
To: Communities, Housing and Planning Policy Board

On: 18 August 2020

Report by: Director of Communities, Housing and Planning Services

Heading: COVID-19 - Service Update

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update to the Communities, Housing and Planning Policy Board on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the areas within the Board's remit since March 2020. It also outlines the key priorities and short-term potential areas of risk.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that members of the Communities, Housing and Planning Policy Board:
- (i) note the content of this report; and
 - (ii) note that planning policies will be reviewed to take account of any new guidance and emerging legislation having regard to the impact of Climate Change and Covid-19.

3. Background

- 3.1 In March 2020, working closely with our partners, Renfrewshire Council moved quickly to respond to the emerging coronavirus pandemic, protecting and supporting our employees and communities, particularly vulnerable people across the area.
- 3.2 Colleagues across the Council have shown great commitment and resilience during the COVID-19 delivering essential services, volunteering to support frontline services and helping others to remain safe at home.

- 3.3 In order to ensure effective decision-making and governance, the Emergencies Board was convened on 20 March 2020 and has received regular updates on the different workstreams established to support Renfrewshire throughout the crisis, highlighting the humanitarian response, reviewing the available data showing the impact on Renfrewshire's people and considering how we can restart services, recover and renew. Detailed reports were also presented to the Council on 25 June 2020.
- 3.4 This report is therefore not intended to provide granular detail of the response, but instead it seeks to give a broad overview of the key areas impacted by the COVID-19 crisis – the service areas paused and restarted, the particular areas of focus now and in the near future and any specific risks and priorities of relevance to this Policy Board.
- 3.5 Whilst this report is a high-level update for Elected Members, we are acutely aware of the impact on our communities of the pandemic - of those who have sadly been bereaved, who have struggled through isolation, have lost their income, have had their health impacted through this crisis, have supported their children and young people with home learning or have contended with other challenges made more difficult by the pandemic and consequent restrictions.
- 3.6 Across services, and with our partners, the Council continues to support our communities and develop our operational and policy response both now and as we continue to move through the recovery route map.
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4. Updates for Communities, Housing & Planning Policy Board

4.1 Changes to service provision following introduction of lockdown

Planning and Housing Services

- Since lockdown measures were introduced, most housing services have continued to be delivered. Staff quickly and positively adapted to working remotely and continued to deliver essential services to tenants, homeless people, those threatened with homelessness, and other services users.
- Staff who made essential visits to temporary accommodation, sheltered housing complexes, tenants and in high rise blocks were all provided with guidance and PPE as required.
- Advice and assistance was provided by telephone on a 24/7 basis to people who were homeless or who were at risk of homelessness. Temporary accommodation continued to be made available to anyone who needed it. While most temporary accommodation provided was self-contained furnished flats, it was necessary to make some use of B&B accommodation.

- Since lockdown, Housing Support Officers have provided support to assist a range of service users, including people re-settling into tenancies, and staff made home visits to people where necessary, with appropriate PPE provided. Donations of food parcels have been delivered.
- All 10 sheltered housing complexes continued to have Officers on duty 7 days a week making daily calls to all tenants and responding to requests for advice and assistance. Daily visits were made to every complex to ensure safety checks on fire doors etc were carried out, and a range of activities to keep tenants occupied within their homes was organised.
- The concierge and caretaking service within high rise blocks have continued to operate throughout, and all 14 high rise blocks had daily fire safety checks carried out. Wellbeing calls were also made to tenants in the amenity flats at Glencairn Court by concierge staff.
- Routine letting was suspended in Renfrewshire at the end of March, with allocations activity from then focused on providing temporary accommodation for homeless people, emergency accommodation and enabling people in critical need to move where safe and possible to do so. During this time, officers who were working remotely were offering housing options advice and registering new housing applications.
- The normal processes for dealing with rent arrears were suspended, and officers proactively contacted tenants where there had been missed rent payments or changes to rent payment patterns to offer advice on accessing benefits and other support services as appropriate.
- In order to avoid non-essential visits to tenants' homes, routine and nonemergency repairs were suspended. Only emergency repairs and gas servicing works was undertaken in tenanted properties.
- The statutory gas servicing process continued throughout the lockdown period with tenants contacted 8 weeks in advance of their service date to arrange their appointment, and to date, the majority of services were carried out within the required 12-month timescale.
- The Planning Service in Renfrewshire adapted to provide a business as usual approach where possible with Officers taking an innovative approach to service delivery which included developing new procedures to enable staff to deal with planning matters remotely.
- Building Standards site inspections temporarily ceased but while construction work was continuing on some sites, officers were accepting alternative evidence such as photographs, reports from suitably qualified persons, video, or utilising remote means of conducting site inspections. Officers were advised to work with developers and building owners to ensure that, where possible, completion certificate submissions continued to be processed.
- Also within Building Standards, Building warrant applications were being processed by officers working from home and remotely and Dangerous Building cover continued to be maintained on a 24/7 basis.

