

SUBJECT:	HOUSING DEPARTMENT UPDATE – COVID 19
DIRECTORATE:	HOUSING AND INVESTMENT
REPORT AUTHOR:	DAREN TURNER, STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide an update to Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee on the Departments response to the COVID 19 epidemic and the future implications of that response. The report will give a summary position for members and will be supported by a detailed presentation on the position of all Housing Services by Assistant Directors.

2. Background

- 2.1 The City of Lincoln Council like councils across the country have been responded to the local impact of the international and national crisis caused by the global COVID 19 pandemic. As we would expect the council has been exemplary in its response both in the way it has continued to support sits residents and the most vulnerable in its communities as well as safeguarding and protecting its staff. As the LG minister has said we have provided the final mile. The Housing Department and its staff has played a massive role in this response.
- 2.2 The nature of this response at a summary level is detailed in the main body of the report. The report lays out responses across services areas split by AD responsibility. This response comes at a cost not just in financial terms but also in terms of impact on staff, tenants and partner organisations. This impact will shape the way we operate in the short to medium term and may well provide the blueprint of how we operate and serve our customers in the future.
- 2.3 Please note that the Housing management team will give a detailed presentation to the committee to compliment and supplement this introductory report. The detail provided below is designed to give an initial snap shot of the situation.

3. Initial Response

- 3.1 Housing Investment and Repairs Service :-

- Investment.

Initially staff left the workplace and continued to work from home, where possible. Work that could continue and complete outside of homes and in a safe environment was continued. Guidelines from government mean that where possible we had to continue with gas servicing. As work dried up we tried to help partner organisations, as they employ local labour, by using staff to supplement the voids programme. Contractual obligations were reviewed, and payment plans were put in place. Within a short space of

time both Keir and Aaron furloughed large numbers of their staff. As a consequence, the decent homes programme and other stock improvements projects have slowed almost to a standstill.

- Housing Repairs Service.

As many staff left the workplace before the lockdown the service moved to an emergency repairs process fairly quickly. This meant staff working on new rotas to make sure we had enough PPE and staff got the down time they needed. Repairs numbers dropped away quickly as people, while the epidemic developed, did not want operatives in their home. Initially we did not record anything other than emergency repairs as the CSA team were under great pressure at the time. Staff who were not in the workplace returned their fleet to Hamilton House (HH), the vehicles were cleaned down and emptied of stock. The highest standard of PPE were issued to the teams, and revised Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) were developed alongside the Safety Assurance Team (SAT). Access to HH was restricted. Our stores offer was problematic as Travis Perkins shut down their operation nationally, however we managed to keep our satellite site open. Supply chain delivery became an issue very quickly as business and suppliers shut down. Some work that could be completed safely away from tenants' homes was initially continued, surplus labour was pushed to the voids process in order to push empty properties through the system to cope with demand from Housing Solutions. A number of operatives joined the befriending service and carried out other duties such as delivering food parcels for local charities.

3.2 Housing Management:-

- Tenancy Services

Several staff were removed from front line services as part of the initial move to shield. The remaining left city hall when the lockdown began. Most could work from home effectively. All home visits were curtailed, and tenant support was delivered over the phone. A concerted campaign was run, with support of corporate communications, to urge people to keep in touch and not fall into arrears (get in touch not into debt). A decision was made fairly early on to bring forward the two rent free weeks that we usually see at Christmas and then to compliment this we designed and launched a hardship fund that allowed tenants who were struggling as a result of the C19 lockdown to get some short term help with their rent. New tenancies came to a standstill as we were only allocating in emergencies and to Band One on the register. The courts ceased to operate, and the government put a short-term moratorium on evictions so managing accounts in arrears became extremely difficult. A detailed process of arrears monitoring was set up and this formed that basis of the Delta Returns to government – these measured the financial impact of the epidemic on LA's.

- Elderly Services

As the service had moved to a more mobile support process there was limited impact initially. Initially, as we had great concerns about this customer group, we stopped usage of the communal areas and restrict visits to the premises. We introduced an increased cleaning regime which concentrated on the high contact points within the schemes. Allocations into supported housing have been paused, again to the risks with this area, we are now allocating on a case by case basis. The LINCARE team continued to operate initially from city hall, as they had traditionally worked in rotas, we had no issue with working practices. Within a few weeks we are able to upgrade the technology we use to allow staff to operate normally from home. Due to initial concern about pressure on this service with the lockdown implementation ten staff from around CH were trained in the usage of the system so that it could be continued to be delivered if a number of staff were taken ill.

- Voids

Initially there was a great deal of pressure to get void properties through the system to allow housing solutions colleagues to respond to government instructions on rough sleeping. Hand overs were extremely difficult to undertake as we stopped all face to face contact. Additional labour was pushed into the process as we saw a drop off in housing repairs requests. Emerging issues with the supply chain and sub-contractors have restricted what we have been able to achieve in this area. Continental Landscapes have continued to deliver the external works throughout.

