

**Name of meeting:** Economy and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel

**Date:** 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020

**Title of report:** Housing Rent and Support to Council Tenants and Support to Homeless Households and Rough Sleepers During the Covid 19 Pandemic

**Purpose of report:** To provide Panel members with information on the provision of services and support to Council tenants in relation to the payment of housing rent and to homeless households and rough sleepers during the Covid 19 pandemic.

<b>Key Decision - Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
<b>Key Decision - Is it in the <u>Council's Forward Plan (key decisions and private reports)?</u></b>	<b>Key Decision – Not Applicable</b>
<b>The Decision - Is it eligible for call in by Scrutiny?</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
<b>Date signed off by <u>Strategic Director</u> &amp; name</b>	<b>Karl Battersby – 18.08.2020</b> <b>Richard Parry – 18.08.2020</b>
<b>Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Finance?</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
<b>Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Legal Governance and Commissioning?</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
<b>Cabinet member <a href="#">portfolio</a></b>	<b>Cllr Cathy Scott – Democracy and Housing</b>

**Electoral wards affected:** All

**Ward councillors consulted:** Not Applicable

**Public or private:** Public

**Has GDPR been considered?** Yes GDPR has been considered. The information in this report does not identify any individuals.

## 1. Summary

### 1.1 Housing Rents and Financial Support to Council Tenants

- 1.1.1 The financial and employment situation of many council tenants has been adversely affected by Covid-19; employers have moved staff onto the furlough scheme creating a reduction in income, many others are working reduced hours, and some have lost their jobs.
- 1.1.2 Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing's (KNH), Income Management Team has responded to this by taking a range of pro-active steps to support tenants faced with financial hardship. This support is balanced with the need to collect rent payments and protect the tenant from falling into further debt.
- 1.1.3 All council tenants with an arrears balance are identified by an arrears escalation process and subsequently contacted by an income officer. Supportive discussions are held, and realistic re-payment plans agreed. Customers are offered budgeting and money advice and assisted with benefit claims.
- 1.1.4 In cases where additional vulnerability or complex needs are identified, the KNH income officer will make the necessary referrals to ensure a holistic package of support is in place to help the tenant sustain their tenancy.
- 1.1.5 All tenants in receipt of benefits, affected by furlough, or have lost their jobs are asked if they would benefit from a referral to the KNH Employment Support Team. The team support the tenant with educational opportunities such as online courses, assistance with completing CV's and job applications, or to seek new employment opportunities. In the last month, 45 tenants have accessed the team for guidance, support and advice.
- 1.1.6 The Income Management Team has assisted with a wider piece of work to contact tenants aged 70 years or older. These calls have been made in order to check on any wellbeing issues and to check if they have support in place to assist with groceries/shopping, collecting medication and access to food parcels. This support has been extended to other tenants facing financial hardship.
- 1.1.7 Universal Claimants (UC) account for 55% of all rent arrears, and during the lockdown period an additional 502 tenants managed by KNH have made Universal Credit (UC) claims for the first time. When new claimants are identified KNH's, Income Management Team have been pro-actively contacting them to offer support.
- 1.1.8 Tenants are offered a referral to KNH's Money Advice Team, enabling them to access a free and professional money advice service. They are offered one to one support to manage finances, assisted with benefit entitlements and other creditor debts and where applicable access to grant funding may assist to clear substantial debt.
- 1.1.9 During the lockdown period 259 tenants have been referred into the team and during Q1 £274,277.83 worth of financial gain has been generated for our tenants.
- 1.1.10 KNH offers a range of support mechanisms to assist with the prevention of rent arrears, and employment and debt advice. Many households with rent arrears are family homes with children, some live in deprived communities with high levels of worklessness and face financial hardship.

