: 45 (Increased by 9 from the previous week)
- Workflow items: 41 (Up by 10 from the previous week)

## **15 Recommendation**

15.1 That Members note the report.

**Contact for more Information:** Mrs Claire Fry, Group Manager for Housing Services, Tel: 01884 255255, email: cfry@middevon.gov.uk

**Circulation of the Report:** All Members of the Cabinet including Councillor Simon Clist, Cabinet Member for Housing, Leadership Team

**List of Background Papers:**