

Report of Director of Housing Economy and Regeneration

Housing Service - impacts of Brexit and Covid

Summary

1. Following the exit from the European Union in Jan 2020 and the Covid lockdown on 23 March 2020 and the subsequent period of restrictions, services to council housing tenants and homeless people have inevitably been impacted. This report sets out these impacts and the action plan which is being implemented to address the manifold, negative service impacts upon the delivery of housing services.

Background

2. COVID has had an impact on the ability of staff in housing to undertake their normal duties, as previously unknown restrictions were placed on communities and then varied as the country returned to elements of normality, despite the pandemic continuing. Balancing a need to deliver essential services during a global pandemic has been immensely challenging and staff have worked enormously hard in very difficult circumstances to maintain essential services to many vulnerable customers. However, as the longer-term national impacts of Brexit began to manifest themselves through labour and goods shortages, the ability of the housing service to maintain the standard of customer service has been compromised.

Key Issues during COVID and post Brexit

3. The key facets of the perfect storm for housing services caused by Brexit and COVID have been :-
 - Inability to undertake non-essential repairs and maintenance works during lock down

- Time consuming covid safety checks for all work done,
- Impact of the “pingdemic” and incidences of covid among staff
- Release of pent up demand from lockdowns and restrictions
- Supply chain - lack of availability and increased cost of materials
- Recruitment - increased numbers of people leaving and lack of qualified applicants for Housing Management, Housing Options roles and tradespeople
- Vacancy controls during covid have led to understaffing in Housing Management and Building Services and Housing Delivery adversely impacting workloads
- Third party contractors – lack of availability and increased costs
- Inability to undertake formal rent recovery actions, obtain court backed repayment arrangements and carry out evictions (a last resort) during covid
- “Everyone In policy” for rough sleeping increased temporary accommodation requirement and cost
- Increase in demand for social housing due to job losses, people seeking more affordable accommodation and security of tenure
- Social distancing and home working have eroded the close relationship with our tenants
- Covid related delays in implementing the new Housing ICT system to deliver long awaited service efficiencies

4. In addition the following factors were already impacting housing services
- The temporary but significant impact of Housing ICT system implementation - configuration testing and training impacting on every day services
 - Loss of managerial staff
 - Departmental and Senior Management Restructures
 - Cumulative Impact of budget savings / staffing reductions over time
 - Long term pattern of more complex customers
 - Impact of welfare reform
 - Increasing volume of FOIs, MP Letters Cllr enquiries

Performance Levels

5. Below are the headline performance impacts caused by these factors
- Housing waiting list increased by 25% - from around 1500 to 2000 between 2019 and 2021 and a backlog of over 500 new application
 - Homeless presentations have remained high over the last few years at around 800 but have increased in complexity due to the Homeless

Reduction Act requirements, increasingly complex customers and more recently staff moving on.

- The increase in void numbers / length of time void means that there is huge pressure on temporary accommodation, B&B is being used and the service are looking to temporarily re-open Crombie House prior to demolition and future development as supported accommodation for people with mental health problems.
- Inability to meet customer service standards on routine service requests leading to increasing levels of failure demand across the teams.
- Increase in rent arrears from £975K in March '20 to £1.25m currently
- A large backlog of repairs and maintenance work, approximately 6000 jobs, on top of BAU, built up during the first lock down and summer months of 2020. This pressure then hit rapidly between July and September as restrictions eased, overwhelming our capacity which was impaired by Covid-safe measures and staff resource issues.
- Increased number of void properties (unlet homes in need of repair before they can be relet) from average of 72 to current level of 159. This included additional work at the beginning of the pandemic to ensure all street homeless people and emergency moves were accommodated.
- Losing 33.27% of repairs customer service phone requests up from 8.38% average
- Falling behind on planned maintenance programme. Lock down meant our planned maintenance contractors, including those for Tenants' Choice, Standing Water, Painting, Roofing, were off-site for 5 months including the additional time required to mobilise back in a Covid-safe way for tenants, residents, and contractors' staff. However a good recovery has been made to deliver higher productivity across these contracts in subsequent months.
- Contractors are now requesting price uplifts to reflect increased material, labour and prelim costs - 10-12% is typical.
- Inability to progress some essential projects e.g. Glen Lodge re-plumbing, Bell Farm pods asbestos removal due to lack of project management resource

