

Report to: **Housing Review Board**

Date of Meeting: 17th September 2020

Public Document: Yes

Exemption: None

Review date for release None



Subject: **Response to Covid-19 and Recovery (Housing Summary)**

Purpose of report:

This report contains the housing extract from the Corporate report that outlines details of actions taken across EDDC to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The report provides a high level summary of future recovery actions.

A detailed organisation-wide Recovery Plan is work in progress in conjunction with Devon County Council and will be submitted to Cabinet in due course.

Recommendation:

To note the continued work of the housing service in relation to the response to Covid-19 as well as ongoing work that is being undertaken to recover the service.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure Members are aware of ongoing challenges and the potential impact that Covid-19 is still having on the housing service.

Officer:

Amy Gilbert-Jeans. Housing Service Lead

Portfolio Holder:

Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities

Financial implications:

The current financial impact of COVID19 and the available funds to deal with the pandemic has been assessed separately within the Finance report.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications set out within the report but Legal Services will continue to proactively advise on any statutory or regulatory changes as a result of the ongoing Covid19 pandemic which will directly affect Housing Services.

Equalities impact:

High Impact

Covid-19 has adversely impacted many residents in a number of ways. We have continued to support our most vulnerable residents through the crisis by way of additional reassurance and wellbeing calls and additional support for residents who have been struggling financially.

Climate change:

Medium Impact

We have highlighted the need to ensure a green recovery as we work towards recovering services fully.

Risk:

High Risk

Covid-19 has brought with it a number of high risks that impact our business plan including;

Potential loss of rental income due to risk of residents being unable to pay rent

If our contractors are unable to function this could lead to our Inability to maintain our properties to standards required ensuring homes are habitable

Inability to maintain gas safety compliance as well as other areas of health and safety/compliance, this could have significant consequences.

Inability to repossess properties due to ASB/rental arrears owing to restrictions on Court hearings.

Links to background information:

Link to [Council Plan](#): Choose Priorities and delete what not appropriate.
Outstanding Place and Environment
Outstanding Homes an Communities
Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
Outstanding Council and Council Services

1. Introduction

1.1 Members of the Board have been provided with operational updates on service delivery on 3 occasions since March 2020. These were provided by email on the following dates;

- 7th April 2020
- 15th May 2020
- 17th July 2020

1.2 The Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment and the Housing Service Lead have continued to work closely and collaboratively with SMT+ to ensure good awareness of challenges the housing service has faced, we have regularly reported on performance in a number of key areas and how this has been impacted by Covid-19.

1.3 As part of recovery planning, the Housing Leadership team have met on a weekly basis to co-ordinate recovery across the service ensuring consistency and the adoption of guidance that has continued to flow from central government. This advice has been constantly changing and being updated and a significant amount of time and resources has been taken to ensure we can keep up to date with guidance. The Housing Projects Officer has been deployed to assist the Leadership team with recovery, this has impacted and meant a delay on a number of projects including the drafting of the new Housing Strategy and our Climate Change work.

1.4 As part of the wider corporate response to the pandemic, actions included;

- Trigger of the Emergency Plan and Business Continuity Plans
- Mobilisation of the Strategic Coordination Group and Tactical Coordination Group multi-agency meetings twice a week
- OPIC multi-agency meeting
- Joint working with Police, County and others on Covid responses
- Daily and weekly updates for Members

1.5 More specifically to housing, as part of our response phase, we considered new priorities which we grouped as follows;

- Keeping residents Safe
- Protecting residents incomes and livelihoods
- Sustaining Critical Services
- Supporting Communities and Recovery

Appendix 1 outlines more detail that relates to each of the priorities.

2. Summary of high level actions

2.1 Due to the nature of our frontline services, every part of the response phase for housing has had to continue as we have emerged ourselves in recovery work. This has seen considerable pressure for some of our teams and we have re-deployed some Officers into other teams to ensure resilience and additional support where required.

2.2 We have recognised the need to communicate to residents openly about changes they will experience in service delivery and have used the website as a way of doing this with reference to our housing recovery plan. This has been further complimented by the publication of Housing Matters more recently which we designed more as a special edition to concentrate on Covid related matters.

