

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.