

North Lanarkshire Council Report

Housing and Regeneration Committee

approval noting

Ref SL/LS

Date 09/09/20

COVID-19 Pandemic and effect on operations

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Executive Summary

This report is to advise committee of the additional and 'business as usual' operational areas of service delivery within Housing Solutions, Housing Property and Projects and New Supply within Planning and Regeneration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- (i) Note the content of this report.

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority Improve the health and wellbeing of our communities

Ambition statement (1) Ensure a housing mix that supports social inclusion and economic growth

1. Background

- 1.1 COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 12 March 2020 and UK lockdown declared on 19 March with effect from 23 March 2020. The Scottish Government provided a route map of guidance for operations as well as support required within the communities.
- 1.2 At the start of lockdown, one of the most significant and important services created has been a dedicated Supporting People helpline to assist the most vulnerable people in the community. Staff from Housing Solutions, Housing Property and Projects (including Customer Contact staff) Enterprise and Communities; Business Solutions, and Business Development and Support were redeployed and trained in a new contact centre. Our partner company Agilisys carried out work to create a digital system to (the first in Scotland) to record the specific needs of each individual and track the outreach support provided to residents on the vulnerable persons/shielding list produced by the NHS. Services provided include arranging and facilitating the delivery of food packages, collecting prescriptions, linking to other support provisions such as financial advice, and making sure individuals remained safe and well.
- 1.3 Performance data has been requested on a monthly basis from the Scottish Housing Regulator who is working with the Scottish Government and the newly formed Social Housing Resilience Group (SHRG) to understand the impact of the pandemic and where support is required by social landlords. Regular monthly reports on key indicators have been agreed and are collated from landlords which is reported to both Scottish Government and the SHRG. The data collected is shown in Appendix 1 which is provided to the regulator, additional information which is compiled for CMT to monitor operations is shown in appendix 2.

2. Report

2.1 Staffing

- 2.1.1 There has been a number of pressures due to staff isolating, shielding and working from home.
- 2.1.2 The implementation of the services' Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) have resulted in areas of non-urgent work being postponed to ensure the workforce capacity is focused on areas of critical need. This has meant that staff have been redeployed from and to other areas of the service.
- 2.1.3 As part of government guidance, home working was introduced (where possible) and arrangements made for social distancing and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (where appropriate) in the sites and offices which remained open to provide essential services to our residents, e.g. homelessness and temporary accommodation, tower services, sheltered/retirement housing services and emergency repairs provision.
- 2.1.4 Mobile technology was in full use where available, and extended where required throughout lockdown. Housing Property and Projects adapted well to working from home due to established mobile working. All staff carrying out essential site visits were provided with suitable PPE in line with risk and method statements.
- 2.1.5 Business Development and Support, despite depleted staffing and sudden move to home working for all, continued to monitor performance and publish all the regular performance reports successfully. In addition, the team responded to all additional

requests for qualitative/quantitative performance information and produced new operational procedures to comply with government guidance and which included social distancing and other appropriate COVID-19 mitigations.

2.1.6 Recovery and business continuity will continue to be assessed to build on lessons learned from the pandemic and ensure preparedness for future events. Business continuity will continue in line with Government guidance.

2.1.7 An overview of the current developments around COVID-19 for individual services areas is included below.

2.2 Housing Property and Projects

Existing BCP's have been implemented and updated to ensure that supply chains; contractual obligations in relation to COVID-19; alternative contractor arrangements and health guidance is in place and updated in line with Scottish Government guidance. This has extended to recovery planning for the service for each stage of the route map.

Virtual meetings for contractor performance monitoring and budget planning have continued through lockdown as well as tender assessments of contracts and awards being completed.

2.2.1 Housing Repairs and Maintenance

- Emergency repairs have continued to be carried out as usual, which has increased due to non-emergency works being cancelled. April saw 1,388 jobs issued increasing to 2,192 in May, and 3,084 in June. However, there remains an overall reduction of almost 50% in the total jobs issued in comparison to the same period in 2019 - Quarter 1 2019 = 13,150 jobs in total compared to 6,614 in Quarter 1, 2020
- Non-emergency repairs and planned works had been suspended, with the exception of 24 hour non-emergency gas safety repair work.
- Right to repair claims have been suspended in line with legislation during emergency only works.
- Essential safety maintenance of systems has continued as usual, such as lift, laundry, communal lighting, CCTV, fire alarm, sprinkler and warden call systems.
- UK Government, Scottish Government and Health & Safety Executive all issued separate guidance around local authorities meeting their statutory obligation to complete annual gas safety checks in all properties. In line with the H&S guidance, NLC adopted practice has been to continue to carry these checks as far as possible given the level of tenant safety attached to this. Engineers operated with appropriate PPE and physical distancing and recorded if tenants refused access (e.g. Shielding) to ensure these will be completed. The service which could not be carried out will be completed when shielding has been lifted.
- A new process was created to sanitise voids prior to work starting in the property.
- Energy providers had cut back services to voids for metering to prioritise engineers in occupied properties which initially led to delays in processing between March and July when normal services resumed.
- Rent extensions were provided where tenants were unable to move due to illness/isolation or shielding.

