



Committee date:	17 February 2021
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General Update

- 1.1** This report provides an overview of management of the Council's housing stock for the current financial year. A full suite of performance information is provided at Appendix A. All figures provided are for the year to date, April to December 2020 (Quarter 3).
- 1.2** Most housing services have continued to be delivered as normal, with good performance seen in the KPIs across the services and incremental improvements in some services. The COVID19 pandemic has however impacted on our ability to deliver certain services, notably repairs and income collection. Targets were reviewed at the mid-year point but with little knowledge of the trajectory that the pandemic would take, most were left unchanged.
- 1.3** When COVID19 lockdown was imposed at the start of the year, housing services were restricted to ensure the safety of residents, staff and the wider public. Services were gradually reinstated in an adjusted, safe, and sustainable way over Q2 and Q3 and are now again restricted in the light of the current lockdown.
- 1.4** The repeated restriction and reintroduction of the repairs services has impacted on both demand for services and on customer satisfaction. Peaks and troughs in demand have been experienced over the course of the year with pressure on contact centre, repairs and antisocial behaviour management.
- 1.5** The virus has impacted on housing services in a variety of ways.
 - Antisocial behaviour (ASB) reporting has increased by 33% this year compared with 2019/20. This service has been provided throughout the pandemic and customer satisfaction with ASB case handling has increased to 65% for the year to date, with performance at 71% in December 2020.
 - Call volumes to the contact centre have fluctuated with both the highest and lowest call volumes being recorded this year. Call volumes peaked during Q3 and

performance dipped, but the minimum standard of 65% calls answered within 30 seconds has been achieved for the year to date.

- Over the course of the year, the repairs service has been drastically reduced to comply with lockdown requirements and remobilised through a phased approach. Whilst residents report good levels of satisfaction with the quality of work completed (85%), overall satisfaction with the repairs service is at the minimum performance standard of 82%.
- The economic impact of COVID19 has affected residents directly, with an increase in the number of tenants claiming Universal Credit and a reduction in rent collection.

1.6 The COVID19 pandemic has resulted in ongoing changes to service delivery arrangements to keep residents and everyone involved as safe as possible. The housing service continues to respond with speed, care and consideration to the needs of residents, with a range of innovations to ensure service delivery continues in a safe and effective manner. In addition to simple changes in practice, digital solutions have been found to enable services to be maintained or re-started where appropriate. Initiatives are described alongside the performance update.

2 Customer services - Contact Centre

2.1 The Housing Contact Centre remains 'virtual' with staff working from home. Call handling performance over the first half of the year was very strong with 75% of calls answered within 30 seconds but dropped to 65% for the year to date following high call volumes over Q3.

2.2 During Q3 a total of 71,432 calls were received, an increase of 20% on the previous quarter. October saw c30,000 calls into the contact centre – the highest volume received to date. During October the final parts of the repairs service that had been suspended since March were taken off hold, and this combined with annual communal heating switch-on and posting of leaseholder service charge actual accounts, generated a higher volume of calls. In addition to high call volumes, five members of staff were redeployed from the contact centre to support Westminster Connects; sickness levels were above normal and the wet weather led to an increase in calls relating to leaks. Call volumes reduced in December to 19,643 and 86% of calls were handled.

2.3 Actions to reduce the impact of high call volumes over the remainder of the financial year include:

- extension of the contract with Agilisys to provide additional resource for longer
- staff re-deployed from the contact centre have returned to service delivery
- having housing staff ready to pass calls on to and reduce initial call duration

2.4 Actions to reduce the likelihood of high call volumes over the remainder of the financial year include:

- restrictions to non-essential campaigns that generate contact/calls from residents
- clear communications to residents on service restrictions (sent by email) during this current lockdown to reduce the need to call

2.5 Planning is underway to contact residents to re-book repairs, when the current lockdown is eased. This should reduce the need for residents to call the contact centre in large numbers.

2.6 Despite the challenges, customer satisfaction with the contact centre service remains high and year to date satisfaction is above target at 89%, with empathy and engagement levels above 90%, based on surveys of 4,857 customers. This has been achieved through developing a coaching culture with training for both customer service advisors and team managers in product knowledge and soft skills, supplemented by external training on customer service, letter writing and coaching skills.

2.7 All staff have been educated on the quality framework and adherence to the expected standards are monitored daily. This has resulted in a significant uplift in all satisfaction measures. Empathy has improved by 4% in the last six months to 93% (using Bright UK industry standards) which is over 10% above the industry norm.

