

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: Thursday 25 June 2020

Time: 5.30 pm

Venue: Legislation has been passed that allows Council's to conduct Committee meetings remotely

Members are invited to attend the above meeting.

If you have an enquiry regarding any items on this agenda, please contact Howard Bassett, Democratic Services Officer (Committees) on 01392 265107.

Entry to the Civic Centre can be gained through the Customer Service Centre, Paris Street.

Membership -

Vizard (Chair), Mitchell, M (Deputy Chair), Begley, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Pattison, Martin, A, Quance, I, Sheldon, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Agenda

- 6 **Presentation on Covid-19 by Portfolio Holders and Questions from Members and Answers** (Pages 3 - 12)

Portfolio Holder briefing note attached.

Portfolio Holder for Supporting People – Councillor Morse
Portfolio Holder for Council Development and Services – Councillor Wright

Details of questions from Members relating to the two Portfolios above on Covid-19 issues only should be notified to the Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support by 10.00am the Monday before the meeting – 22 June 2020.

Date of Next Meeting

The next scheduled meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee will be held on **Thursday** 16 July 2020 at 5.30 pm in the Civic Centre.

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Customer Access

Housing Needs

- Key dates
 - 23rd March Lockdown commenced
 - 24th March – partner services and district Councils close doors (ECC remains open)
 - 26th March Luke Hall MP instructs Councils “Everyone In”
 - 27th March – ECC procures hotels and begins accommodating rough sleepers
- 75% increase to the temporary accommodation portfolio
- All rough sleepers offered accommodation (97% accepted)
- 91 households accommodated on special emergency grounds
- Demand for housing advice and homelessness applications has stayed the same
- Physical face to face applications shift to phone and on-line applications
- 57% increase in positive move-on compared to previous 3 months

Background

The Covid lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister on the evening of Monday 23rd March and from the morning of Tuesday 24th March, all customer access to the Customer Service Centre was stopped, save for emergency homeless presentations. On Thursday 26th March Housing Minister Luke Hall asked all local authorities to help the crisis response by making safe accommodation available to all rough sleepers. This included finding different accommodation for those already in night shelters, as this form of accommodation was no longer seen as safe during the crisis. Work began to achieve this on Friday 27th March and within a week most rough sleepers had received an offer of accommodation. The work to keep the numbers on the streets has continued throughout the crisis however, as new presentations from those newly homeless or newly moved to the area has been ongoing.

The Housing Needs service has remained very busy during the pandemic. Whilst the number of evictions generally reduced new causes of homelessness arose such as shielding-related loss of home and accelerated discharges from hospitals and prisons. Numbers of out of area homeless applicants applying to Exeter also remained consistent as has the rate of applications for social housing. Added demand on the service from the need to provide extra accommodation for all local rough sleepers from the end of March continues to stress-test the team with accommodation procurement and management, additional caseload assessment work and pressure to create move-on in a semi-paralysed housing market.

Emergency Covid-19 accommodation

Since 15th March the service has provided additional assessments and emergency covid accommodation for 91 households (mainly single homeless) for whom the Council would not ordinarily owe a duty to accommodate. This includes all rough sleepers supported under the government’s “Everyone In” instruction on 26th March.

Pre CV-19 we were using 88 units of contract TA with additional demand being met by the use of spot purchased accommodation.eg Travelodge / Premier Inn. In March it was necessary to dramatically increase the TA portfolio to accommodate those rough sleepers who we would not ordinarily have a duty to accommodate. Numerous options were explored.

The Main Challenges

- Increased daily demand for placements
- Increased financial demand
- Increased demand from clients & providers
- At exactly the same time our partner agencies were making decisions based on managing social distancing which resulted in the closure of our local support provision. In addition, the majority of district council closed their customer service centres.
- Support services across Sanctuary, Social Care, Together, were drastically scaled back to providing some telephone support for clients, face to face meetings with clients stopped abruptly
- In the properties owned by the council and managed by TA staff, the Temporary Accommodation Officers in addition to managing the three properties were ensuring that clients who needed to shield due to symptoms of CV were able to self-isolate. Emergency Food and medicines were provided by as there were simply no other options available to us, none of the clients who self-isolating were hospitalised and none tested positive for CV.
- Managing a CV Risk Assessment across all TA properties including spot purchase so that we could advise and support providers and give advice from PHE which changed daily
- Move on from temporary accommodation during lockdown was significantly restricted due to supporting services e.g. letting agents, removals etc. being out of action.