2.2.2 Corporate Repairs and Maintenance

- Repairs have continued to be carried out, at a reduced rate in comparison to the same period in 2019. 29 jobs in total were issued in April, increasing to 55 in May, and 183 in June. This is compared to previous year of 1670 jobs in April, 2337 jobs in May and 2155 jobs in June. Appendix 3 shows the corporate maintenance performance in relation to jobs issued within each category monitored.
- During lockdown, priority was given to ensuring school hubs remained open and functioning to support children of key workers and vulnerable children.
- Implementation of a programme for re-opening recycling centres and other buildings in accordance with route map was carried out.
- The team continued to undertake statutory compliance checks on all operational buildings.
- Good progress has been made in the planning and re-provisioning of schools to allow for social distancing for their full re-opening on 11th August.

2.2.3 Investment Mainstream and Projects

- At the start of lockdown, current working at height works were completed and scaffolding dropped to accommodate safe working guidance. This later included restart of roofing and rendering contracts and completion of works.
- Commenced work on new or revised specifications existing contracts to both ensure compliance within timescales and ensure that we keep tenants and workmen safe at all times updated risk assessments.
- Successful HEEPS (Home Energy Efficiency Programmes Scotland) submission and approval for £2.4m of grant funding for owners from Scottish Government.
- Successful bid for external funding of £36,000 for decarbonisation.
- Submission and receipt of decarbonisation grant funding from Scottish Government.
- Implementing of new Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) and Energy Efficiently Standard for Social Housing (EESH) legislative/reporting requirements and successful submissions.
- Progression of statutory approvals for legislative compliance.
- SHQS has been maintained at 98.8% and EESH at 87.2%.

2.2.4 Contract Strategy

- Continued to operate fully throughout the lockdown including Planning, Procurement, Contracts and CDM functions.
- Contract Support have continued to maintain the Housing Property and Projects contract and procurement function throughout COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.
- Support provided to both Investment and Repairs and Maintenance Teams to ensure continuity of service when the COVID-19 restriction are eased or removed completely.
- Successfully awarded seven contracts during lockdown worth a total of £8m including contracts for Lift Replacements; Sprinkler Installations, demolition of Burnside Court, Coatbridge and Lead Mains Replacement to domestic properties.
- Issued 12 tenders on Public Contracts Scotland in the period between the beginning of March including Refurbishment and Extension to Dundyvan

Gardens Sheltered Housing Complex; lift replacements, sprinkler installations and Controlled Door Entry Systems.

- A further eight tenders have been completed for issue on Public Contracts Scotland in Autumn 2020.
- Worked closely with Brodies LLP to provide Council services (namely New Supply; Repairs and Maintenance; City Deal; Investment and Asset and Procurement) with legal advice regarding Extension of Time / Compensation Event claims relating to the COVID-19 pandemic on a total of 52 construction contracts. Work was progressed with Brodies LLP to collate and circulate amendments to standard construction contracts to protect against future outbreaks of similar infectious diseases and to protect against a potential resurgence of COVID-19. These conditions were included in all tenders that were issued by Contract Support post-lockdown to protect the Council's interests.
- The team have also been involved in the procurement of the Security Services Contract and the Enterprise Contract which are large procurement exercises being led by Corporate Procurement.
- Site audits and inspections continued throughout for repairs and maintenance sites.
- Carry out site inspections to ensure contractor COVID-19 arrangements and CDM compliance on site.

2.3 Housing Solutions

Staff who had volunteered at the Supporting People helpline were put on a rota to cover the different shift patterns and when off the rota many returned to do their usual jobs. Others were on operational rotas to cover at the retirement housing complexes, temporary accommodation units or area housing offices to deliver the 'essential services' and to cover where staff members were shielding. Social distancing was enabled in these locations in accordance with Government guidelines. Estate Officers throughout our towers, localities and homeless units had their rota amended to ensure the required 24 hour per day service was covered and that social distancing and staff and resident safety maintained at all times.