- 1.1.11 KNH will only take possession of a property on behalf of the council when all opportunities to recover arrears of rent have been made. We are aware of how the displacement of a family with children can often mean that local support networks are lost, children may need to move schools, children known to social care may move out of an area, and the overall health and wellbeing of the family can be impacted.
- 1.1.12 To avoid children and families being displaced we work in conjunction with a range of support services, including the Stronger Families team to ensure all available support is given to prevent the loss of the tenant's home.
- 1.1.13 KNH will only take enforcement action to repossess a property when all attempts to recover rent and arrears has been exhausted. To date the Coronavirus Act 2020 has provided residential tenancies with protection from eviction. The county courts have stayed all pending possession claim hearings and KNH has temporarily ceased enforcement action.
- 1.1.14 The government legislation to cease enforcement action, has necessitated the need for a strengthened partnership approach to support council tenants facing hardship.
- 1.1.15 KNH have worked closely with the following partners to develop new protocols that respond to government legislation, and the amended possession practice directions of the Judiciary Department:
- Huddersfield County Court Judges
  - Fusion Housing
  - Kirklees Council Legal Services
  - Connect Housing
  - DWP
- 1.1.16 This collaborative approach has enabled the swift development of new protocols and has strengthened our partnership approach. This will enable us to achieve our shared objective of supporting tenants sustain their tenancy.
- 1.1.17 The restrictions will be lifted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 20, and replaced by measures that must be taken by a landlord before proceeding with enforcement action.
- 1.1.18 The new measures include a requirement for KNH to inform the courts in writing if they wish to reactivate stayed possession hearings and evictions. In advance of any hearings the courts require an activation notice that includes the full history of rent arrears, any vulnerability issues, financial circumstances, and if a tenant has had to shield for a period of time. KNH are working closely with the county court judges, legal services, and other partners to ensure we meet the new requirements.
- 1.1.19 A review of all stayed cases has been undertaken to determine which cases require reactivating the restrictions are lifted. All tenants faced with either possession or eviction action have been contacted and reassured that KNH will not seek possession of their property during the stayed period, but have been urged to take the support offered to enable them to meet rent payments.
- 1.1.20 To support this, all correspondence relating to rent arrears which directly refers to potential or imminent enforcement action has been amended. Additional information around the range of available support has been provided. The Money Advice Team has

devised a leaflet promoting their services and this is sent in all correspondence to the tenant.

- 1.1.21 Despite the challenges, this proactive work appears to have prevented a significant increase in rent arrears. The DWP post UC payments to tenants accounts every four weeks. This results in a 'low' period of arrears when the DWP payment is made (week 15 arrears - £3,063,134k), and this is the 'true' arrears balance. Then follows a period where no UC payments are made, and arrears increase to their highest level (week 18 arrears - £3,491,110). A DWP file is expected at week 19, and this payment is expected to be circa £750k. This payment may reduce the arrears below the current lowest point at week 15, and this reflects the hard work taken by our officers to support tenants.
- 1.1.22 There is a need to be cautious about the ability for tenants to pay rent and arrears in the future and we are prepared for this. Many UC claimants have benefited from increased payments during lockdown, in addition to free school meals and other benefits. It is also worth noting that creditors have offered payment breaks and stopped recovery action for debts owed. When this re-commences this could mean that tenants are pressured into making payments towards these debts rather than rent payments.

## **1.2 Homeless Households and Rough Sleepers**

- 1.2.1 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17) placed increased duties on Local Authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness for eligible households regardless of whether or not they are in a priority need group by offering information and support but not a requirement to secure accommodation. The main homelessness statutory duty to eligible homeless households in defined priority need groups remains as does the Local Authorities duty to secure for such priority households suitable accommodation. In addition, the duty to provide interim or temporary accommodation remains.

### **Homeless Households**

- 1.2.2 In response to the national Covid 19 lockdown and government guidance that only essential house moves should take place, the letting of the Council's housing via Choose n Move was suspended on the 25<sup>th</sup> March. On the 13<sup>th</sup> May further government guidance confirmed that "non-essential" house moves could resume stressing that social landlords "will need to consider how to carry out their activities in line with the government's advice on social distancing in the workplace". The letting of council homes restarted on the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020.
- 1.2.3 Since lockdown was introduced the Housing Solutions Services has continued to maintain the delivery of statutory homelessness services, especially the requirements to provide temporary accommodation for eligible households and a wider group of homeless people, including verified rough sleepers and those with no recourse to public funds.
- 1.2.4 Most staff in the Housing Solutions Service have been working from home providing information, advice, assessment and support by telephone. Out of hours services are provided by the Council's Emergency Duty Team. The Customer Service Centres in Dewsbury and Huddersfield remain closed but if people present in person, saying they have no access to a phone and are 'roofless' they can be seen, in accordance with social distancing requirements, by a member of a small staff team working in Dewsbury and Huddersfield.