Communities and Public Protection

- In the Community Safety Partnership, Daily Tasking continued on a daily basis with Police and the Council triaging relevant incidents and ensuring they were passed to relevant agencies for action in line with the normal process.
- MARAC also continued to meet as normal using MS Teams to consider high risk domestic abuse cases.
- The CCTV Hub continued to be staffed and public space cameras have been fully operational, supported by targeted Wardens patrols in mobile CCTV vehicles. These patrols continued to be deployed to respond to incidents and hotspots identified through daily tasking and complaints.
- Counter Terrorism / Prevent activity has continued with a number of multi-agency meetings held in relation to 2 Prevent cases since March 2020 - one an adult and one a child and these have been well attended and supported by all relevant agencies and officers. These meetings used the recently updated Renfrewshire / Police Prevent referral form as a core document to capture and share information.
- The K Division CONTEST / SOC Strategic Group has met using MS Teams and has increased its pattern of meetings – 4-6 weekly rather than quarterly in order to ensure that there is enhanced strategic oversight of the CONTEST and SOC agenda in Renfrewshire and Inverclyde throughout the lockdown and service restart period.
- Within Renfrewshire the tactical Renfrewshire Community Protection (Prevent) Steering Group has similarly moved to a 4 weekly MS Teams cycle to ensure there is tactical oversight and engagement with these issues at a Renfrewshire level. All relevant agencies have been attending and contributing at these meetings.
- At present while the terrorist threat picture has not changed substantially nationally, consideration is being given by these groups to the impact of isolation and the removal of face to face services from those that are vulnerable to becoming radicalised or involved in terrorist or criminal activities and how these can be reinstated with appropriate support and a focus on any persons of concern. Concern also relates to understanding and responding to the changed picture in relation to cyber issues which continue to provide opportunities for organised crime groups in relation to frauds and scams as well as coercion. The groups have also shared information on local concerns and vulnerabilities in relation to campaigns such as Black Lives Matter and counter demonstrations – all of which were held peacefully.
- Both groups are awaiting the distribution of updated Prevent Guidance by the Home Office / Scottish Government originally expected in April 2020 and have agreed to hold special meetings if required to ensure that this can be cascaded and responded to quickly as soon as it is issued. Following this, appropriate actions will be added to the action plan – particularly, it is anticipated, in relation to training, awareness raising and engagement.

