



Cabinet Member Report

Committee date: 16 November 2020

Cabinet Member: Councillor David Harvey

Portfolio: Housing Services

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COVID-19 Recovery

1. COVID-19 restrictions between 5 November and 2 December 2020

1.1. Housing services have a business continuity plan in place for COVID-19 and the government announcement of a second lockdown has resulted in the initiation of a different level of that plan. Government guidance is not as restrictive as the previous lockdown in March, and services will continue to run wherever possible.

1.2. This means that:

- In-flat repairs service will continue for residents who want their repair done.
- All residents with repairs already booked for November will be contacted to confirm their preference.
- Physical attendance in the office will be restricted to key staff who have to be in the office to deliver the service and those who are unable to work from home.
- Allocations will continue with the exception of our community supportive housing scheme. This is to protect vulnerable residents who are part of those schemes.
- Playgrounds will remain open.
- Major works projects are to be risk assessed but will continue wherever possible.
- In compliance with government guidance, community halls will close.

2. Housing Management: COVID-19 Response

2.1. Housing officers are standing attendees at the thrice weekly 'Tactical Group' for cross-departmental working and core members of the daily Housing Outbreak Management Team (OMT) respond to any potential outbreaks in Housing settings.

2.2. Call volumes are currently very high and are anticipated to remain so while residents understand the impact of the latest lockdown announcement.

- 2.3. A full repairs service is being provided, and operating with training, PPE and distancing arrangements in place. Contractors are working to update their winter plans. Services are constantly reviewed with the objective of maintaining the full repairs service, as long as it is possible to do so in compliance with government requirements and COVID-19 guidance.
- 2.4. The Safe Systems of Work have been reviewed in accordance with government guidelines, and Health & Safety at Work with detailed risk assessments for all contractors in place.
- 2.5. Housing are working closely with Westminster Connects and Adult Social Care to ensure arrangements are in place to work consistently and collaboratively in maintaining contact with vulnerable cohorts. Housing will shortly be writing to their vulnerable residents mirroring the recent message from the Leader to the formerly shielded cohort.
- 2.6. Three testing sites are now operating from Housing Community centres at Greenside Community Centre, Lydford Tenants and Residents Hall, and Grosvenor Hall. The centres have a combined capacity of 4,000 tests per week.
- 2.7. Calls to vulnerable residents are continuing and a number of staff are being seconded to support Westminster Connects.
- 2.8. A new digital surgery pilot has commenced for Soho residents with the support of the Housing Digital team, replacing a physical surgery in the Soho area prior to COVID-19. By using the online booking system, residents can book a telephone or online video meeting with a Housing Service Officer to discuss any issues. The service is being promoted to residents and if successful, it will be rolled out to other areas of the city.
- 2.9. Services continue to be offered by appointment only to residents in our Housing Area Service Centres with measures such as screens, hand sanitiser station and an intercom system on entry in place to make the centres COVID-secure. There is a desk booking system for staff working at the Area Service Centres to support track and trace and is aligned to the system used at City Hall.
- 2.10. Estate cleaning has continued with the frequency of some tasks increased such as touch points in communal areas (handrails, door handles and lift panels). Satisfaction with estate cleaning remains high with both tenants and lessees. All grounds maintenance services are running with a focus on seasonal works such as leaf clearance.

Housing services: operational

3. Housing Contact Centre

- 3.1. In early April, the Housing Contact Centre successfully moved to operating remotely with no impact on service delivery. Absence and attrition levels have both been below the usual rate, with absence tracking at 2% and only one leaver since April.
- 3.2. Call volumes initially dropped at the beginning of lockdown in March and services reduced to emergency response only. As restrictions eased, customer demand increased and, as anticipated, the reduced demand in first two months of the year has been delivered across

June to September. This has meant that the team have had to deal with increased volume with the same level of resources.