- 1.2.5 At the start of lockdown in anticipation of an increase in demand for temporary accommodation for homeless households and for people needing to be discharged from hospital or moved through the care system as a result of the worsening Covid 19 crisis, a joint Council and Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing (KNH) Project Team was established to: -
- Establish the existing range, capacity and availability of temporary accommodation and how to increase the number and range of temporary accommodation options.
  - Agree how in line with government Covid guidance households could when appropriate be safely and logistically supported to move on from temporary accommodation into council homes to free up temporary accommodation capacity.
  - Confirm the process for letting properties and signing up new tenants.
- 1.2.6 Additional hotel/B&B rooms and serviced apartments have been identified and arrangements for their use as temporary accommodation agreed. In addition, a further 30 council properties have been added to the temporary accommodation portfolio.
- 1.2.7 Despite lower overall volumes of people presenting as homeless in the last 3-4 months, the levels of households requiring temporary accommodation has been higher during COVID-19 restrictions. Also, the length of stay has increased as people have not been able to move-on from temporary accommodation because of the restrictions placed on non-essential house moves across the housing market. From 123 households at the end of January 2020 there has been around a 65% increase in households in temporary accommodation.

Accommodation	April	May	June	July
1. Households in TA at month end	191	203	203	209
1.(i) Of those above, households in B&B at month end	75	80	77	76
2. Placements into TA during the month	58	45	48	50
3. 'Move out' out of TA during the month	39	29	57	36
4. Average length of stay within TA (nights)	58	69	106	81

- 1.2.8 This includes greater use of B&B placements which have doubled since January. (Snapshot B&B figure 37 in January 2020).
- 1.2.9 It is anticipated that as restrictions on evictions are lifted and as the economic situation worsens that more households will present as homeless, adding further pressure to the temporary accommodation portfolio and support services.

### **Rough Sleepers 'Everyone In'**

- 1.2.10 Government's response to Covid 19 and rough sleeping is to bring in those on the streets to protect their health and stop wider transmission. Local Authorities were asked to support verified rough sleepers into appropriate accommodation by the end of the week commencing 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and to continue to support people to stay in that accommodation until such time as restrictions ease and step down arrangements can be put in place.

- 1.2.11 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March, the Rough Sleeping team within the Housing Solutions Service (together with colleagues and partner agencies) had successfully engaged with and accommodated all verified rough sleepers (14 individuals, 9 of which were known to services and entrenched rough sleepers) except for one person who chose to decline the accommodation offer and unfortunately continues to refuse support and accommodation.
- 1.2.13 The team has continued throughout the Covid restrictions to do outreach work to verify rough sleepers and in accordance with MHCLG guidance encourage and support them to accept and maintain temporary accommodation. Recently a further rough sleeper has been identified but so far refuses to engage or accept support or accommodation. In total 40 verified rough sleepers have been accommodated since the start of lockdown. Of these 15 remain in temporary accommodation, 17 have been successfully moved on to more secure accommodation and 8 are being supported by staff to stay with friends or relatives until they are ready to move on.
- 1.2.14 The Rough Sleeper team is now actively providing on-going intensive support to 48 former rough sleepers. At the time of writing none of those brought in under the Everyone In initiative had left their accommodation to return to the streets.