2.8 A number of digital projects are underway to improve the contact centre service as follows:

- Roll-out of a new integrated communications platform
 - Phase 1 completed during Q3:
 - new telephony and email management software for communications between staff and residents
 - IVR messages can now be amended quickly to advise residents of wait times and residents can request a call-back rather than waiting in a queue
 - Phase 2&3 roll-out during Q4
 - text messaging and chat facilities
 - contact centre workforce management tools
 - PCI compliant payment solution
- Development of CRM (Microsoft Dynamics)
 - Building a knowledge base to provide the contact centre with easier access to information to resolve enquiries at the first point of contact, including estate based information
 - Designing a general enquiry process integrated with the main housing management database with proof of concept scheduled for delivery at the end of January
- Online services
 - a new on-line housing application form for the housing register has been developed and is being tested.
 - development of self-help videos on the website for residents to reduce the need to call or email the contact centre. The first for lessees has gone live (see 9.5 of

this report), and three further videos are in development with animations produced and now being scripted.

- On-line appointment bookings for lessee and housing management surgeries (further details are provided at 7.6 and 9.4 of this report).

3 Complaints and Member Enquires

3.1 208 complaints were responded to during Q3, with 88% resolved within the 10-day target for the year to date. 11% of complaints escalated from stage 1 to stage 2, a slight drop on the first half of the year (15%).

3.2 158 members' enquiries have been received year to date with 96% responded to in target.

3.3 Work to comply with the Housing Ombudsman's new complaints code is now complete. The code aims to improve complaint handling and reduce the time taken for resolution. Actions undertaken include:

- A review of policies and processes to ensure they comply with the requirements of the Code
- A review of the role of the Complaint Officers, with changes proposed as part of the housing restructure which is currently underway.
- A new framework for learning from complaints

3.4 In addition, complaints management and reporting requirements have been prioritised as part of the CRM for Housing project.

4 Repairs

4.1 During the first lockdown the repairs service was restricted to health and safety related repairs including responsive emergencies, planned inspections and servicing programmes. A full service was gradually phased in from June – October to control the number of new repairs raised whilst clearing the works put on hold at the start of lockdown. The service was again reduced broadly in line with the first lockdown on 6 January 2021.

4.2 Performance has been good across the repairs service:

- Tenant satisfaction with repairs: 82% (minimum target 82%)
- Tenant satisfaction with the quality of repairs: 85% (target 85%)
- Completion within target time:
 - Emergency repairs - 98.6% (target 98%)
 - Urgent repairs - 92% (target 95%)
 - Routine repairs – 93% (target 90%)
- Appointments made and kept: 90% (target 95%)

- 4.3** Repairs satisfaction is based on a random sample of 1697 tenants, with a confidence interval of +/-2%. It has not been possible to carry out in-flat post inspections, but any issues have been picked up through satisfaction monitoring and calls to the contact centre. 50% of communal repairs have been inspected with issues found on 5% of work.
- 4.4** Initiatives to improve the repairs service have focussed on leaks which generate the greatest volume of calls and include:
- Leaks protocol panel to work with residents to improve on the areas that impact them when experiencing or affected by a leak.
 - A case management system for leaks to improve communication with residents and improved visibility for the contact centre of the work in progress of the leaks detection team.
 - Improved the questions within the repairs diagnostic tool used by contact centre staff to better understand and triage initial calls in regards leaks
- 4.5** Resident's wellbeing and safe-guarding is always a main priority and all work is carried out in line with HM Government guidance and appropriate PPE and risk assessments.
- 4.6** All repairs in sheltered accommodation have a specific risk assessment produced and signed off prior to the commencement of works. Housing staff continue to work closely with colleagues in Adult Social Care to ensure homes remain well maintained whilst protecting the health of residents. Void works and lettings in sheltered accommodation has been paused during this current lockdown.

5 Void properties and lettings

- 5.1** Following Government guidance, lettings were initially suspended during Q1 which has resulted in increased re-let times for the year to date. The number of lettings carried out increased over Q3 to clear the backlog of voids. Void turnaround time in December was an average of 75 days and year to date performance is an average of 84 days.
- 5.2** Lettings continue to take place with the benefit of a digital lettings process, including virtual viewings and electronic sign up to minimise contact.

6 Health and Safety Compliance

- 6.1** Statutory testing and inspections of services including gas appliances, water tanks, asbestos and fire risk assessments continued throughout the year, with staff taking additional health and safety precautions as appropriate. Compliance across the five areas of gas, electricity, water, asbestos and fire is good.
- 6.2** Gas servicing performance at the end of Q3 was at 99.54% with 30 properties without a current gas safety certificate (the oldest having expired in August 2020). A concerted effort has been made across the housing team to reassure residents of the safety

precautions that are taken to protect all involved and a very small number of residents remain cautious and reluctant to allow access to their homes.