2.3 Our Housing Recovery Plan is subject to constant review and the weekly Housing Leadership team meetings focusing on recovery will stay in place as a way of monitoring any changes, such as the scenario of a local lockdown.

2.4 The points set out below are a summary of recovery actions from across the service, work is ongoing in relation to much of this work.

- Working with other Districts, Housing Providers and the MHCLG to look at how we step down the 'everybody in' approach that has been taken to ensure nobody is homeless through the crisis. With increased numbers of people in temporary accommodation we now need to consider 'move on' plans for each individual/household. We are constantly alert to funding streams that we might be able to access to improve our position here, the crisis has seen an overspend on our homelessness budget due to the higher numbers of people we have placed in temporary accommodation.
- We have fast tracked Sailors Rest, Exmouth (12 self-contained flats purchased by the HRA at the end of 2019) and designated the use to move on accommodation as a direct way of assisting people in temporary accommodation.
- We are continuing to review arrears cases to ensure we are providing as much support and assistance as possible to people who are struggling, working closely with Housing Benefits and the DWP to do this.
- Constantly monitoring demand to services to ensure we have Officers deployed in the right areas and can respond to peaks in demand as and when required.
- Following the closure of all community centres, we are risk assessing all 14 Community Centres with a view to beginning to open back up with appropriate safety measures in place.
- Working with legal to prepare for Courts re-opening, be ready to prioritise cases as appropriate.
- Recovering our tenant participation work, zoom meetings with our tenants to resume meetings. We have also consulted with tenants and asked for their views on our recovery plan.

- We have produced a special edition of Housing Matters to outline how we are recovering the housing service.
- Created a complete remobilisation plan for the start-up of the Integrated Asset Management contract following 3 months of only emergency works being undertaken. A considerable back-log of non-essential repairs built up and this work has had to be carefully reviewed and a system created to book these jobs back in. This has been done in partnership with Ian Williams and been monitored by the day. A communications plan has been in place to ensure we are clear on how we are communicating these messages to residents, we have created a specific risk register which is monitored weekly to ensure we are constantly reviewing updated government advice that may change the situation or cause us to review how we are running this area of the service, recognising the critical nature of it.
- Constant focus on gas compliance, we have now brought non-compliant properties down to just 2 (as at 17th August 2020) at its highest this was 34. Each non-compliant property is having a weekly risk assessment carried out over the phone until we are able to get into the property. We are reviewing advice on this constantly and due to non-compliance we self-referred ourselves to the Social Housing Regulator in April.
- We are reviewing the planned works programme for the year, many programmes have not been able to start so we are looking at the financial consequences of this in order to best decide how to proceed through the rest of 20/21.
- We have reviewed and signed off all RAMS and risk assessments from all contractors who work across the housing stock to ensure working practices are covid compliant.
- We are reviewing property acquisition scheme in relation to what has been achieved since lockdown and what potential penalties there could be for pay-back of receipts (slight extension now given for pay-back) risk of financial impact and also stock levels.
- We are monitoring RP completions to understand the impact on affordable housing delivery in the district.
- As part of restarting the Housing Support Service we are considering how we can operate a 'face to face' service without entering people's properties. Currently reviewing options with Corporate Health and Safety Team. Options could include 1:1 drop in sessions in community centres, setting up marquees on estates with Housing Officers being available outside to talk to people.
- Our Community Development work programme is under review, the face to face nature of the work has meant it is high risk and we are assessing carefully the right time for events to re-start. We have started up a digital platform to engage with young people who access our services in this way, we have also offered young people 1:1 phone support as a way of keeping in touch and helping them through the challenges they are experiencing.

2.5 It is recognised that although we are making excellent progress with recovery work, we remain alert to the risk of a local lockdown scenario that could quickly mean we need to instigate further response actions.

2.6 Our experience since March places us in a confident position to be able to adapt as appropriate and our Housing Leadership team will co-ordinate the necessary actions if and when the time comes.