### **Health and Well-being Support**

- 1.2.15 From the outset of the lockdown the Housing Solutions Service and Public Health collaborated to ensure that services for rough sleepers and other homeless households in TA are provided in accordance with guidance for those deemed at high risk to Covid-19 and/or symptomatic as well as support for those who are substance dependent. Working with partner agencies (E.g. CHART and the Whitehouse Surgery) we quickly arranged GP registration and access to substance misuse support which has we believe contributed to people staying in accommodation.
- 1.2.16 Housing Solutions Service staff continue to provide telephone support for rough sleepers and other homeless households in TA - this is done on a case by case basis and in accordance with their personal housing plans. Support is also in place with regards food supply; mental health support and substance misuse needs through partner agencies.
- 1.2.17 Housing Services staff have in collaboration with health and social care colleagues implemented new ways of working to support the discharge of people from hospital or to help people move on through the care system.
- A dedicated Housing Solutions Officer was appointed to work alongside the hospital discharge teams. During the 3 months April – June a total of 41 patients ready for discharge, who had indicated that they had nowhere suitable to live on discharge, were supported to identify and secure suitable accommodation. Of the 41 it was established following assessment that 21 people were owed a statutory homeless relief or prevention duty.
  - Accessible Homes Occupational Therapists collaborated with social care and health colleagues to agree and support the Discharge to Assess pathway. The pathway prioritised the assessment and provision of equipment and home adaptations to support people move home safely. In addition, 40 straight stock stair lifts and 40 stock hoists were offered to NHS and Social Care colleagues for emergency hospital discharge and also to be used for end of life or hospital admission prevention. KNH colleagues agreed to fit lifts within 2 days and agreement was reached with a local external contractor to fit hoists within 5 days

## **2. Information required to take a decision**

2.1 No decision is required; this information report is submitted at the request of the Economy and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel.

## **3. Implications for the Council**

- **Working with People**

All council tenants with an arrears balance are identified by an arrears escalation process and subsequently contacted by an income officer. Supportive discussions are held, and realistic re-payment plans agreed. Customers are offered budgeting and money advice and assisted with benefit claims.

In cases where additional vulnerability or complex needs are identified, the income officer will make the necessary referrals to ensure a holistic package of support is in place to help the tenant sustain their tenancy.

All tenants in receipt of benefits, affected by furlough, or have lost their jobs are asked if they would benefit from a referral to the KNH Employment Support Team. The team support the tenant with educational opportunities such as online courses, assistance with completing CV's and job applications, or to seek new employment opportunities. In the last month, 45 tenants have accessed the team for guidance, support and advice.

The income management team has assisted with a wider piece of work to contact tenants aged 70 years or older. These calls have been made in order to check on any wellbeing issues and to check if they have support in place to assist with groceries/shopping, collecting medication and access to food parcels. This support has been extended to other tenants facing financial hardship.

All people who present as homeless are supported to develop a Personal Housing Plan. This plan is an agreement between the authority and the individual which is based on the individual or households circumstances and support needs and sets out the actions that each will take to prevent them from becoming homeless or to find and secure suitable and affordable accommodation.

- **Working with Partners**

The government legislation to cease enforcement action, has necessitated the need for a strengthened partnership approach to support council tenants facing hardship.

KNH have worked closely with the following partners to develop new protocols that respond to government legislation, and the amended possession practice directions of the Judiciary Department:

- Huddersfield County Court Judges
- Fusion Housing
- Kirklees Council Legal Services
- Connect Housing
- DWP.

This collaborative approach has enabled the swift development of new protocols and has our strengthened partnership approach. This will enable us to achieve our shared objective of supporting tenants sustain their tenancy.

It is recognised that meeting the housing needs of Kirklees residents and ownership of the preventing and relieving homelessness agenda must be partnership based, across the council and its partners. The council cannot meet the districts housing needs or prevent homelessness on its own, partners play a vital role in meeting the wider housing needs of Kirklees residents and in preventing and responding to homelessness. In developing our responses to the corona virus, we have and continue to work collaboratively with key services and partners including: -

- Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing and registered providers of social housing
- Health services
- Providers of KC commissioned hostel accommodation
- B&B and hotel proprietors
- KC social care services.

- **Place Based Working**

Council tenants accessed the customer service centres to discuss a range of housing issues including rent arrears. The closure of the customer care centres, and the inability of KNH income officers being able to undertake home visits was an initial concern.

The Income Management team has responded to this challenge and adopted new ways of working with our tenants in a remote way. This has involved communication with tenants by pre-arranged telephone appointments, text messages, and by online facilities.

This has proved successful, with minimal impact on the service we provide. This is supported by no complaints about, or requests by tenants to access the customer service centres to see an officer in person.