- 6.3** A new asbestos inspection contract commenced in Q3 and a programme is in place to survey all communal areas by the end of the financial year. Delivery of the plan is on schedule. The high-risk asbestos remediation works have progressed slowly with delays but are on track to complete by the end of the financial year. There is a risk that extended leaseholder consultation may push some of the work beyond the end of March and regular liaison between the leasehold operations team and health and safety team is ensuring all questions are resolved quickly and this risk is mitigated.
- 6.4** Planned major works were put on hold during lockdown and spend is reduced accordingly. Work has now commenced again, with the support of communications to residents to address the queries residents may have about the safety of the works restarting. We have received a small number of queries and the cautious approach has been received well.

7 Neighbourhood services

- 7.1** The housing management teams continue to deliver virtually all core services to residents using new ways of working, including virtual viewings and digital lettings, issuing parking permits, providing support and advice and responding to enquiries.
- 7.2** Our Housing Area Service Centres continue to operate with measures such as reception and interview room screens, hand sanitiser stations and intercom systems in place. It has however recently been necessary (from 11 January) to support the reception service with contract staff, due to reduced numbers of available housing staff as a result of self-isolation or illness. Staff have continued to be available to respond to emergencies or urgent matters if required.
- 7.3** The enhanced estate cleaning regime has continued, and standards remain high, despite cleaning and estate services staff also being affected by self-isolation and illness. Grounds maintenance services are also continuing to operate. Resident satisfaction scores for these services remain high. The compliance team have also continued to conduct health and safety inspections and provide an out of hours response service in cases of emergency.
- 7.4** Welfare calls to vulnerable Housing residents have been incorporated into the wider Council automated 'Connects' service, which involves the resident receiving an automated call with a range of options to select if they need further support.
- 7.5** Housing Operations meet weekly with colleagues in Public Health and chair the joint Westminster Housing Outbreak Management Team to ensure the monitoring and escalation of outbreaks of the virus among the City's own and private residential stock is responsive and to agree consistent and targeted communication lines.

- 7.6** A new digital surgery pilot has commenced for Soho residents, replacing a physical surgery. 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.
- 7.7** The estate parking project to implement the Traffic Management Order is reaching completion, with amendments being made to a small number of locations in response to requests from residents. Changes include relocation and addition of visitor and motorcycle bays. Areas included in this final phase are: Gloucester Terrace (rear of Housing blocks), Dorchester House, Heather Walk, Blandford Estate, Luxborough Tower, Cherwell House and Blackwater House.

8 Antisocial Behaviour

- 8.1** 843 reports of ASB have been received to the end of Q3, compared with 633 to the same point in 2019/20, a 33% increase. 31% of cases were related to noise, 26% to verbal abuse and 17% to misuse of drugs/drug dealing (top 3 categories).
- 8.2** Resident satisfaction with ASB case handling remains at the ideal target level of 65% and satisfaction for December reached 71%.
- 8.3** Following the latest national lockdown restrictions, the ban on evictions has been extended until 21 February 2021. Notices can be served to initiate possession action by the landlord but there are lengthy queues for court hearings to obtain possession cases. For possession orders already in place, bailiffs' warrants can be enforced only where a possession order was granted on a mandatory ground for serious cases of ASB.
- 8.4** The ASB team are currently (Jan 2021) in the process of serving six notices seeking possession and making applications for four civil injunctions. Injunctions are currently being heard in court however there is a wait for hearing dates.
- 8.5** Other legal tools continue to be used to provide residents with some protection from ongoing ASB, including:
- civil injunctions to prohibit behaviours with the power of arrest attached.
 - solicitor's letter before action warning of the action to be taken.
 - Premises Closure Orders – to close a property for a period of three months.
 - Partial Premises Closure Orders – to close a property for three months in exception of the resident / named person(s).
- 7.6** Other tools that remain in use include:
- Acceptable Behaviour Agreements - a non-legal agreement in place for six months made with the perpetrator of low-level continued nuisance
 - Acceptable Behaviour Contracts - as above but for those under 18 and in partnership with local police teams

- Mediation. A virtual mediation service is being offered and this has been very effective during the Covid-19 outbreak period.
- Enforcement interviews and warning letters
- Non-legal banning letters – a letter asking the person to refrain from entering an area they have been identified to be causing low level nuisance in
- Working closely with the police to conduct patrols for specific hotspots and properties

8.6 Following continued lockdown restrictions, the service has also increased its contact with residents who are living with ASB from neighbours to ensure they are supported. This includes:

- increased electronic contact with victims through teams calls, phone calls and update emails
- large scale “virtual” door knocks to blocks affected by ASB – this has seen a high response rate compared to in person door knocks as residents feel more comfortable to discuss their concerns on the phone
- making wide use of one to one conflict coaching with a professional mediator
- working with the communications team to ensure online resident frequently asked questions are continually updated to reflect current reports and trends in ASB

8.7 We have seen an increase in mediation being accepted as an early intervention tool during lockdown. The virtual setting may be seen as less confrontational by residents as opposed to normal face to face meetings.