An information dissemination process was developed to allow important and relevant information in regard to COVID-19 updates and service changes to be delivered on a daily basis to all senior managers across the localities.

2.3.1 Allocations

Amended procedures were introduced as soon as lockdown commenced to ensure that applicants who couldn't move due to the pandemic were not disadvantaged, for example:

- Offers – where an applicant could not view the property, the property was held until the Scottish Government approved house moves as part of recovery phasing.
- Refusals – a new refusal reason "Applicant does not wish to move at present – COVID-19".

2.3.2 Terminations

Revised procedures were introduced to ensure tenants could terminate their tenancies, these included:

- Extending their Date of Entry into their new property (if they were moving to another NLC property).
- Allowing outgoing tenants to leave possessions in the void property due to recycling centres being closed. This enabled them to hand their keys in and move safely to their new properties where possible.
- Rent abatement - guidance and a new journal code was created for COVID-19 to ensure tenants moving home were not charged for properties they could not move into.
- Birth certificates were not being issued during lockdown and the allocations procedure was updated to reflect this.

It should be noted that homeless applicants continued to receive offers of permanent housing throughout the lockdown period.

In addition to ensuring the essential services were delivered to meet statutory and regulatory duties, homelessness, temporary accommodation and housing support, Housing Solutions also made sure other areas of 'business as usual' service were maintained.

Between 23rd March 2020 - 30th June 2020:

- 745 new housing applications were taken with 93% being fully assessed and pointed within our target of 20 days.
- 231 applicants were housed in the period with 50% of lets to homeless households and 24% lets to existing tenants
- 999 waiting list reviews were initiated in the period where after the initial waiting list review letter was posted to tenants who we had not had any direct contact with in the past 12 months, staff were proactively contacting tenants to ensure they still wanted to remain on the waiting list and providing housing options information to those whose circumstances had changed.
- Staff were able to carry out 2457 housing options interviews over the phone for people on our housing waiting list.
- As lockdown restrictions eased offer activity increased, with applicants able to view properties. Properties sanitised before viewings with PPE (masks & gloves) and social distancing taking place on site between staff and applicants.
- Sign-ups completed at offices with PPE (masks & gloves) and social distancing taking place on site between staff and applicants.

2.3.3 Homelessness, Temporary Accommodation and Support

- Procedures were amended to ensure ease of taking homeless applications when it was not possible to meet applicants face to face.
- Additional properties sought for use as temporary accommodation from other RSL (Registered Social Landlord) partners.
- Temporary accommodation provision which included any shared space was changed to single occupancy and we stopped sharing within all homeless accommodation.
- Where appropriate to provide a permanent housing solution for homeless applicants currently in temporary accommodation, the temporary accommodation property was offered as a Scottish Secure Tenancy.
- Additional properties available for let were taken on as temporary accommodation to meet increased demand. It is important also to note that NLC

managed to maintain temporary accommodation levels from our own stock and did not require to use B&B or hotels.

- At total of 419 homeless cases have been taken between the start of lockdown on 23rd March 2020 until 30th June 2020. Staff have been able to make enquiries and investigate homeless cases to allow a decision to be made, with over 95% of decisions made within the 28 day target timescale.
- Tenancy support has been provided where possible.

2.3.4 Rent Arrears

- No home visits or office appointments could be carried out. All home visit and office appointment letters have been replaced with a template to include details of repayment arrangements.
- No evictions could be carried out per the guidance from the Scottish Government.
- No cases have been progressed to court again in compliance with Government instructions. .
- Our focus throughout this period has been on Income Maximisation and utilisation of the Universal Credit Assistance Fund.
- NLC also introduced a Rent Relief Fund totalling £300,000 to assist tenants whose income had been affected by furlough, reduced hours or redundancy and had necessitated Universal Credit claims. This fund has been very well utilised with over 500 tenants receiving in the region of £370 which equates to five weeks' rent utilising £185,000 as at end June of the fund allocated.

2.3.5 Anti-Social Behaviour

- No call outs or home visits were carried out.
- Investigations have relied upon increased telephone communication, reporters and subjects.
- Interviews have been carried out where necessary and where possible by telephone.
- Increased witness appeals by postal letter drops where possible.
- Corroboration via increased partnership working with Police Scotland, electronic liaison.
- Housing Solutions managed to implement the savings agreed at the budget setting in terms of Anti-Social Behaviour and Sheltered Housing services and at the same time maintain a high level of agreed service.