3.3. Performance across all contact centre KPIs has been very strong, with targets achieved or exceeded despite the challenges. The only exception was in September, which saw a year on year increase in call volumes of 30%, with call abandoned rates of 10% against a target of 8%. Almost 100% of emails were handled within the target of 48 hours.

2020/21	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20
Calls Offered	12427	11728	17618	19597	17256	22852
Calls Answered	12055	11508	17027	18447	16206	20572
Answered %	97%	98%	97%	94%	94%	90%
Average Wait Time	00:00:25	00:00:11	00:00:26	00:00:39	00:00:27	00:00:42
Average Wait Time - Agilisys	00:00:14	00:00:13	00:00:19	00:00:33	00:00:53	00:01:24
% calls answered in 30 seconds (target 70%)	86%	93%	84%	77%	79%	71%
% calls abandoned	3%	2%	3%	6%	6%	10%
Emails received	3324	3217	4204	4428	3878	4655
Emails completed in SLA	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%
2019/20	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19
Calls Offered	18326	17782	16053	15719	15662	17532
Calls Answered	17436	16849	14893	14797	14420	16734
Answered %	95%	95%	93%	94%	92%	95%
+/-	-5899	-6054	1565	3878	1594	5320

3.4. The charts located at Appendix 1 are produced using Bright software which collects customer feedback via automated post-call surveys. Customer scores are received against a range of categories and residents are contacted directly to address any outstanding issues. The charts show a 12-month trend for customer satisfaction with answer time, first contact resolution (FCR), Knowledge, General Satisfaction and Empathy. A considerable improvement in customer satisfaction with services delivered by the Housing contact centre during COVID is evident. The only area that has seen a reduction in satisfaction is with First Contact Resolution. This was due to the reduced service offer with the repairs service as customer service officers were unable to book all repair types until the service resumed completely on 26 October 2020.

4. Major Works

4.1. In the early stages of the pandemic, all major works contracts were paused, and no work was carried out. Following a very proactive communications exercise to reassure residents, all major work contracts have now resumed.

5. Housing Digital Projects

5.1. There are currently a number of projects and initiatives relating to customer self-service. Existing projects include:

- online housing register applications including the Hope portal (Homelessness)
 - Orchard (the housing management database)
 - digital platform developments including customer self-appointing repairs, online bookings, self-help videos for the website and channel shift
 - customer sign-up to the online housing portal
- 5.2. The Housing Contact Centre are promoting the online housing service portal during their conversations with residents and assisting with sign-ups. There are also planned targeted communications aimed at encouraging those residents who are currently not signed up/registered on the portal.
- 5.3. Two additional service offers have been introduced to the portal; repair requests and creation and updating ASB cases. Phase 2 of the portal is currently being scoped and will include full end to end self-appointed repairs.
- 5.4. Three self-help animation videos are being created, including how to register for the Housing portal, COVID-secure working practices and how to complete simple repairs.
- 5.5. CRM knowledge base is an improvement project for Housing Services through the provision of a knowledge base to empower customer service staff to resolve customer requests first-time. The CRM knowledgebase went live in September 2020 and provides contact centre staff with knowledge articles to improve quality and consistency of information provided to customers.
- 5.6. The Housing Contact Centre Solution replacement project is a transformational project within the Housing Improvement Programme. The project is designed to deliver improvements to Housing Services through stabilisation of the contact centre telephony platform but also City for All and Customer Experience and Digital strategic commitments.
- 5.7. The new software tells customers their position if there is a queue and provides the option to request a call back. It provides more and better analytics and agent management tools to assist supervisors to monitor performance and improve the quality of service from the contact centre. It also includes speech analytics so we will have insight into what is driving contact and can respond better.
- 5.8. The second release will have new customer channels such as Webchat and SMS, this allows more choice for customers to contact us in a way that suits them. The project has interdependencies with the CRM for Housing project and is critical to the success of the Housing Improvement Programme which will deliver recommendations made by the Task Force investigation commissioned by WCC, prior to the decision to bring Housing Services back in house.
- 5.9. Phase one of the project is completed with the replacement telephony system delivered on 28 October 2020. This combines powerful IVR solution (the interactive call routing virtual receptionist) with the ability to check staff availability to ensure calls are directed to the right person to reduce delays. It is anticipated that the solution will deliver improved response times across channels with greater insight in forecasted contact volumes, performance, and staff scheduling.
- 5.10. By the end of phase 2 in November there will be a multi-channel offer in place - one integrated solution to manage resident contacts calls, email, and chat. The channels are interlinked and contact information is shared. A customer that has used one channel but