- Housing Solutions

Again a number of staff were removed from front line service as the lockdown unfolded, all remaining staff left CH when the complete lockdown was announced with the majority working from home. In the early stages of the crisis the government directed Councils to only allocate properties to those in need as a result of the lockdown measures, which remains the current guidance. We were also tasked with setting aside isolation units for the homeless rough sleeping cohort in order that they could be given the opportunity to isolate if they displayed symptoms. At the time of lockdown we had hoped that the implementation of the new Allocations policy would be progressing. The updating of the allocations process was reliant on the software enhancements to Abris, unfortunately the software company who provide the system immediately furloughed all their staff so progress in this area was limited

- Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

This service has continued through and managed massive additional pressure as partner providers fell away. Great care was taken with staff well fare and the required PPE was distributed to staff. Although initially numbers decreased as the council, along with all other DC's in the county, responded to the Everyone in campaign. However, tenant behaviour has

been a constant issue and providers refusing to house client or even evicting tenants has provided an additional pressure to the team. Additional units have been leased in the short term from the private sector as we have looked to plug the gap left by the closedown of BB and hotel accommodation. Little or no extra funding has come into the council for these services and as such the service remains stretched. Sadly, we have had three Rough sleeper deaths during the pandemic. This is obviously a tragedy.

- Housing Administration

A number of staff left City Hall initially, the remaining followed the lockdown all of the staff continue to work from home. All IT systems have been running throughout, creditor payments have been kept up to date and staff have also been engaged in the community support service and the befriending helpline. Unfortunately, the whole of the housing admin area and some parts of Tenancy services were flooded as a result of a leak at CH in the first week of lockdown. Admin staff managed this incident and coordinated the refurbishment and rectification.

3.3 Housing Investment and Strategy

- Housing strategy

The team initially worked from home; the Sincil Bank community hub was closed (although this was not entirely due to C19). One key member of staff was seconded over to work with Simon Walters on creating the befriending service and the community support group, this was then increased to two when the service grew. Unfortunately, the active sites at Markham House and De Wint Court were locked down by the contractors and so progress was initially stalled. The Rookery Lane development has also slowed, site surveys have continued but at a slower pace. The background work on QER has continued and a new master plan for the site is in draft format, the demolition of the blocks adjacent to the QER site was initially stalled as was the demolition on Trelawny Church. The project to buy back Council property across the city to support our housing stock has continued with great success. The development of the refreshed housing strategy has continued but been hampered by staff availability and the pausing of the stock survey work. LTP support has continued remotely, regular updates have been provided to the chair. The LTP communication channels have been used extremely effectively throughout.

- Safety Assurance Team

The team have continued to work flexibly from HH or remotely throughout the process and provided valuable support to the corporate process of creating Health and Safety risk assessments reflecting the changing dynamic of the situation. Invaluable support and work has been done in interpreting gov't guidelines, which are constantly changing, and ensuring work spaces and working practices are safe. The team took over the role of managing the PPE stock and deployment for the whole council. The team

have continued to provide both the Asbestos support and fire safety support to housing.

4. Current Position

4.1 Housing Investment and Repairs Service:-

- Investment

Staff have continued to work from home, where possible. A number have returned to HH but this is not being encouraged. RA's have been produced for HH and for the new work streams, with individual RA's produced for staff where required. A number of staff were placed on furlough. Work has begun to mobilise various work streams again, with the team finding ways to do key pieces of work such as gas safety checks, safely and within the guidelines. We have worked with contractor partners to ensure their RAMS are in place and safe systems of work are used. The major programmes of work remain restricted by supply chain issues and restrictive working practices. Costs will be differed to mirror programme changes. We still face issues with customers not wanting improvement work or are unable to have operatives in their homes during the pandemic. This situation is gradually easing. Pre-inspection work has recommenced using social distancing guidelines. We are now being mindful about the situation our partners are in as we see the economy downturn.

- Housing Repairs Service

Staff that can return to the work place have, individual RA's have been done where necessary. A number of staff have been furloughed and remain on furlough presently. A new suite of RAMS has been developed to include the guidance on returning to the work place and the unions have been consulted on these. HH has reopened to a degree although staff have staggered arrival and leaving times. TP have continued to operate with only one member of HRS staff allowed in the stores at one time to enforce social distancing. We have a one-way system in place at HH and an enhanced cleaning regime has been enforced. We are also closely monitoring staff numbers in the HH. When carrying out repairs within voids, operatives are only working in pairs, but this may move to three operatives per void split over two floors. Routine repairs are now being recorded when reported and we are now in a position to trail the new scheduled repairs programme. Other works that can be done safely, for example fencing, are now starting to be undertaken again. Any surplus labour will be used in the voids process. We still have supply chain issues and there are acute shortages of some items such as Plaster.