In addressing the housing needs of people especially those with issues of homelessness and rough sleeping, a Place Based approach is needed. This includes consideration of peoples support networks and where and how they access services. When providing temporary accommodation, we normally consider factors such as children's education / childcare arrangements / employment and health and support needs so that wherever possible the accommodation provided is suitable. We will continue to consider these aspects however may not due to the current situation always be able to meet all needs or expectations.

- **Climate Change and Air Quality**

Homeworking by KNH's income officers has reduced the omissions created by vehicle use when they travel to and from the workplace.

When providing temporary accommodation all efforts are made to ensure that the accommodation is located within walking distance of town centres or as near as possible to well served bus routes.

- **Improving outcomes for children**

KNH offers a range of support mechanisms to assist with the prevention of rent arrears, and employment and debt advice. Many households with rent arrears are family homes



with children, some live in deprived communities with high levels of worklessness and face financial hardship.

KNH will only take possession of a property when all opportunities to recover arrears of rent have been made. We are aware of how the displacement of a family with children can often mean that local support networks are lost, children may need to move schools, children known to social care may move out of an area, and the overall health and wellbeing of the family can be impacted.

To avoid children and families being displaced we work in conjunction with a range of support services, including the Stronger Families team to ensure all available support is given to prevent the loss of the tenant's home.

For households with children presenting as homeless, where homelessness cannot be prevented, we have a statutory duty to secure suitable accommodation. Any 16- or 17-year-old young person presenting as homeless has a child in need assessment carried out by a social worker and is offered suitable emergency accommodation pending the development of a care and personal housing plan.

- **Other (e.g. Legal/Financial or Human Resources)**

MHCLG announced a Coronavirus (COVID-19) Rough Sleeping Contingency Fund. This included £12k for Kirklees to help cover additional costs associated with accommodating and supporting rough sleepers. It is clear that the £12k will not cover such costs due to the numbers of people brought in and the length of time they have had to remain in temporary accommodation. (Total costs (gross) incurred in the first 8 weeks from housing rough sleepers was £40,320). The increased use of and longer stays in B&B accommodation results in an increased pressure on council budgets as a result of housing benefit subsidy loss. Finance colleagues are monitoring and reporting the impact of this additional financial pressure.

MHCLG announced Coronavirus (COVID-19) Emergency Funding for Local Government, £24m for KC, which includes provision to provide additional support for the homeless and rough sleepers.

The recently announced MHCLG Next Steps Accommodation Programme, offers opportunities to bid for capital and revenue funding to provide additional accommodation and support to prevent rough sleepers returning to the streets. A bid proposal is currently being co-produced with MHCLG for submission on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

KC Housing Solutions staff are continuing to deliver statutory homelessness and other essential services in accordance with government guidance on for example social distancing, travel and the use of PPE.

Communication with homeless people and other individuals and households is being maintained albeit with a focus on telephone / electronic methods of communication rather than face to face.

## **Do you need an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)?**

Not in relation to this information report but IIA will be carried out in relation to future planning and any proposed changes to policy and service provision.

#### **4. Consultees and their opinions**

- 4.1 The Portfolio Holder and Executive Team have been consulted on and approved decisions in relation to the approaches outlined above and taken to support homeless households and rough sleepers during the Covid 19 pandemic.

#### **5. Next steps and timelines**

- 5.1 The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on council tenants and rough sleepers and other homeless households will continue to be monitored and services adapted to support vulnerable Kirklees residents.

#### **6. Officer recommendations and reasons**

- 6.1 That information in the report be noted.

#### **7. Cabinet Portfolio Holder's recommendations**

- 7.1 The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on council tenants and rough sleepers and other homeless households will continue to be monitored and services adapted to support vulnerable Kirklees residents.

#### **8. Contact officer**

Sarah Clayton, Head of Housing Management, KNH

Helen Geldart, Head of Housing Services, KC

#### **9. Background Papers and History of Decisions**

None

#### **10. Service Director responsible**

Joanne Bartholomew, Chief Operating Officer, KNH

Naz Parkar, Service Director Growth and Housing, KC