8.8 Noise continues to be the most reported source of ASB and has increased this year. In December 2020 the ASB team started to trial a ‘Noise App’. This enables residents to record anti-social noise coming from their neighbour’s property and send in recordings to their case manager via the app. The app is being tested with longstanding noise cases across the borough and if its use proves positive it will be offered more widely.

8.9 The housing ASB team continue to work with colleagues in Environment and City Management to streamline processes and are currently working on a borough wide ASB strategy as part of the City for all plan. The ASB team are also strengthening their joint work with the noise service to ensure that any housing resident served with a noise abatement notice, will automatically receive a notice seeking possession.

8.10 The ASB team have been working in partnership with the integrated gangs and exploitation unit (IGXU) on gang issues that affect communities. The ASB team regularly meet with IGXU case workers to share important information regarding estates affected by gangs. Where there are specific locations affected by large groups of individuals causing ASB, this is shared with gang workers who engage with young people who could be in a gang or targeted by a gang.

8.11 The Autumn Nights campaign delivered in partnership between council services the police and local colleges ran from 28th October to 8th November 2020 to address ASB related to Halloween and Bonfire night. Proactive preventative work was successful in

reducing the occurrence of ASB reported with a 38% reduction in fireworks related CAD calls in 2020.

9 Rent Collection

- 9.1** The service priority is to support and protect residents, particularly in times of uncertainty, to sustain their tenancies. COVID-19 has created challenging conditions for many households financially and rent collection performance is at 97.59% at the end of December 2020 compared with 98.57% at December 2019.
- 9.2** The number of tenants claiming Universal Credit (UC), has increased 74% since January 2020 and 57% since March 2020. There is a 5 week wait for the first payment which is made in arrears, putting severe pressure on an increasing number of households.
- 9.3** Government advice regarding rent arrears remains that landlords should offer support and understanding to tenants who may start to see their income fluctuate. Eviction restrictions apply to possession orders on the grounds of rent arrears and presently the courts are only considering instances of substantial rent arrears incurred prior to COVID-19 for action. There are now large backlogs in some areas. Two evictions have been carried out this year due to rent arrears.
- 9.4** The income team has moved away from a traditional patch-based approach to be able to use resources more effectively to respond to new arrears cases as they arise. A core of 1,500 accounts that represent the more complex cases have been allocated across the income team, to provide more time and assistance to residents who require a higher degree of support to sustain their tenancy.
- 9.5** The approach to rent collection remains support focused, with payment reminders but no references to court or evictions. Tenants have been supported with referrals Westminster Citizens Advice, local charities and food banks and the business and enterprise team. The income team has helped to promote energy advice offered by Morgan Sindall which includes support to reduce energy consumption, switch provider and offers of vouchers for qualifying tenants using pre-payment meters. For residents who require the most support the team have liaised with Adult and Children's Services.
- 9.6** Work continues to promote Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to a targeted audience working in conjunction with colleagues in the housing benefit service.

10 Leasehold service charge collection

- 10.1** Lessee service charge collection performance has been steady, but with an increase in debt forecast for year-end. At the end of March 2020, service charge arrears totalled £470k and an additional £313k is forecast for 2021, bringing the total forecast debt to £783k.

- 10.2** All service charge accounts are monitored and a log of any references to COVID19 kept which may impact on leaseholders' ability to pay the service charge. Once again, no standard debt recovery action is being taken at this time. Payment reminders are being sent with an emphasis on support and assistance.
- 10.4** Virtual surgeries were held in October 2020 after issuing the actualised annual service charge accounts. Uptake was tenfold that of the physical surgeries held in March 2020, with residents able to book a 20-minute appointment with a leasehold adviser, and able to submit information in advance of the call. Following this success, virtual surgeries have been extended and are available to book on-line every Wednesday between 9am-8pm. Once booked, an email is sent confirming the upcoming booking. Residents can manage their own booking, and can reschedule or cancel their appointment at any time.
- 10.5** The first on-line self-help video guide 'Your Lease Explained' has been very well received and will be followed up with 'Ways to Pay Your Service Charge' and 'How to Extend Your Lease'.
- 10.6** A 'virtual' leasehold conference was held on 17 October 2020. A number of sessions were offered with presentations from the Leasehold Advisory Service and Citizens Advice. Attendance at the all-day conference was high, with all 200 available places booked. Attendees heard presentations on how Westminster is tackling short lets and how leaseholders can kick off the process of extending their lease.