2.3.6 Estate Management

- Enhanced sanitising of public areas and touch points in all 45 towers.
- Redeployment of staff from other services into the Estate Officer role to assist in covering towers.
- Free vend introduced for launderettes to enable tenants who were shielding to use the washing and drying facilities.
- Enhanced sanitising in communal areas of walk up flats.
- Garden assistance programme – worked with contractor to agree safe working practices and have reduced the cuts from ten to eight.
- E-mail address provided to tenants for succession/assignments of tenancy, with phone and online assistance during this time when home visits and face to face meeting cannot take place.

2.3.7 Tenant Participation

Whilst unable to carry out their usual engagement activities the members of the Tenant Participation team volunteered to be part of the councils Supporting People helpline. However in addition to supporting the helpline the team also managed to keep in touch with all tenant and resident groups and some individual tenants via telephone, email and text message, and have had video conference calls with the North Lanarkshire Federation of Tenants and Residents.

Information has also been issued to groups regarding:

- NLC Community Grant: COVID-19 response
- Co-op membership grant
- Consultation on East Airdrie Link Road
- Information on development on lands at Dalnacoulter Landfill Site

2.4 Planning and Regeneration (New Supply)

2.4.1 Existing BCP's have been implemented and updated to ensure that contractual obligations in relation to COVID-19 and health guidance is in place and updated in line with Scottish Government guidance. This has extended to recovery planning for the service for each stage of the route map.

During lockdown new supply staff were able to work from home and work has been progressed in relation to site assessments; development of the new Strategic Housing Investment Plan; design development; contractor performance monitoring; budget planning; tender assessments, and where appropriate, contract awards.

All council new build projects which were on site prior to lockdown were being delivered by CCG (Scotland) Ltd. The sites are located at: Lismore Drive, Coatbridge; Dimsdale Road, Wishaw; and Caledonian Avenue, Bellshill. In line with Scottish Government guidance, construction was suspended on these sites from 24 March 2020.

CCG re-opened with a phase 2 soft start on the week commencing 15th June for Dimsdale Road and the week commencing 22nd June for Caledonian Avenue and Lismore Drive. CCG are currently implementing Phase 4 (steady state operation with physical distancing and/or PPE use) on these developments. Further to this there are four projects to go on the site in the near future that will be affected by Covid related social distancing restrictions on working practices.

The COVID-19 preventative measures being envisaged on construction sites suggests that all construction works will move at a slower pace than pre-COVID-19. The industry is predicting a range of percentages on productivity loss. Anything between 50% to 25% reduction. Not all site activities are on the critical path and may not be delayed however it is generally accepted that an overall programme prolongation is to be expected.

A further update on the impact on the overall programme will be provided to the next Committee.

2.4.2 Open Market Purchase Scheme

From 24 March 2020, all property surveys were suspended with immediate effect. Registers of Scotland (RoS) also closed their offices, therefore all transactions were put on hold to protect the interests of the council. In June, the Scottish Government

announced that restrictions on property transactions could be relaxed from 29 June 2020.

Since this announcement, a total of 7 property purchases have taken place to date. There are currently 28 properties with Legal, with proposed settlement dates scheduled throughout August and September. In addition, a total of 94 properties are with the Estates team and survey visits have now re-commenced.

2.5 Performance monitoring

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) has placed requirements on the council to report on various indicators on a monthly basis. The information requested by SHR is shown in appendix 1. Good performance has continued over the period in a number of priority areas reported to the regulator, such as arrears, anti-social behaviour, estates, empty homes (voids), allocations, homelessness and temporary accommodation.

In relation to gas safety, the team continued to achieve access to properties, however, one fail has been noted due to the tenant shielding and refusing access. This notifiable event has been reported to the regulator.

Performance has been reported to CMT on a monthly basis in addition to this. This included further detail on gas safety and emergency repairs, in addition to the indicators reported to the regulator.

Business Development and Support were able to complete the annual statutory statistical returns for the Scottish Housing Regulator (the ARC) within normal timescales, although the regulator offered extended deadlines due to the pandemic. It is worth noting that NLC was one of only 3 Local Authorities which submitted their ARC return within the original timescale.