4.2 Housing Management:-

- Tenancy Services

Staff remain largely working from home. Home visits are not taking place, tenant support is delivered over the phone. As lockdown has eased, expectations of the service have grown. We are restricted in aspects of dealing with ASB, particularly noise monitoring as the PSH team are still not fitting equipment into people's homes. We have concerns about a growing number of tenant accounts, and we are shortly

moving toward gearing up enforcement action again as the courts begin to reopen and hear cases. We continue to distribute funding from the Hardship Fund, however recent estimates are pointing to arrears pushing up to over £1m and the collection rate has now dropped below 90%. We have currently paused the hardship fund thinking that the remainder of the fund may need to be diverted to other schemes and initiatives as the environment changes. The moratorium on landlord evictions comes to an end on 24th August. The position is kept under constant review. People are still reluctant to move so the number of vacant properties coming the system has dropped to a trickle, this has an impact across the department.

- Elderly Services

We remain extremely careful with our supported housing service. Communal areas remain closed, but residents are now able to get out and about more and can be visited by family. We are still managing new tenancies very carefully and are dealing with allocations in the centres on a case by case basis. The enhanced cleaning regimen remains although this has been slightly hampered by the furloughing of a number of staff. It is pleasing to say that at this point we have had no confirmed cases of C19 in centres. LINCARE remains operating normally, they have now taken on all of the befriending calls for Housing tenants.

- Voids

Surplus labour is still being allocated to the voids process. We are having a number issues with the voids contractor performance which may mean a different approach in the coming weeks and months. We now monitor numbers in detail on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, as previously stated, the number of keys being handed week on week has dropped dramatically. For example, last week only four sets were returned so we are not getting the property flow that we would normally expect, however the buyback programme remains successful; although, these properties tend to need more work to bring them up to letting standard.

- Housing Solutions

Staff remain working from home. We are still allocating properties to emergency cases and homeless families and individuals. As above the number of new lets coming through the system are extremely limited and this continues to cause an issue with customer expectations. Allocations have been made to the new properties we have taken at Riseholme Road and those from developers where we have taken the allocation rights.

- Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

This service remains under great pressure. Numbers of people being presented as needing emergency support have grown exponentially. Two weeks ago we had 14 referrals in one day, which is more than we would ordinarily expect in a week. The lack of wrap around support and care and the continuation of no face to face support from Housing related support providers has left our staff in a very difficult position.

No additional funding has been received to help manage the pressure, although MHCLG have released details of funding that can be bid for to provide new move on accommodation (£433m over four years) and an additional £105m for additional support costs following the Everyone In campaign. The latter is to cover additional revenue costs but is only available until the end of this financial year. The team intend to put forward expressions of interest to both funds.

- Housing Administration

Staff were possible remain working from home. Work has restarted on some key projects for example replacement IT systems.

4.3 Housing Investment and Strategy

- Housing Strategy

The team have continued to work from home, one member of staff remains seconded to work with DCE. A number of the team were initially furloughed, although the majority came back on a part time basis w/c 6th July. Sincil Bank community hub remains closed (some alterations to the building are planned to improve staff security). Property purchases are continuing using right to buy receipts. Although the government announced an extension to the rules on spending timetables for a 6 month period, however the team have been successful in identifying enough properties to ensure that RTB receipts have not been returned so far this financial year. The Markham House and De Wint Court sites are back in operation, although there are some restrictions due to the adoption of C19 working practices that will no doubt slow progress. The Rookery Lane development site surveys have restarted, and we await the results. The work on QER has continued and demolition of the blocks adjacent to the site are complete. The demolition of Trelawny Church is still paused due to nesting birds. LTP support has continued remotely. The lead officer has now returned from furlough, so we hope to get meetings up and running again as soon as possible, although these will be carried out remotely where possible.

- Safety Assurance Team

The team continued to work from home and from HH. They continue to support HRS in making sure RAMS are up to date and reflect current guidelines. They have made the requisite alterations to HH, again in line with guidelines, which has enabled the building to be gradually opened up. The team remain the hub for PPE across the council. The team have progressed the Asbestos database cleansing and this has been reported at 75% complete. The team continues to support housing in its programme of fire safety improvements in our tower blocks, working closely with Lincolnshire Fire & Rescue.

5. Recommendation

5.1 Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee is asked to:

- a) Note the responses to the COVID 19 crisis and the ongoing situation of Housing Services.

Is this a key decision? No

Do the exempt information categories apply? No

Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply? No

How many appendices does the report contain? None

List of Background Papers: None