switches to another will have all of their information presented to the adviser who will have a full picture of any earlier activity whether it was on webchat or emails etc. This should minimise the number of service requests that customers generate.

- 5.11. Channels to be delivered by the end of November will include telephone, email, social media, SMS and webchat, as well as improved insight from a powerful speech analytics platform.

6. Repairs, voids, compliance, and gas checks

- 6.1. The full repairs service was reinstated on 26 October 2020 and is performing well. Performance against KPIs for the first half of the year is as follows:

- Tenant satisfaction with repairs: 83% (target 84%)
- Tenant satisfaction with the quality of repairs: 86% (target 85%)
- First time fix: 81% (target 85%)
- Completion on time – emergency repairs: 98.6% against a target of 98%
- Completion on time – urgent repairs: 93% (target 95%)
- Appointments made and kept: 91% (target 95%)

- 6.2. Works to void properties is being completed within target:

- Average time taken to complete repairs to routine voids: 9 days (target 14 days)
- % of routine voids completed within target: 100%
- Average time taken to complete repairs to major voids: 17 days (target 19 days)
- % of major voids completed within target: 97.1% (target 98%)

- 6.3. Statutory testing and inspection of services including gas appliances, water tanks, asbestos and fire risk assessments has continued, with staff taking additional health and safety precautions as appropriate. Compliance across the five areas of gas, electricity, water, asbestos and fire is excellent.

- 6.4. Annual gas servicing was given no dispensation during lockdown despite access to many properties being understandably refused. The team responded well to the considerable challenges and at the end of October, performance was at 99.45% which equates to 32 properties outstanding out of 6,566.

7. Resident Engagement

- 7.1. A fortnightly meeting is held between 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.

- 7.2. The housing team is working with resident representatives to set up a programme of guest speakers. The meetings have helped to develop the relationship between Neighbourhood Services and Resident Associations and enabled the service to quickly respond to any issues raised.

- 7.3. Other resident meetings continue to be held online. Prior to lock-down, officers worked with residents to create estate action plans, recognising local priorities for

improvement. Work has recommenced on creating new plans and a total of 55 plans were in place at the end of September. The plans are regularly updated on the website.

8. Anti-social Behaviour

- 8.1. As part of plans to improve resident engagement and the approach to the management of anti-social behaviour (ASB), a resident-led ASB case review panel pilot is being established. This pilot will be run in two geographically distant wards: Little Venice and Vincent Square. Engaged residents from one ward will help peer review anonymised ASB cases relating to the other ward. It will give engaged residents the opportunity to sense check the council's approach to ASB management, establish an operating model for the group, and understand how well council methods and approaches align with resident expectations. Some training may be needed for participants but there is also significant material value in hearing the views of residents who are not experts in the usual options available to the council when managing ASB but who are its victims or may otherwise experience it.
- 8.2. There are currently 164 active ASB cases. The number of ASB cases being reported has reduced and the numbers are similar to the same period last year. Cases being reported are predominantly noise nuisance, verbal abuse and harassment. The ASB team keep in regular contact with the victims reporting ASB for every case. The ASB team can currently seek possession of a property due to breach of the tenancy agreement but due to restrictions there is currently a suspension of bailiff enforcement of the orders. There are two cases where possession has been granted but evictions cannot be carried out. The ASB team are making use of injunction powers and two injunctions have been granted recently to prohibit certain nuisance behaviour.
- 8.3. In conjunction with Housing Management, Public Protection and Licensing, the Integrated Gangs Unit, the Police, and the communications team, a plan has been put together for the Autumn Nights period. Each year, measures are taken that are designed to limit any nuisance behaviour. Meetings have been held with families of previous perpetrators and a communications campaign has been carried out.
- 8.4. The ASB team will be running a trial of a new digital noise 'app' which residents, when reporting noise nuisance, can download and record noise that can be used as evidence in taking enforcement action.