- The Renfrewshire Community Protection Chief Officers Group has also moved to a 4 weekly cycle of meetings to provide Chief Officer scrutiny with an update on CONTEST / SOC activities at each meeting.
- One unavoidable impact of the lockdown has been in relation to a Renfrewshire NOTICE – CHECK – SHARE training and awareness raising event planned for April 2020 which required to be postponed. This event had a particular focus on lone actors, the Prevent referral process and PMAP processes. Currently it has been rescheduled for October 2020 - with the key Home Office speaker provisionally rebooked – however the nature and timing of this event may still require to be revisited as a better understanding of the phased routemap becomes clearer, in relation to groups of people being able to congregate.
- An area for increased activity in terms of business regulation was the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 which were enacted on 27 March 2020, with powers for Councils to visit and prohibit businesses that were not compliant with the Regulations. In line with the Council Integrated Enforcement Policy, businesses were supported by officers adopting an “engage, explain, encourage and then enforce” model which afforded people the best opportunity to comply before any enforcement action was taken.
- Pest Control was restricted to attending emergency calls only e.g. rodents within a property.
- A number of employees from Communities and Public Protection were redeployed and worked with employees from housing services and across the Council to establish a Local Assistance Team to support shielded and vulnerable residents to access practical support and resources including access to food and medicines. At one stage over 2,600 residents were receiving practical support each week – mainly food provided by Catering staff and Building Services employees from Environment and Infrastructure. The Local Assistance Team conducted all the welfare calls and ensured that vulnerable residents were matched with the services that they needed. Over 6,500 people on the shielded list were contacted – over 99% of those on the list and each received personal advice and support as they required. As the lockdown period began to end each person receiving support had follow up calls and contact to ensure that their ongoing needs were understood and if necessary redirected to provision from mainstream services or the recently established Community Neighbourhood Hubs.
- During the lockdown Street Stuff coaches continued to be flexible in working with partners and young people. They supported Renfrewshire Council in the delivery of sports and various activities including educational support within schools for the children of key workers throughout the duration of the pandemic. They supported communities by moving from core outdoor activities to online activities in the evenings with young people and with parents who have joined in from the comforts of their own homes. They have also supported the delivery of a range of Street Play activities for vulnerable young people during the Summer Holidays

- Adult Learning and Literacies staff helped keep learners and families stay on track through a weekly check in via telephone calls, texts, emails and newsletters. The Family Learning Team supported parents by listening to their concerns and helping them with lockdown and have created a 'Pizza Express Newsletter', which has been sent out to families who have children in Primary 6 and 7.
- The Youth Services team within CLAD worked with partners and have delivered over 200 activity packs to young people across Renfrewshire. Youth Services Staff also set up online chat rooms, quiz nights, movie nights and a range of other activities to ensure that young people did not feel isolated during this challenging time. Staff also worked with Renfrewshire Youth Voice to set up the 'Unheard Voices Campaign' – to find out how lockdown and the COVID-19 virus has affected young people and those who support young people.
- Community Learning and Development employees have been heavily involved in arranging and supporting delivery of the Children's Hubs for Key Workers run by the Council through the lockdown period – providing safe and secure childcare for around 250 children per day. They are now supporting delivery of the Hubs running over the summer period supporting around 1000 children a week and running alongside the StreetStuff Street Play activities. In addition, Community Learning and Development employees have been supporting the establishment of Community Neighbourhood Hubs working with volunteers and members of the community to provide vital support and services in local communities.

4.2 **Scottish Government's route map - Easing of lockdown restrictions**

The Scottish Government has set out a route map for recovery with 4 phases. Below is a summary of changes due to the relaxing of certain restrictions as we have moved through the phases of the route map so far.

Planning and Housing Services

- The Scottish Government's route map includes specific advice for the social and private rented sectors and from 29th June 2020, home moves were permitted as long as they could be carried out safely. The guidance was clear that this was not signalling a 'return to normality' and that the process of moving home was very different from before COVID-19. Practices and procedures for everyone involved were adapted to ensure that the risk of spread of the virus was reduced as far as was possible.
- Operational letting activity continues to focus on the provision of temporary and settled accommodation for homeless people and other people with the highest levels of housing need, in keeping with the needs-based framework set out in the housing allocation policy. This sustained focus on homelessness was necessary, in order to enable people to move on from temporary accommodation to settled housing, create greater capacity within the system and return to a situation in Renfrewshire where it would not be necessary to use B&B accommodation.