3. Equality and Diversity

3.1 There is no specific impacts on Fairer Scotland.

3.2 There are no specific equality impact assessments to note.

4. Implications

4.1 The financial implications of COVID-19 are being managed and reported on via the Financial Solutions team.

4.2 There no HR/Policy/ Legislative implications.

4.3 There are no environmental implications.

4.4 The risk presented by the impact of COVID-19 will be continually assessed in line with government guidance and council strategy. This will be documented via corporate and service risk registers.

5. Measures of success

- 5.1 The councils Gold group have developed performance to track developments during the pandemic.
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6. Supporting documents

- 6.1 Appendix 1 SHR COVID-19 template for performance monitoring.
6.2 Appendix 2 Internal COVID-19 performance indicators monitored for CMT
6.3 Appendix 3 Internal monitoring of Corporate Repairs and maintenance



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Appendix 1 – SHR COVID-19 reported indicators of performance monitoring

NB Data in grey has not been included in April and May return

N/a* total number of empty dwellings is not available for 2019 as this data requires to be run on that day

	2019			2020		
	April	May	June	April	May	June
RSL and Local Authorities with stock:						
Gross Rent arrears	£9,381,172	£9,710,912	£9,980,878	£9,915,878	£9,735,003	£9,775,781
Total rent due	£125,108,941	£124,915,652	£124,710,373	£129,195,261	£128,886,070	£128,919,807
Arrears - Gross rent arrears (all tenants) as at last day of the month as a percentage of rent due for the reporting year.	7.50%	7.77%	8.00%	7.68%	7.55%	7.58%
The number of empty dwellings that arose during the last month in self-contained lettable stock.	306	223	270	99	104	163
The total number of empty dwellings in self-contained lettable stock on the last day of the reporting month.	N/a*	N/a*	N/a*	233	285	386
Number of lets during the reporting month	279	218	227	20	39	152
Lets to homeless (SST)	120	101	84	12	15	73
Lets to homeless (short SST)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lets to homeless (leased to relevant LA)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total No used for temporary accommodation* – the number of empty homes that were set aside during the month to be used for temporary accommodation						32

Total number to others* – the number of empty homes let to households other than those that are homeless, i.e. to existing tenants, housing list applicants, and others.	159	117	143	8	24	47
The total number of court actions initiated during the reporting month.	216	139	110			0
The number of properties recovered having obtained decree for non-payment of rent during the reporting month.	15	11	22			0
The number of properties recovered having obtained decree for anti-social behaviour during the reporting month	0	0	0			0
The number of properties recovered having obtained decree for other reasons during the reporting month.	0	0	0			0
The number of Notice of Proceedings issued during the reporting month for Rent arrears	482	609	585			0
The number of Notice of Proceedings issued during the reporting month for Antisocial behaviour/ criminal activity	1	3	2			3
The number of Notice of Proceedings issued during the reporting month for Other reasons	0	0	0			3
The number of homeless applications received in the month;	169	171	176	131	121	135
The number offered and accepted temporary accommodation in the month;	181	200	191	179	170	161

The number offered and refused temporary accommodation;	44	45	48	21	24	35
The number not offered temporary accommodation when needed in the month.	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total Households in temp on the last day of the month	531	530	525	556	613	619

Appendix 2 – Internal COVID-19 performance indicators monitored for CMT

	2019			2020		
	April	May	June	April	May	June
Antisocial behaviour - number of complaints reported in the last month that were resolved	870	942	884	736	671	735
% of complaints reported in the last month that were resolved. (Carry forward open cases to following month)	N/a	N/a	N/a		81% (156 still in progress)	84% (135 still in progress)
% complaints reported in the last month that were resolved within timescales	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Gas safety - number of gas safety inspections carried out in the month	2819	3514	3571	2577	3755	3817
Gas safety - number of times statutory obligation to complete gas safety check in 12 months was not met	0	0	0	0	0	1
Number of emergency repairs per month	4966	4363	3821	1338	2192	3084
Average time to complete emergency repairs per month in hours	03:30:18	04:37:41	04:09:03	02:48:00	03:47	02:40:37

Appendix 3 - Internal monitoring of Corporate Repairs and Maintenance

	2020			2019		
	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun
Category 1 - Emergency Works	170	263	165	12	34	50
Category 2 - 3 Days	41	60	69	1	2	10
Category 3 - 7 Days	19	34	48	0	0	6
Category 4 - 20 Days	284	377	406	8	4	47
Programmed Works	26	23	17	0	0	56
Routine Repairs	565	790	725	0	0	0
Cyclical Maintenance Works	565	790	725	8	15	14
Totals	1670	2337	2155	29	55	183