Rough Sleeping

All 32 local rough sleepers known to services from the start of lockdown (23rd March) were made offers of accommodation, most starting from the 27th March. All but 1 person accepted accommodation. Numbers were added to with people presenting to the Council from who were staying with friends, rough sleeping out of area and leaving local and regional institutions. Members may recall that the Council, within less than 48 hours of the government's announcement had put in place emergency arrangements to offer accommodation to all those sleeping rough. Special thanks must go to Gillian Littley for this.

Numbers of rough sleepers in the city reduced to a low of 5 at one point (3 awaiting a specific offer of accommodation and 2 new arrivals).

Further to the "Everyone In" instruction Government specialist homelessness advisors have subsequently advised local housing authorities to predominantly return to normal assessments of homelessness applicants under existing homelessness legislation. The Council was advised at the end of April that the expectation to accommodate all rough sleepers was no longer required. To date however this position has not been relayed in written guidance and so the service continues to be challenged by some partner agencies expecting accommodation to be provided regardless of legal homelessness status.

Recovery Plans

The service has been working hard to maximise positive move-on from the temporary emergency accommodations. From April to present day, 27 individuals have moved on positively into alternative more settled housing (19 into private rented, 2 into social housing, 6 direct matches). 54 persons remain in emergency covid accommodation and the focus continues on planning for specific move-on options as part of the step-down recovery planning.

The service is working with partner agencies for both accommodation pathways and support services (where needed) for those unlikely to access private rented options. Actions are underway with Bournemouth Churches HA and Westward HA to create voids in Gabriel House and Mortimer House through support from our private rented access service (HAT) and St Petrocks Fairlets service. Finance and support packages are being drawn up in order to optimise move and sustainment potential.

Discussions are also ongoing with other partner accommodation providers in supported housing and social housing; vacancies in ECC stock properties already being prioritised for statutory homeless referrals from Housing Needs. RSLs have also been asked to prioritise additional vacancies to assist with the anticipated increase in homelessness applications from people fleeing domestic violence and abuse as lockdown continues to relax.

The temporary accommodation team is also prioritising voids wherever possible for move-on from covid accommodation. However this is challenging given the continuing numbers of new applicants for emergency housing.

We have been working with central government's task force of HAST advisors under Dame Louise Casey's agenda to minimise the number of people having to return to rough sleeping. The service has been reporting local needs in terms of current numbers in temporary accommodation and what might be needed in order to step down from hotels and provide interim accommodation in preparation for longer term plans.

Thank you to Richard Crompton, Kevin Neil and all of the staff in the Service who have worked tirelessly to support people in crisis to access emergency accommodation.

Customer Access

The Customer Services team's Covid- related activity has focussed around supporting Housing Needs staff by maintaining a skeleton staff in the Customer Service centre and playing an integral role to the development and resourcing of the Exeter Wellbeing Hub. The Hub has now been incorporated into the work of the Customer Services team.

The Payments and Collection team have been responsible, on top of business as usual in developing the framework for the dispersal of Grants from the Government's two grants Schemes to Businesses- the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Scheme where £25m has been given out to support local eligible businesses and the Discretionary/Top Up Scheme where there is £1.5m to be allocated to eligible businesses. The work involved in administering these Scheme cannot be underestimated- staff have often worked over the weekend to put these in place and respond to business enquiries. Also supporting the work has been Victoria Hatfield's team, finance and Strata, working alongside Laura Fricker, Jayne Hanson, Guy Burnley.

Senior staff in the team have also been involved in submitting the required returns to government on the council's spend of Covid 19-related work.

