



Cabinet Member Report

Committee date:	17 September 2020
Cabinet Member:	Councillor David Harvey
Portfolio:	Housing Services
Report Author and Contact Details:	Amy Just <u>ajust@westminster.gov.uk</u>

1. Communications

Residents have been kept updated and informed of service updates and advice as coronavirus lockdown restrictions have lifted, with information on government guidance, how to access council support and any changes to services. Digital tactics have increased, enabling faster and more efficient communications such as utilising email where we have addresses and text message. In addition to our fortnightly e-newsletters and quarterly magazine, most recent communications to highlight include:

- Supported the gradual restart of non-urgent repairs, and major works onsite, with letters, pamphlets and posters on noticeboards in blocks
- New online FAQ for the latest coronavirus advice and information relating to housing services plus new Public Health posters on all noticeboards
- 17 web news posts covering issues such as noise nuisance, cycles stores, financial and employment support and fire safety from June to August, with local media coverage in WestminsterExtra on major works restarting at Little Venice Tower
- Launched MyWestminsterHousing online customer account upgrades to report, view and cancel repairs, with improved online FAQ and emails to existing users
- Transformed the Tenant Handbook with printable and online interactive versions available
- Transformed the Leaseholder Handbook with printable and online interactive versions available, and produced a Your Lease Explained video for leaseholders and promoted on our website and through our YourHome e-zine and magazine
- Information and advice to 1,000 residents living in community supportive housing to reassure them of measures in place to keep them safe
- Notice to 3,000+ housing applicants to advise allocations are operating as normal, with choice-based lettings available, from 24 August 2020 with new virtual viewing and sign up

2. Housing Contact Centre

The contact centre continues to operate remotely with no impact on effectiveness. A reduction in call volumes was seen in April and May but volumes have now returned to normal for the time of year. Performance levels have remained strong with 96% calls handled and 85% of calls answered within 30 seconds for the period of April-July.

Customer satisfaction, empathy and engagement levels are above 90%, based on surveys of over 2000 customers.

3. General Repairs

The repairs service was reduced to emergencies and health and safety works only during lockdown and recommenced on a phased basis from June with plumbing and electrical works. Further trades will be added as pre-COVID work in progress is cleared. This approach has allowed contractors to take staff off furlough to clear the works put on hold at the start of lockdown and manage a gradually increasing new workload. The re-start has been accompanied by resident consultation and communications. Repairs requested before lockdown will be completed in October, subject to access.

Repairs performance has been good across the reduced service with both customer satisfaction with the service and satisfaction with the quality of the repair up slightly on last year.

4. Health and Safety Compliance

Statutory testing and inspections of services including gas appliances, water tanks, asbestos and fire risk assessments continued throughout lockdown, with staff taking additional health and safety precautions as appropriate.

Gas servicing performance has slipped and at the end of July 118 tenanted properties were without a current gas safety certificate. This is due to residents who continue to shield being reluctant to allow access to their homes. A concerted effort is being made by housing management and repairs teams to reassure residents of the safety precautions that are taken to protect all involved but some residents remain cautious.

5. Major works

Planned major works were put on hold during lockdown and spend is reduced accordingly. Work has commenced again, with the support of communications to residents to address the queries they may have about the safety of the works restarting. A small number of queries have been received and the cautious approach has been received well.

6. Neighbourhood services

Neighbourhood services responded swiftly to lockdown to maintain visibility of the service in new ways. Resident meetings are now held on Zoom, including fortnightly meetings with resident representatives and the Cabinet Member for Housing Services. This has helped to ensure the service remains close to its customers and alert to local issues.

The Housing Area Service Centres continue to offer appointment-based services and measures have been taken to ensure that the offices and interview rooms are COVID-Secure. This includes screened receptions and resident interview rooms, reduced office capacity and new hygiene measures. Fewer residents are requesting face to face services and many are cautious about inviting officers and contractors into their homes.

The housing management teams have identified and contacted vulnerable residents, and provided regular contact and support as needed.