9. Rents – Income collection

- 9.1. The income team are monitoring all accounts and are keeping a log of any references to COVID-19 which may impact a resident's ability to pay their rent.
- 9.2. The serving of possessions stay was lifted in September 2020, but the escalation to Tier 2 means that all bailiff activity is now prohibited. No court action or bailiff activity is expected to be undertaken until at least 2021.
- 9.3. The team have moved away from geographical patch-based work and are identifying cases which need the priority work amongst all officers.
- 9.4. Payment reminder actions are being undertaken through telephone calls, text messages, e-mail contact and written correspondence. When debt recovery action is

reinstated in line with the Covid Act 2020, all accounts will be reviewed but the priority will be cases in arrears prior to March 2020 where there are no COVID-19 related concerns. Recovery action will recommence from the initial stage of the arrears recovery process to ensure our tenants have an opportunity to speak to the service first about their account and their circumstances.

- 9.5. Universal Credit claims have increased by 73% from the start of the year and by 56% from 1 March 2020. This is an unprecedented rise from any prior year.
- 9.6. Promotion of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) continues, with communications sent by text and letter to a targeted audience. DHP can only be made as a top-up to housing benefit or universal credit where tenants are in receipt of either benefit. Tenants will continue to be encouraged to claim DHP for a fixed period unless there are exceptional circumstances. There are no time limits on backdating a DHP award. If a tenant needs DHP considered from the point that lockdown started (or earlier) they only need to make this clear on the claim form.
- 9.7. 200 letters were sent in September 2020 to tenants who may be eligible for DHP. 116 texts were sent to tenants who may be eligible for DHP in October 2020 and a further 200 are planned for November 2020. DHP will be continually promoted to all tenants when contact is made, as well as sending targeted communications to cohorts who may benefit.
- 9.8. Work is also underway to identify tenants who may have lost their employment (through changes to UC claims) and who may benefit from employment support. The income team make referrals to Citizens Advice, Cardinal Hume, the Employment Assistance Programme, the energy initiative scheme to support residents and are assisting with UC claims where necessary.

10. Leasehold Services

- 10.1. The 2019/2020 actual service charges were dispatched in September 2020, which is the earliest they have been served. Following a Lessee Scheme process where the council works with residents to help shape and interrogate the charges which will form part of the service charges, this has been a very successful period for the team.
- 10.2. The service charge team are monitoring all service charge accounts and keeping a log of any references to COVID-19 which may impact on our leaseholder's ability to pay their service charge.
- 10.3. The core of the collection process approach is still firmly centred around a supportive gentle payment reminder. Letters do not reference breach of lease or court action. Payment reminder actions are being undertaken through telephone calls, e-mail contact and written correspondence.
- 10.4. To date, no increase of accounts in arrears has been identified, but it is anticipated that this may happen as more people lose employment or claim Universal Credit.
- 10.5. In September the Lessee team hosted their first Leasehold Conference for 200 virtual attendees. The conference was a success and was supported by sessions from LEASE and Citizens Advice. Topics on lease extensions, service charge explained, and short term letting

were very popular with residents. A post conference survey has been sent out to attendees to gauge opinion and help ensure the next conference is resident-led and incorporates any changes they may wish to see.

