

APPENDIX 4

HOUSING SERVICES

1. Housing Services have remained operational from the outset of the government measures coming into force in March 2020. Managers and teams have adapted operated on a hybrid model using mixture of on -site and agile working practices, our tenants and customers received the help and support they needed . Out of hours service also continued to operate as normal.

Housing Options/Homelessness

2. This has been a very demanding time for our Housing Options team with a significant increase in the number of presentations for homelessness, rough sleeping or at risk of being homeless. This situation has been reflected across the country
3. To meet this increased demand additional temporary accommodation has been sourced through procuring hotel accommodation and ensuring our Tenancy Management Team increase the number of temporary Council accommodation units. The work done by this team has been guided by the information from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government ensuring that all vulnerable homeless applicants were placed in accommodation regardless of their need and status.
4. To ensure that all applicants could self-isolate additional items were purchased such as fridges and microwaves for their rooms in the hotel as well as furniture packages and carpets for the temporary accommodation. Each presentation has been assessed by a Housing Options Officer and they have all been given a personalised housing plan which will support them with in their longer-term housing solutions.
5. Over the period of April to June 2020 Housing Options have worked with 359 clients who have approached us for support around their homeless situation. Of these 243 were emergency presentations, resulting in 116 being placed in various types of temporary accommodation including bed and breakfast and supported housing. The remainder were given appropriate advice and support, including money advice, support to access social or private housing, access to bonds and prevention loans and referral to specialist services. At one stage we had 57 households placed in temporary accommodation, but this is now down to around 40. The additional presentations represent some of the hidden homeless and sofa surfers who we have been successfully engaging with during this challenging period.

Lifeline Team

6. The Lifeline Officers have ensured that all essential services have been delivered over this difficult period. All our sheltered, extra care and good

neighbour schemes have had a staff presence throughout

7. All government guidance has been followed making key decisions around
 - (a) Extra Care – closing of the dining area and delivering meals to tenant's flats
 - (b) Closing of communal areas to discourage gatherings
 - (c) Encourage and support each tenant to self-isolate within their own flats
 - (d) Correct use and guidance of PPE, ensuring the safety of staff
 - (e) Use of vehicles – one person per vehicle
 - (f) Correspondence and verbal updates have been given to our tenants throughout to ensure we have met the guidelines and that these are understood by all
8. To ensure our tenants were not socially isolated, staff have been innovative in creating ideas to deliver virtual activities within the schemes supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our tenants. Over all our schemes we now deliver 34 weekly activities, which include, bingo, quizzes, virtual coffee mornings.
9. In recent weeks 27 one off events have also been delivered throughout the schemes, such as VE Day where we delivered cupcakes and sweets, social distancing clap for carers, Easter events including delivering of chocolate eggs to every tenant throughout the schemes.
10. Activities are delivered safely and follow the government guidelines and as these changes we can increase or change the way these are delivered. Thinking ahead we have recognised that our shielded tenants are feeling very isolated and some are frightened to go outside so we are working with Creative Darlington around a project called Unforgettable Experiences to deliver group activities, build support and relationships and in turn help them gain confidence.
11. To enable tenants to see their families we have introduced safely managed family visits in the outside areas, to support mental health and wellbeing. Our Leisure Services staff provide support to the schemes as part of the Move More initiative which delivers a gentle exercise programme to support the physical wellbeing of our tenants. Whilst we have had to cut back on this project due to the guidelines, we are now delivering some social distance chair-based exercises in the garden areas of the schemes
12. Throughout April and May the Lifeline team have carried out,
 - (a) 7550 welfare calls by telephone
 - (b) 171 physical welfare checks
 - (c) 1335 call outs where a person has activated the emergency call
 - (d) 1849 lifts for clients who have fallen
 - (e) Facilitated 26 hospital discharges by installing essential equipment.

Housing Income

13. Despite the financial challenges the lockdown has brought, tenants have continued to be fully supported to pay their rent and sustain tenancies. Rent arrears in May were 3.3% of the annual debit which is an increase from the year-end figure of 2.8% but the increase is lower than other social housing providers nationally. Since April over £3.7 million has been collected towards rent and arrears with weekly collection rates over 94%. Numbers of Universal Credit claims have significantly increased as of this time last year by 66.5%, with over 1285 council tenants claiming Universal Credit and the team continue to provide specialist support to those people who have lost employment and claimed Universal Credit. This support and guidance will continue to help ensure that residents are supported in maintaining payment plans and maintaining tenancies.

Customer Services

14. During the lockdown period over 6570 vulnerable customers have been contacted by Housing and Lifeline staff where residents were offered help and assistance as appropriate. This proactive work has helped to reduce the immediate effects and allayed some of the concerns of these residents and prompted more than 300 referrals being made to Darlington Community Support Hub for emergency food, medication and advice and to Darlington Support for help with shopping, befriending and dog walking. Housing staff were also involved within the Darlington Community Support Hub where they were able to answer emergency calls on a wide variety of topics to assist residents during these exceptional times.

Allocations Team

15. We have continued to maintain the housing waiting list over this period and at present have 1665 active housing applications. The team have continued to work from home and in April and May have ensured that 242 applications were checked and activated. Appointments have been carried out over the phone and they will continue to do this as we look at the Council's overall recovery plan and future demands on the service.

New Build

16. The Council Housing new build programme was stalled during the lockdown period but recommenced in June at Fenby Avenue and Allington Way 3, providing 70 much needed new homes. The future programme has also been reviewed and we are now focusing on 3 additional sites at Neasham Road, East Haven and Skinnergate . These are now being progressed through the planning application process, providing potentially an additional 206 dwellings.

Repairs and Maintenance for Council Tenants

17. Whilst we were required to put all our routine and general repairs on hold during the lockdown period 642 urgent and emergency repairs were completed for Council tenants. Overall, we saw a 33.5% increase in these types of repair with the biggest increase relating to blocked drains. Some routine repairs also became more urgent as time went on. From 18th May 2020 routine repairs recommenced in accordance with government guidelines, starting with clearing the backlog before accepting new repair requests from early June 2020. Essential gas servicing and other regular safety checks have continued during this time with appropriate measures in place to ensure staff and tenants have been kept safe throughout this process.

Neighbour Nuisance

18. Whilst reports of neighbour nuisance and ASB have remained similar to previous years, there has been an additional 18 Covid related breaches which have been dealt with in partnership with Darlington Police. These were mainly large gatherings inside Council tenanted properties and the surrounding areas. There has also been an increase in those who are suffering with mental health issues during the lockdown period and those individuals have received appropriate advice support and signposting.