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Housing – Summary

Housing Assets - Asset Management Team	
Stock Condition Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inspections of blocks have continued and have been completed with no interaction with residents• Data cleansing, rationalisation, updating and general housekeeping of the stock condition information has been undertaken• A huge amount of stock condition data and expertise has been fed into the Carbon Reduction project.
Development Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work has continued to identify and bring forward opportunities to meet the 500 home delivery target for the HRA• The Laings development site closed down, but is due to re-mobilise at the beginning of July• The Extra Care scheme / Bovemoors Lane development have continued and good progress has been made• The procurement of an operator and care provider for the Extra Care scheme has slowed due to pressures within Devon County Council teams
Housing Assets - Health, Safety & Compliance	
Gas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The housing regulator did not relax the requirement to undertake annual gas safety inspections despite many tenants objecting at the height of the pandemic and gas engineers themselves having to self-isolate• Initially, contractors also found it hard to source PPE but we were able to develop detailed records of properties where tenants were self-isolating or shielding to be followed up at a later time which is allowable by the Regulator. Compliance dipped from 99.76% in February to 98.68% for May with most of the drop consisting of coronavirus related no-access. We expect the compliance figures to begin improving from July so that by September figures will be normal or near-normal• Our own teams have helped the contractor by providing additional reassurance calls to tenants• Gas boiler installation program continues to be delivered• Gas Repairs – This service was largely unaffected as all breakdowns tend to be urgent, as they leave tenants without hot water or heating.
Electrical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Domestic 5-yearly inspections – Extensive planning between the contractor and ourselves has meant that the catch-up has already commenced. Compliance has dipped and currently stands at 94.1%.• Electrical Repairs – These were largely unaffected• Communal 5-yearly inspections – Although these did not involve electricians entering tenant properties, the risk from the coronavirus and difficulty obtaining PPE meant that the inspections were suspended. Compliance has reduced from 100% in February to 93.8% in May. We are now on track.• Emergency lighting upgrades – this extensive program was also suspended but in line with the other electrical work has resumed.

Asbestos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communal re-inspections – This service was largely uninterrupted and good compliance has been maintained – 99.29%. Voids and surveys – As voids were suspended, this area of work ceased. This was sector-wide. Work is resuming again and we will continue to work closely together to minimise any disruption.
Legionella	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk assessments – as these are annual we largely maintained compliance Testing and inspections – the work completed in sheltered schemes was suspended. Planning for the backlog has taken place and service is due to resume this month.
Fire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fire risk assessments (blocks of flats) were suspended, in agreement with the fire service, until September. We have been able to bring the resumption date forward so that surveys will start in July and finish in October Monthly inspections of communal areas in blocks of flats were suspended in agreement with the fire service. With visiting officer risk assessment now agreed and our own guidance we are resuming these inspections.
Lifts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communal lifts – 6-monthly inspections and maintenance largely unaffected Domestic stairlifts – emergency repair continues but maintenance and safety inspections were suspended. Resumption of service is starting this month.
Footpaths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-inspections - Outdoor inspections have continued and remain on target.
Housing Assets - Reactive Repairs	
Reactive Repairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reactive repairs moved to emergency and essential repairs only, following the introduction of restrictions Non-urgent repairs have been logged and prioritised Specialist contractors (damp proof, roofing) were put on hold and are now resuming We are planning for an anticipated surge in demand on the service
Voids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We reviewed existing void properties to establish whether they should be mothballed or used for temporary accommodation The void process has now commenced Re-let times (therefore rental income) have been temporarily negatively affected, but the service has withstood the challenge of COVID
Assisted Gardening Scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Assisted Gardening Scheme was temporarily suspended with the exception of health and safety works. This service has now recommenced.
Housing Assets - Planned Repairs	