11. Tenant Management Organisations

- 11.1. All Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) are running full repairs, cleaning and gardening services and have started to reopen their offices. Staff are working between office and home and offering face to face services with appropriate systems in place to maintain social distancing.
- 11.2. TMOs are planning their Annual General meetings and receiving support to hold virtual meetings, or to ensure the appropriate risk assessments are in place. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Government has extended the deadline for AGMs to be held to December 2020.
- 11.3. TMOs have been included in the council's Windows 10 and Office 365 deployment with full use of SharePoint. This will enable the TMOs to manage their casefiles more efficiently across different platforms.
- 11.4. Additional officer resources have been committed by the Council to working with our eight TMO partners, to assist with greater transparency around TMO performance management.

12. Registered Providers

- 12.1. 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. WCC meets regularly with the other housing providers.
- 12.2. Services such as repairs and lettings are returning to business as usual, with new practices to minimise the risk of COVID-19.
- 12.3. RP websites are being regularly updated to inform residents of current arrangements. RPs are operating welfare calls for vulnerable residents and some are also carrying out food deliveries, working with local charities and volunteer groups.
- 12.4. A number of significant new affordable housing schemes recently completed and delivered by our RP partners are currently being let. These include:
 - Octavia Housing's North Wharf Road scheme in Paddington providing 12 social housing units, plus four units for shared ownership.
 - Woodfield Quarter, (Woodfield Road) also delivered by Octavia Housing is providing a mixture of 19 one and two bed shared ownership homes.
 - Lanark Road delivered by Dolphin Living providing 10 social and 39 intermediate rented homes

Homelessness services: operational

13. Homelessness and Housing Needs

13.1. The majority of our contractors' staff across the service continue to work from home with a skeleton service operating from the Family Hub at Bruckner Street (11am to 3pm) which is open for all emergency homelessness cases. Appropriate safety measures including screening and PPE have been provided in order to ensure COVID-safe guidelines are adhered to.

13.2. The Housing Solutions Service (HSS) at The Passage is now open. The service operates from 11am to 3pm, to mirror the family's service, and is staffed by both Passage and RMG workers. Passage staff are on reception with an RMG duty worker also in the reception area, and a Passage duty worker in a separate office in the HSS space. There are clear procedures in place for when clients present as to how this is managed and how assessments are facilitated. This includes where required a virtual assessment via a Teams video link within the service.

13.3. The contact centre is operating as normal and customers are advised to contact the service via telephone or by going online to complete the assessment form. As part of our continuous service development, HSS Advisors at the contact centre will be deployed onto the new platform that has been implemented as part of the digital solution across Housing Services. Benefits include routing customers to agents and allowing them to work from anywhere with internet access. There is additional functionality which provides customer analytics as well as further functionality to support team leaders with quality management through improved reporting and monitoring. There is also an additional feature which will enable post call surveys to be conducted with customers to collect feedback.

13.4. Homelessness prevention activity

13.5. Homeless approaches to the housing solutions service during April to September 2020 were 11% higher than the same period in 2019/20, with homeless applications down 25%. The reduction in applications relative to approaches is due to new application processes being introduced to comply with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA), meaning a full assessment is carried out within seven days, usually on the day of approach. This allows caseworkers to advise applicants and issue decisions quickly and means that applicants who do not qualify for temporary accommodation or social housing choose not to proceed with their application. The new process is more efficient and better manages expectations.

13.6. Homelessness preventions are 31% higher compared with the same period in 2019/20. This figure comprises a combination of positive outcomes in the "Prevention" stage and the "Relief" stage of the HRA. A significant contributor to our prevention performance being higher is the Westlets team, which has been restructured and relaunched along with a new website. The team has been able to improve the service to applicants who want help finding a private rented property, and despite lockdown they were still able to achieve a good number of lettings. The council has encouraged Shelter (delivery partner of HSS) to refocus their attention on homelessness prevention, and they have reported an increased number of preventions.

14. Partnership engagement

- 14.1. During lockdown the HSS partnership created a focus group, to review and improve the service offer to those at risk of homelessness in Westminster, including:
- how referral pathways can be improved and increase early intervention activity
 - participating in virtual Family Hub Panel discussions with Portman Children's Centre and the Bessborough Centre to build on existing relationships, alongside Shelter providing expert housing advice.
- 14.2. As part of ongoing engagement with Registered Providers, the Shelter outreach team are working with one of our main providers, Peabody, and have established contact with the Income Team at the Westminster office with to develop view to building and maintaining a strong referral partnership, with a view to reducing rent arrears and preventing evictions.

