

Homes and Safer Communities, Housing Services: Covid19 service position statement

Community & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

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carmarthenshire.gov.uk

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1. What is the purpose of this report?

The purpose of this report is to provide Scrutiny members with a high level summary of the impact COVID 19 has had on Housing Services over the last 8 months from a service user, staff and Council perspective. The report also looks ahead in terms of what are the implications moving forward as well as key lessons learnt.

It is not the intention of this report to cover every area of the service but will focus on key delivery issues and future developments in the following areas:

- Strategic Housing Delivery and Investment;
- Advice and Tenancy Support;
- Sheltered Housing; and
- Engagement and Partnerships.

2. What has been the impact of Covid on services and what changes have we seen?

At the outset, tribute should be paid to our remarkable staff and managers whose commitment in dealing with the most difficult of situations has been outstanding. From homelessness, housing management and community engagement through to development and investment the flexibility and adaptability shown has been first class and is certainly a blue-print for moving forward.

Some services have remained fully functional during the COVID period, although certain other areas have seen reduced or suspended activity e.g. allocations at beginning of lockdown, home visits, adaptations etc.

a) Housing Services

Housing Services had to respond and adapt quickly to the pandemic, particularly around **homelessness and its prevention**.

Welsh Government (WG) changed the law around people that are homeless and in 'priority need'. Regardless of a person's previous history, we must now temporarily accommodate and rehouse all single people that present as homeless, including prison leavers. This change has caused a significant demand on temporary accommodation and homelessness services in the County. The impact of this has been:

- an increase in the number of people we have provided with temporary and emergency accommodation. We normally cater for 70 households but currently we have 135 households in temporary accommodation (over 100 are single people);
- providing 12 new households a week with temporary accommodation, mostly single people (it was three or four normally); and
- continuing our prevention work but the change in circumstances has made it difficult to improve on the % of cases we were able to intervene on (now 49% compared to 52 % before).

Allocations were suspended from 23rd March to the beginning of May. Similarly contractors working on bringing **voids back into use** furloughed their workforce so the number of new tenancies in March and April dropped from approximately 60 to 30 a month. New tenancies in August and September rose to 58 and 43 respectively.

Issues which are affecting delivery involve contractors needing to apply safe systems of work so this does limit the numbers of workmen in a property at any one time, a further issue is the availability of materials like plaster.

In terms of **private and social renters** many households, as a result of the outbreak and lockdown, experienced a reduced or complete loss of income. This has resulted in:

- the demand for housing advice rising significantly with number of telephone enquiries rising from approximately 2,500 to 3,500 a month; and
- Council tenant rent arrears rising from £1.5 million in October 2019 to £1.8 million in October 2020. This performance, however, is significantly better than other Local Authorities.

The **adaptation** program was suspended as a result of lockdown, again many contractors furloughing their workforce. More importantly, it was the risk of infection to older people where many were shielding. Only emergency provision was made. We have delivered, however, 106 adaptations, mainly involving small scale work, with a further 150 being commissioned to date this year.

We have continued to manage **sheltered schemes** throughout this period and it should be acknowledged the flexibility of staff and residents has been first class.

b) **Development and Investment**

All **Carmarthenshire Home Standard** related works on tenant's homes have been delayed since March 2020. Only emergency repairs have continued.

The **new build programme** has been delayed as contractors closed their sites between March and July. We are now, however, back on site in Dylan, Garreglwyd, Glanmor Terrace, Maespiode and Gwynfryn. As above, works are taking longer due to the need to social distance on site (less trades can be on site at the same time) and delays with sourcing some raw construction materials.

Covid has also delayed the launch of our consultation for the new affordable housing plan.

We have stopped our **buying private sector homes** programme as the housing market was originally closed in an attempt to stop people moving and the risk associated with staff (valuers and surveyors) entering people's homes.

Covid has, however, presented our service area with many **funding opportunities**, including the Land Release Fund and Optimised Retrofit funding for works and research.

These funding opportunities will help the HRA capital programme go further and provide more affordable homes. It will also shape our decarbonisation programme in our existing stock and help us develop a full costed asset management programme.

Covid has also resulted in the Intermediate Care Fund (ICF) being reprofiled towards our housing capital programmes, including Coleshill Terrace and Glanamman assisted living projects and sheltered housing improvements.

c) **Engagement and Partnerships**

As a result of Covid estate presence and activity has reduced and this has resulted in increased demand and complaints from tenants regarding fly tipping, grounds maintenance and estate issues, and non-urgent repairs not being carried out.

We continue, however, to carry out health and safety inspections and fire safety checks. We have also been unable to deliver the T2T awards.