The Antisocial behaviour service has seen a 34% increase in reported cases from March to July compared with the same period last year. 60% of cases related to noise nuisance and verbal abuse and 17% of cases concern substance misuse and dealing. Despite the increase in volume, customer satisfaction levels are rising and reached 70% in July.

Estate cleaning has continued with the frequency of some tasks amended, such as touch points in communal areas (handrails, door handles and lift panels). Satisfaction with estate cleaning remains high with both tenants and lessees.

7. Rent Collection

Rent collection performance is running at 96.23% compared with 98.72% at July 2019. Standard rent collection was paused until the end of July 2020. The approach remains support-focused, and payment reminders are not referencing court or evictions. The Government's ban on evictions is in place for six months and new six-month notice periods are to be in place until at least 31 March 2021.

The number of tenants claiming Universal Credit (UC), has increased 40% since January and there is a 5 week wait for the first payment in arrears.

The programme of support includes referrals to employment services and signposting to the Citizens Advice Bureau and other external agencies. Over 400 residents who are looking for work have been referred to the Council's employment services.

Work continues to promote Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to a targeted audience working in conjunction with colleagues in the housing benefit service.

8. Leasehold service charge collection

Lessee service charge collection performance remains good and an increase in arrears on the portfolio is yet to be identified.

The service charge team are monitoring all service charge accounts and keeping a log of any references to COVID19 which may impact on our leaseholder's ability to pay their service charge. No standard debt recovery action is being taken at this time. Payment reminders are being sent with an emphasis on support and assistance.

9. Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs)

All TMOs are running full repairs, cleaning and gardening services and have started to reopen their offices. TMO staff are working between office and home and offering face to face services with appropriate systems in place to maintain social distancing.

TMOs are planning their Annual General meetings and receiving support to hold virtual meetings, or to ensure the appropriate risk assessments are in place.

10. Registered Providers.

Registered providers (RPs) are offering services in a similar way to the Council, with many staff working remotely from home. Public facing offices remain closed or with restricted access. Services

such as repairs and lettings are returning to business as usual, with new practices to minimise the risk of COVID19.

RP websites are being regularly updated to inform residents of operating arrangements. RPs are operating welfare calls for vulnerable residents and some are also carrying out food deliveries, working with local charities and volunteer groups.

11. Homelessness and Housing Needs

The Passage (Singles Assessment Hub) has now re-opened with amended procedures e.g. at least one member of the team is on site during the day. The majority of staff across the service continue to work from home with a skeleton service operating from Bruckner Street which is open for all emergency homelessness cases. Footfall remains low, with 18 visitors/appointments during June/July 2020 and 8 in April/May 2020. The contact centre is operating as normal and customers are advised to contact the service via telephone or by going online to complete the online assessment form.

Since 1st April 2020 186 lettings have been achieved, compared with 311 during the same period for 2019. 40% of lettings during lockdown were to homeless households and 18% to Pathways/Hostel Move-On applicants to free accommodation for rough sleepers.

Council stock lettings are taking place with the benefit of a new digital lettings process, including virtual viewings and electronic signup to minimise contact.

The housing service has worked with the Rough Sleeping team and provider agencies to support the shared objectives of protecting those clients in COVID-19 emergency accommodation from future homelessness and achieving a sustained reduction in rough sleeping overall.

Homeless approaches during June and July 2020 were 1.3% less than the same period in 2019/20, with homeless applications down 33.5%. Temporary accommodation placements were down 56.9% compared with the same period in 2019/20. The Council faces continued challenges in trying to secure an adequate supply of temporary accommodation. It is anticipated that demand will increase, particularly from single people when limitations on evictions are raised.

June 2020 saw an increase in the number and of homeless applications with issues of domestic abuse (16% of all homeless applications). This has reduced slightly post lockdown to 13% in July and 8% in August. Customers who approach with concerns of domestic abuse are able to speak with an independent advisor. HSS and our own housing management services continue to work with our DA charity partners to ensure the most appropriate options and support are offered.