15. Domestic abuse

- 15.1. Although there has been an overall decrease by 25% in homeless applications between April and September compared to the same period last year, the data recorded currently shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of applications where domestic abuse (DA) is stated as the main reason for loss of settled accommodation.
- 15.2. DA was the main reason for loss of settled accommodation in 11% of homeless applications, compared to the same period last year where it accounted for 4% of homeless applications. Current year-to-date figures show domestic abuse as the third largest cause of homelessness, behind families being no longer willing to accommodate the applicant, and the end of a private rented tenancy.
- 15.3. High risk and complex cases are referred and managed through our Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC). Actions volunteered and agreed at the MARAC will always be focused on safeguarding of the victim/survivor. The purpose of the referral is to establish a comprehensive risk management plan for the victim/survivor which may include actions such as implementing sanctuary schemes, placing special schemes on an address or assisting a victim/survivor with a Non-Molestation Order. Service specialist support has been embedded through an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) from Advance. Our IDVA discusses housing options and liaises with involved professionals on behalf of the survivor, provides relevant support on safety planning for survivors and discusses sanctuary schemes, as well as signposting particularly on legal remedies and options.
- 15.4. During the emergency COVID response, priority was given to interim allocations policy to ensure cases of domestic abuse were being managed in an effective way and that survivors could be rehoused throughout lockdown.
- 15.5. HSS continue to work towards obtaining the DAHA (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance) accreditation and have carried out reviews of their policies and procedures, continual staff training and individual case audits.

16. Quality Assurance

- 16.1. Service Improvement Groups are usually held on a quarterly basis in the Lord Mayor's Parlour as part of the Quality Assurance Framework. HSS and the HSS Contract team hosted its first virtual Service Improvement Group in September, the first session since COVID-19 restrictions were in place. The session focused on customer experience of accessing services during lockdown, feedback on TA Providers and feedback on communication how customers can access information.
- 16.2. The Complaints Procedure to deal with Stage 2 and Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) complaints regarding the HSS has also been reviewed. The HSS Contract team in collaboration with the HSS complaints team will be reporting and capturing data from complaints which have been escalated to Stage 2 and the LGO in order to assist with service improvement.

City for All

17. Cleaner and Greener

- 17.1. The housing service is working towards improving energy efficiency of the stock and carbon reduction. Detailed modelling of the stock has commenced to determine what is needed to take the stock up to a B rating or net zero by 2040. A full report will be submitted in the near future to the Carbon Action Group.
- 17.2. The housing team has been successful in an application for £125k of funding from the GLA for low income E-rated properties and >£300k for cavity wall insulation to the small number of remaining properties that can be cavity insulated.

18. Smart Cities

- 18.1. As part of the 'Smart Cities' ambition, the housing service is embarking on a project to trial smart technologies to improve management of building services and estates and to provide proactive and value adding services to residents. This includes sensors to remove the need for routine checks and to provide early warning alerts, reducing the cost of maintenance and system failures.
- 18.2. The project is in the early discovery stage, exploring the technology available. A range of technology will be selected to be trialled.

19. Vibrant Communities

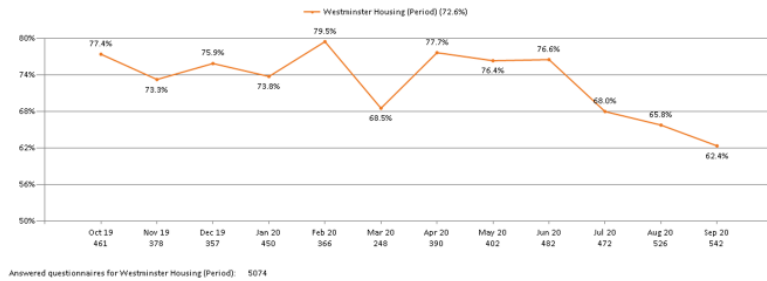
- 19.1. A portfolio of initiatives is being developed to increase the support available to vulnerable residents and create healthy, vibrant and connected communities. A series of pilots will test new ways of working to provide access to co-ordinated council and community services, before considering wider roll-out across the city. Examples of the work include support into employment, support to maximise income, support for residents with mental health issue and support for ex-homeless. With better access to coordinated council and community services, the most vulnerable residents will be supported within their community.