Action Plan

6. The **Building Services** team have developed an action plan to address these performance issues. This includes :-
 - I. Reiterate that we triage repairs to identify and prioritise emergency repairs
 - II. Procure additional contractor support to bring void properties back into a lettable state - currently in conversation with 3 contractors who have

capacity to provide services will require a financial waiver to appoint without tendering to enable rapid deployment. Appropriate safe working practices will need to be evidenced. J Mark who were brought in to do additional voids work last month have now been issued with 20 properties – early indications are good.

- III. Procure additional contractor support for building services planned maintenance
- IV. Prioritise internal staff to housing maintenance away from traded schools repairs and maintenance activity
- V. Recruit staff to fill vacancies – social media campaigns and emphasise full benefits package
- VI. Provide additional temporary resource to handle customer calls for repairs and maintenance
- VII. Focus internal repairs team on reactive repairs to prevent any further increase to the backlog of routine repairs during winter – our busiest period as this will drive complaints and dissatisfaction and it also runs counter to regulatory direction to be listening social landlord – as set out in social housing bill.
- VIII. Complete the current review of the voids process and implement the improvements we have identified.
- IX. Move one of our area repairs team leaders from the reactive side to support the Voids Team leader – and pick up more of the contract management works as more contractors brought on.
- X. Recruitment of a voids coordinator which will mean less administration work for the supervisor and team leader – a recommendation from the voids review.
- XI. Update communications across phone, social media and website to manage expectations of tenants in relation to service demands on repairs.

7. The **Housing Services** team have developed an action plan to address these performance issues. This includes

- I. Triage housing applications to focus on those most in need, providing regular information and advice to those who won't be a priority during the transition to the new York base allocations policy and system,
- II. Ensuring the most urgent cases receive new home offers during the down time between transition to existing IT and allocations policy to the York based IT and allocations policy.
- III. Triaging housing management work to focus on the most urgent issues for customers e.g. letting new homes, progressing urgent moves, supporting people in financial difficulty and taking action on serious ASB.

- IV. Temporary longer SLA response times for housing allocations. (no formal times are stated but we acknowledge applications within 10 days.
 - V. Recruit staff to fill vacancies, using Work With York where traditional recruitment fails – social media campaigns to promote posts
 - VI. Increase the capacity of lettings teams to deal with increased volume of properties being let.
 - VII. Reprofile ICT go live to enable effective testing and training – homelessness and allocations modules deferred to 2022 with a short moratorium on advertising properties immediately before system go live to enable a transition between the new York Allocations System and the old North Yorkshire Home Choice system.
 - VIII. Negotiate to keep families needing temporary accommodation where they are for as long as possible and open up Crombie House.
8. In addition to these actions Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny are requested to review the situation and the proposed action plan.

Council Plan

9. This report links to the following priorities within the Council Plan 2019-23:
- Safe communities and culture for all
 - Good health and wellbeing
 - An open and effective council
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Implications

10. In producing this report the following implications have been considered:
- **Financial** –The profile of the capital programme will be impacted but will be managed within existing HRA budgets
 - **Human Resources (HR)**– Difficulties in recruiting to existing posts due to national resource shortages
 - **Equalities**– delays in allocations, adaptations and repairs may impact upon a range of tenants some of whom will have protected characteristics
 - **Legal**) None
 - **Crime and Disorder** – None
 - **Information Technology (IT)** –there are no identified IT implications
 - **Property** – Covered in the report

- **Other** – There are no other identified implications.

Risk Management

11. Failure to address the unavoidable short term degradation in service for housing repairs and allocations will impact on the everyday lives of tenants, reduce the availability of council house accommodation for vulnerable tenants and reduce rental income from void properties.

Recommendations

12. Members are invited to hear from officers within the Housing Service on how the impact of COVID restrictions and Brexit have been met and how the performance issues within the service are being addressed.

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Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report