

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 OCTOBER 2020

CLLR RUTH WILLIAMS – PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR SUPPORTING PEOPLE

CUSTOMER ACCESS – UPDATE ON PORTFOLIO HOLDER PRIORITIES

Revenues (Council Tax & Business Rates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1,963 grants have been awarded through the Small Business Grant Fund and Retail, Hospitality & Leisure Grant Fund, totalling £26.5m• 228 Discretionary Business Grants have been awarded, totalling £1.3m• Although the grant schemes closed at the end of August, the team are still involved in reconciliation and post award fraud and compliance checking activity• Senior staff in the team continue to submit the weekly returns to government on the council's spend of Covid 19-related work.
Benefits & Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In August, 5,544 council tax hardship awards were made to working age customers already in receipt of council tax support, reducing their Council Tax by a total of £820k• Daily, as new claims for working age Council Tax Support are received, more awards are made from the Hardship Fund.• This means that there are no working age council tax support customers with council tax arrears in the current year. Work is underway to identify those with previous year's arrears, so that staff can make contact and offer support to help those customers clear their arrears.
Payments & Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All formal recovery processes and enforcement action has been suspended since lockdown. Courts have been closed for revenues collection activity and all enforcement activity and visits have been suspended by regulation.• Instead, for all council debt areas, staff have been calling customers whose accounts have been falling into arrears and either taking payments or agreeing alternative payment plans.• The team have now started to send 'soft reminders' to prompt payment or a response. Although no formal recovery action is being taken currently, these are statutory charges and it is important to start progressing action in order to prompt payment and to continue to encourage engagement with those that are financially struggling so that support can be offered. We want to avoid our residents and businesses increasing their levels of indebtedness as this will become more difficult to resolve.• Currently senior staff are analysing data which will help inform when and how to reintroduce formal recovery procedures.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite staff being heavily involved in bringing in the new Housing Management system, data extracted on 24 August, and compared to a similar period last year, shows less of an impact on rent collection than expected: 				
Tenure	% Arrears against net collectable rent	Arrears value £	2019/20 %	2019/20 £	
HRA (standard ECC stock)	3.61%	£714,654	3.32%	£659,676	
HRA Former tenancy arrears	-	£39,434	-	£71,913	
Short Term Accommodation (B&B)	4.16%	£23,944	1.96%	£17,740	
Short Term Accommodation (B&B) former tenancy arrears	-	£42,607	-	£47,101	
Extralet & Private Sector Lease (PSL)	9.73%	£23,166	*10.83%	*£24,554	
Extralet & Private Sector Lease (PSL) Former tenancy arrears	-	£21,612	-	*£31,832	
	<p>The support given to the homeless has substantially impacted the cost of short term accommodation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The net collectable debit for council tax has increased by just under £2m. Council Tax Collection is approximately 1% under target. 				
Customer Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Exeter Wellbeing Hub has been incorporated into the work of the Customer Support Team and to date 135 customers have received support through the Exeter Wellbeing Support Fund. £38,000 of the fund has been spent so far. The Customer Service Centre continues to offer a face to face service, limited to those with emergency housing needs. 				
Housing & Homelessness Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since 26th March “Everybody In” the final total of people rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping accommodated on special emergency Covid grounds (i.e. over and above normal duties) was 102. Face to face demand (where no immediately available alternative methods of engagement) continue to be met by the frontline housing duty service (1 caseworker plus 1 team leader/manager) operating from the customer service centre at the Civic. Demand averages 20 presentations weekly and is predominantly from rough sleepers especially those new to the area, people fleeing domestic violence or abuse, and persons made “homeless tonight” usually through family / relationship breakdown. The majority of homelessness applications continue to be diverted to interviews and assessments by phone plus some online. Demand has remained consistent throughout the last 6 months from mid-March to mid-September averaging 45 new approaches weekly. Numbers accepted into temporary accommodation has remained consistent during the same period (excluding rough 				

	<p>sleepers accommodated under “Everybody In”) averaging 24 households per month. However September is indicating a potential spike with 17 accommodated within the first 2 weeks of the month.</p>
<p>Rough Sleeping</p>	<p>Of the 102 persons accommodated under “Everybody In” which entails rough sleepers and those most at risk of rough sleeping:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 38 have moved on successfully through other housing options via friends/family, private rented, social housing and supported housing • 22 have lost or abandoned emergency accommodation • 42 remain in emergency Covid-accommodation principally at the Great Western Hotel. <p>Currently there are 28 individuals verified as rough sleeping on the street and services are working with each to deliver offers of housing and / or reconnection back to their local area. 11 of these individuals have been referred for accommodation at a repurposed city centre 11-bed hostel at 62 Howell Road, currently closed for refurbishment and due to re-open for rough sleepers in mid-October. On-site support and supervision at the project is being increased to 24/7 which includes overnight security / concierge and double staff cover during the core daytime hours. A management plan is in place and the premises already has long-running hostel status.</p>
<p>Recovery Plans</p>	<p>Work is continuing with a review of the supported housing pathway and in particular move-on functions and capacity. The Council is leading a review with partner agencies to re-set targets and build further capacity in the private rented sector through financial support packages to landlords and clients. This also involves an assessment of property available in the market for lease purposes via new landlords and property management services expressing an interest to work with the Council in providing accommodation move-on.</p> <p>The government funded Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) has determined bids for revenue for local authorities across England providing emergency accommodation and support for rough sleepers. Exeter has been awarded £440k for the 6 months up to end March 2021 and these funds will enable the ongoing commitment to operate services at the Great Western Hotel and other temporary placements. We are awaiting the announcement at the end of September of the capital round of the bid which, if successful will support the Council to deliver up to 36 new units of accommodation with support.</p>

	<p>Discussions with partner services are continuing with regard to tracking any new housing need for people fleeing domestic abuse and violence for which support services have been experiencing significant demand growth (> 50% increase) but housing has not experienced to date.</p>
<p>Winter emergency provision</p>	<p>As winter approaches we anticipate an increase in demand for emergency housing as a result of the impending cessation of the evictions moratorium (Sept 21st) whereby landlords are due to be able to take proceedings against tenants with ASB and significant rent arrears. The situation is being monitored and options are being assessed for financial support to help reduce rent arrears and therefore any additional burden on temporary accommodation.</p> <p>In addition there are anticipated spikes in demand during inclement weather for which we are currently in discussions with Public Health and MHCLG in order to determine plans for making accommodation available that is not based on shared sleeping space (e.g. night shelter and communal floorspaces) currently deemed not feasible on health and safety (covid-19) grounds.</p>