Appendix 1: Bright Navigator Charts

FCR



Period: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020



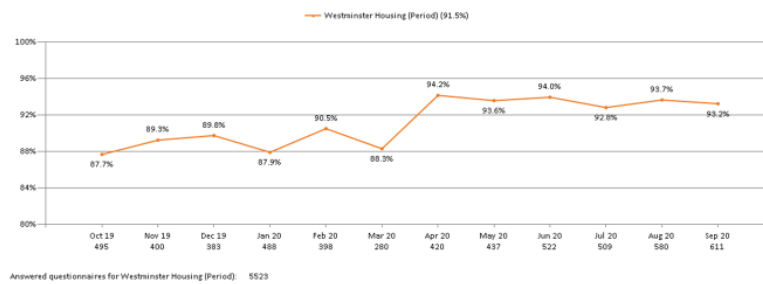
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Empathy



Period: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020



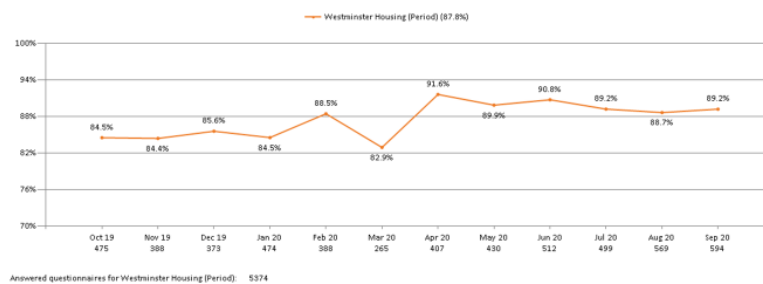
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General satisfaction



Period: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020



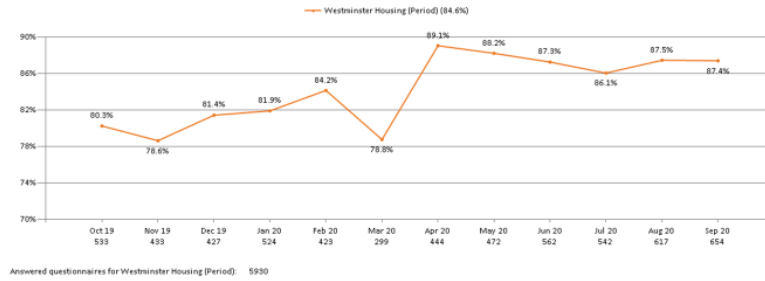
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Answer time



Period: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020



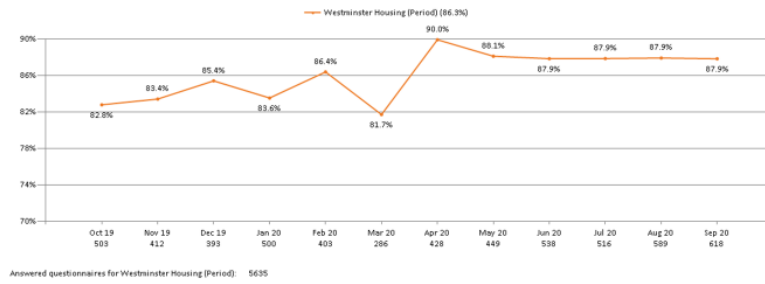
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Knowledge



Period: 01/10/2019 – 30/09/2020



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