- Some offers of housing were made prior to the end of March which had to be suspended due to lockdown. Officers have contacted the prospective movers to check if they are still able and willing to move home. Preparatory work was done to support this, including making short video clips of properties to allow prospective movers to 'view virtually' rather than in person.
- In line with guidance and following consultation with tenants, measures were put in place which allowed communal lounge areas to re-open on 17 July 2020 in Renfrewshire Council's ten Sheltered Housing Facilities. Initially lounges are only to be used by tenants, however this will be reviewed as the recovery from COVID-19 restrictions progresses.
- Remobilisation of the housing repairs service is underway with the recommencement of some routine and non-emergency repair works, starting with external works which were reported prior to lockdown. Recommencement of non-emergency internal repair works will be subject to a phased return, taking account of government guidelines and new working practices that are required to comply with these. It is anticipated the full resumption of the housing repairs service will not be possible until Phase 4 of the government's routemap, however, the volume and type of repairs which can be carried out will increase on an incremental basis over the next month.
- Construction work on two Council newbuild projects was suspended at the end of March at Bishopton and Johnstone Castle. Work restarted on site when restrictions were eased for the construction sector, but the lockdown period and new working practices required to achieve social distancing will impact on completion timescales. Final completion is expected at Bishopton in August (80 new Council homes) and discussions are ongoing with the contractor at Johnstone Castle on revised completion timescales (95 new Council homes). Contractors have continued to progress work at design and approval stages for the newbuild projects at Ferguslie Park and South West Johnstone.
- External improvement works which were underway as part of the capital investment programme were suspended in March. Works have now restarted and properties where works were substantially underway prior to lockdown are being prioritised. New working practices have been developed to ensure compliance with government guidance in relation to the construction industry.
- Planning applications continue to be accepted and processed with site visits commencing on 22 June 2020, this included visits related to planning applications and enforcement investigations.
- Some limited Building Standards site inspections commenced on 15 June 2020 on multi plot sites to catch up with houses completed just before or at lockdown. From 22 June 2020 full site inspection activities, utilising a hybrid system covering alternative evidence, physical and remote site inspections have been carried out.

Communities and Public Protection

- As the indoor retail sector has continued to open both Environmental Health Officers and Trading Standards Officers visited premises to ensure compliance with the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020. This included appropriate risk assessments and social distancing within the shop and management of the queues outside.
 - As pubs and restaurants have also re-opened, officers from Communities and Public Protection have worked closely with colleagues in Police Scotland and Licensing to undertake proactive joint visits. This has ensured that any potential issues have been picked up and addressed quickly with businesses acting positively and responsibly to implement the revised guidance. Further guidance and changes to legislation will continue to influence decisions made by Officers.
 - The Renfrewshire Community Safety Hub has successfully supported most operational community protection services - but as lockdown is relaxed more officers have been able to return to frontline duties and are now providing additional capacity to assist communities and businesses. Levels of service remained reduced while some staff continued to work from home, remained shielding or were seconded to other essential areas of priority activity, but capacity to respond to most types of incident has now been restored and cases will be actioned on the basis of identified need and priority.
 - Colleagues in Adult Learning and Literacy Services (ALLS) have continued to support the childcare hubs for the children of key workers and vulnerable children in schools over the summer holiday period.
 - In addition to the childcare hubs, a programme of street play activities was delivered for eligible families, offering a programme of activities for those children who previously would have been eligible to attend the Families First Clubs over the summer period. These activities were delivered using Street Stuff sessional workers and resources, maintaining the profile and awareness of this programme in communities until such time as their core programme can restart – which is expected to be around the time schools return – in line with anticipated government guidance.
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5. Key priorities and risks until next board cycle

- 5.1 In terms of risk, members of the Communities, Housing and Planning Policy Board should note that the Corporate Risk Management Group (CRMG) is undertaking a piece of work to review the council's risk profile in light of the pandemic; many of the existing strategic and corporate risks will be impacted. These risks will be reported to the Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board in November. At this point in time however, Members of the Board will wish to note that the service-specific risks relating to recovery work and immediate concerns between now and the next cycle of Board meetings include:

- Moving forward, we recognise that as the impact of Covid-19 informs people's choices of how they live and work, this will need to be reflected in Planning Policies and in particular the design and location of new housing. In this context the Communities, Housing & Planning Service will ensure that any new guidance and emerging legislation will be used to inform future decision making and policy development and be brought to the relevant Policy Board for consideration.
- Tackling homelessness – the number of statutory homeless households in Renfrewshire increased during the 'lockdown' period, as was the case in across Scotland. As letting activity increases, the number of homeless applicants staying in temporary accommodation will reduce, and this will be closely monitored. The Council had to revert to the use of B&B as a form of temporary accommodation for the first time in many years during the COVID-19 crisis, and a range of measures are being put in place to allow us to again cease using B&B. The Scottish Government will introduce an amendment to the Unsuitable Accommodation Order from 30 September 2020, which will require local authorities to ensure no homeless applicant is placed in a hostel or B&B for more than 7 days. The current Order only applies to households with children.
- As a consequence of uncertainty in the local employment market and wider economic implications it is anticipated that there will be an increase in rent arrears as a result of new Universal Credit claims and changes in payment methods. This situation is being closely monitored and Officers are undertaking detailed analysis and monitoring on rent account management as well as providing detailed welfare contacts to support our tenants where there is an indication of financial pressure / distress.
- Gas Safety Checks and Repairs Backlog – Some annual gas services have not been completed within the required timescale due to tenants shielding, self-isolating or refusing access. Officers are continuing to monitor overdue services and are arranging for these to be re-scheduled as restrictions are lifted. As only emergency repairs have been attended during lockdown this has resulted in a backlog of non-emergency work. Plans are now in progress to re-commence non-emergency work but it should be acknowledged that timescales for work to be completed are anticipated to be longer than normal.
- Contact tracing -Test and Protect – This is going to continue to be a critical tool for the UK and Scotland to minimise transmission of COVID-19. The West Local Resilience Partnership has agreed for local authority Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) to work with Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board to implement the Test and Trace parts of the model. All 6 local authorities have agreed to release full time equivalent staff at varying degrees, with Renfrewshire Council releasing 2 EHOs (FTE) over a 3 month period.

- Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Minister for Public Health and Sport agreed to allow local authorities to deviate from certain elements of the Food Law Code of Practice (Scotland) 2019. This provided greater flexibility for local authorities to allocate resources to areas of most critical priority. Whilst helpful during the pandemic, it now leaves the Business Regulation Team with a backlog of premises that need to be inspected moving forward. A national recovery group has been convened to ensure consistency across Scotland and Renfrewshire Council sit on this Group. The Council will need to produce an up to date Service Plan to advise how it will catch up with inspections.
- Community protection activities – particularly in relation to regulatory services have been placed under significant pressure in responding to the new demands placed on them by the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 which were enacted on 27 March 2020. This, together with Test and Protect support will be a continued pressure in the immediate future and will impact on the same areas of service as will be impacted by increased demands arising from the forthcoming ending of the transition period and full implementation of Brexit in January 2021.

Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – None
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – None
3. **Community/Council Planning** – COVID-19 will impact on the operations of Council partners and on services to the community. This paper highlights the work being undertaken to mitigate this impact as far as possible and maintain essential services for the safety and wellbeing of the community.
4. **Legal** – New legislation has been enacted and used by staff as part of the COVID-19 outbreak. Legislation is being followed to ensure all staff are returning to work safely.
5. **Property/Assets** - as facilities start to open in line with the Scottish Government Route map, adjustment may have to be made to physical spaces to allow for physical distancing & to comply with relevant guidance. This will also apply to outdoor assets.
6. **Information Technology** - ICT are working to ensure staff have the capability to work from home wherever possible to reduce social contact in line with government and health guidance.

7. **Equality & Human Rights** – The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report because it is for noting only. However, the service notes the scientific advice in relation to risks to particular groups and communities from COVID-19 and is undertaking individualised risk assessments wherever appropriate.
8. **Health & Safety** – Advice and guidance is being given to protect the health and safety of employees and service users when carrying out priority services for the Council in line with government and health guidance
9. **Procurement** – The ongoing pandemic has and will continue to have a significant impact on existing contractual obligations and on the procurement of future goods and services required by the Council.
10. **Risk** – As noted in section 5, the CRMG are currently reviewing the Council's risk profile in light of the coronavirus pandemic and will report to board in November.
11. **Privacy Impact** – None.
12. **CoSLA Policy Position** – None
13. **Climate Risk** – None

List of Background Papers –

none

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