Planned Repairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All works undertaken by the Planned Works Team have been suspended with the exception of health and safety development and one urgent major disabled adaption job which need to proceed towards the end of the initial lockdown • We have revised our programmes of work to accommodate the delays, including working with our contractors • Our contractors have returned to site
Tenancy Services - Estates	
Housing Officer Team Lettings & Leasehold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carried out desk top tenancy/ property audits and flexible tenancy reviews • Written to all tenants keeping them updated on the Housing services being provided and updated social media • We have launched a lockdown Garden competition • Introduced a new housing management I.T. system • Provided properties to housing options for rough sleepers needing to self-isolate • Continued to deal with complaints, MP enquiries and reports of anti-social behaviour (over doubled the number of reports of ASB) • Started to re-let properties • Continued to accept mutual exchange requests although not able to carry out final property inspections but were processed up to this point • Continued to process Right to Buy applications • Liaised with other Social Landlords operating in the area to share best practice and take a common approach • Arranged for additional cleaning of older persons accommodation • We have worked with Housing Needs to adapt the DHC policy to give a priority to homeless household in order to tackle the anticipated rise in homeless households
Performance, Strategy & Resident Involvement	
Performance, Strategy & Resident Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devised a three stage recovery program, to resume normal services • We have contributed to the corporate Business Continuity Plan from a Housing point of view • We have updated our risk register to help mitigate the negative effects of Covid-19 • We only furloughed four staff as the vast majority were performing essential functions • We provided information and answered customer queries through our social media accounts • We have helped produce a clear three stage recovery plan • Our performance has held up despite all the current difficulties (e.g. no staff off sick; rent arrears at the median level according to Housemark; reports of ASB have increased but are in line with other social landlords) • Provided performance and operational delivery data to a number of agencies (NROSH, Housing Ombudsman and Housemark) in addition to normal requirements

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided a link between housing and the Exeter Wellbeing Hub for tenants and leaseholders of the council
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No. of complaints / enquiries received	MP enquiries	Cllr enquiries	Service Level Complaints	Corporate Complaints	TOTAL
March	8	10	10	4	32
April	1	2	3	0	6
May	4	2	3	2	11
					49

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 JUNE 2020

ITEM 6: QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS ON COVID-19

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People – Councillor Morse

Questions from Committee Members

- 1 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - In January Exeter received an allocation of £917,850.00 for 20/21 from the Rough Sleeping Initiative allocations - please can you confirm if Exeter will still receive that amount in this financial year?
- 2 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Has any multi-agency planning occurred to develop a recovery strategy so that those currently staying in emergency accommodation are not faced with a return to the streets when the immediate risk from this first wave of the virus recedes?
- 3 **Councillor K. Mitchell and Councillor M. Mitchell** - Has the City Council issued any guidance to Private sector HMO landlords during the COVID lockdown and what financial and other support linked to the present crisis has been allocated to supporting private sector landlords, HMO properties and PBSA?
- 4 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Has the City Council had any meetings with the University of Exeter to discuss the safe movements of its students to and from private sector HMOs within communities during the COVID lockdown?
- 5 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Is the Portfolio Holder/Senior Officer aware of the concerns expressed by the Exeter St James Forum regarding concerns about Private HMOs during the COVID lockdown?
- 6 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - To what extent has the current crisis impacted since March 2020 upon the level of business rate income received by the council and what number of businesses are still making business rate payments?

Questions from Non-Committee Members

- 1 **Councillor J. Moore** – After the 'Everyone In' policy in March we saw the housing of people sleeping rough. Were there instances of people presenting as homeless but not meeting the requirements of this policy? In particular,
 - a. How many people presented as homeless after the initial 'Everyone In' period and were they housed?
 - b. How many people who presented as homeless during the period of the lockdown ([from March 24th](#) to date) did the council not offer support to

because the council identified that they had no statutory duty or no recourse to public funds. What alternative services were offered to these people?

- c. How many people presented as homeless as a result of domestic violence? What safe accommodation/support was offered?

- 2 **Councillor J. Moore** - Councillor Morse has confirmed that when people were moved into hotels they were not made aware that there would be any service charges made to them. What will happen if, having been unaware that they needed to budget for it, homeless people are unable to pay the charge of £21 a week? Will it be accrued as debt?
- 3 **Councillor D. Moore** – what long term changes will be made to the Junction to ensure that proper social distancing can be maintained; what provision will there be for people needing to self-isolate because of suspected or actual cases of Covid 19; and, how many people will the Junction accommodate after these changes have been made?

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services – Councillor Wright

Questions from Non-Committee Members

- 1 **Councillor D. Moore** - What assessment of changes of tenants' circumstances will be undertaken to better understand their needs now and enable access to support to manage financial circumstances where COVID 19 has resulted in financial difficulties?
- 2 **Councillor D. Moore** - As a consequence of the Covid epidemic has or will the Council review its emergency plan for each Council service?