3. What have been the workforce implications?

Staff have been outstanding throughout the pandemic, in continuing to support people in our communities, and take on challenges that they would never previously have foreseen. For example, staff helping out in care homes to manage Covid-19 outbreaks, being part of the Test Trace and Protect (TTP) programme and assisting with advice and compliance for businesses etc.

We are conscious that this has been a hugely difficult time for staff managing both work and challenging situations at home, and staff have been exemplary in the commitment and dedication they have shown.

It should also be noted that tenants, residents and members have been very understanding during this period, accepting the challenging times we all have faced and the impact this can have on the delivery of the service.

4. What have been the key financial issues identified?

The following issues/implications have been identified:

- There has been reduced capital and revenue spend in terms of the Housing Revenue Account. The budgets are currently being re-profiled for future years and we are particularly conscious of the role our development and investment programmes will play in the economic recovery of the County. We still plan to invest over £50m on building more homes and investing in our existing homes over the next three years; and
- The response to homelessness, whilst being excellent, is resulting in additional monthly costs on average of 109k at the present time. We have a transitional homelessness plan in place to reduce these costs over time. We can currently claim these additional costs through the Welsh Government's monthly hardship claim but this has, to date, only be confirmed up until March 2021.

5. How have we approached Communication and Engagement?

Good and regular communication has been critical to supporting staff, as well as recognising the achievements of staff and taking each opportunity to thank them. The use of technology has meant that we are probably in much more regular contact with each other and have taken the opportunity to have

regular short meetings. This is something that we would want to continue going forward.

There is regular communication with staff via the internet, newsletters, individual letters and published guidance. Team meetings have continued via teams and training modules are being made available via e-learning programmes, wherever possible.

We have also carried out extensive welfare calls to our tenants during this time to ensure they are coping and intervening where it is sensible to do so. We have made over 2000 pro-active calls during this period.

Regular contact has also been maintained between Heads of Service and the Executive Board Member, to ensure everyone is up to date on what is happening.

6. What are the key implications moving forward?

We must make sure that we learn from this unprecedented experience as we reintroduce our services and re-set our strategic and operational priorities. It is not going to be a case of restarting and getting back to the way we were. This is an opportunity to refresh and renew. Recovery Groups have been set up and we are focusing on recovery plans to sustain services following the crisis.

Moving forward generally we will:

- continue to change and adapt the way we work. We are currently looking at how we structure our services moving forward, making sure people can access us as much as possible on a seven day a week basis. We are finding that more and more tenants are using on line services and are happy to communicate in this way;
- further develop our modernisation plans for some services e.g. less building-based services, far more agile working;
- require our workforce to be flexible and adaptive in the long term in the event of future uncertainties; and
- build on the flexibility and adaptability staff have shown during this period to create new opportunities and experiences to further develop;

On a more service specific level we will:

- implement plans to provide additional support, moving to better quality temporary accommodation and additional provision of permanent accommodation.
- prioritize getting empty voids back into use;
- plan for the impact when evictions start up again, especially for private renters;
- expand digital platforms so we can engage with our tenants of all ages;
- start as many CHS+ improvement programmes as possible to aid economic recovery, with the appropriate risk mitigation measures in place that protect our tenants, contractors and staff;
- ensure, over the next six to nine months, that as many Council new build sites as possible start on site. We currently have over 10 sites that we are developing to planning and tender stage. This will again help to stimulate the local economy by creating local job in construction and the supply chain.
- continue to embrace all external funding opportunities; and
- look to purchase suitable properties that have become empty in our town centres due to the pandemic and convert them to residential apartments and homes. This will help our town centres recover and also prevent economic decline and disrepair.

7. What lessons have we learnt?

- Digital solutions will play an ever-increasing role in shaping what we do. Communication has improved significantly, through effective use of virtual technology and going forward, we need to get the right balance between virtual and 'face to face' contact, to make best use of time;
- Staff Resilience has been remarkable during this unprecedented time, but we are seeing, understandably, general fatigue across services and fear regarding the future. We are aware of the need to ensure that staff access supervision, support, and occupational health interventions where necessary;

- Improved collaboration within the council and with external organisations. Attendance at multi agency meetings has improved and regular governance forums have enabled decisions to be made quickly, and identified risks responded to swiftly;
- We have all had to change and adapt the way we work, and staff have been flexible and resilient to ensure that our essential services continue to be delivered. Those who use our services have also demonstrated resilience, patience and understanding during this very challenging time; and
- The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to work innovatively and we will capitalise on this to continuously improve services. We have inevitably learnt a huge amount during the first wave, which stands us in very good stead to cope with the current second wave. All our processes are in place to manage the various scenarios, so we are confident that we will be able to learn the lessons and manage the challenges ahead together.

To consider and comment on:

1. The Homes and Safer Communities Division's response to COVID