

Report No.
HPR2020/052

London Borough of Bromley

PART ONE - PUBLIC

Decision Maker: **RENEWAL, RECREATION AND HOUSING POLICY
DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date: **Wednesday 16 December 2020**

Decision Type: Non-Urgent – Non-Executive Non-Key
For Information Only

Title: **HOUSING COVID RESPONSE UPDATE**

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Ward: All Wards

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 To provide an overview of the work undertaken by the Housing Department in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
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2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 Members of the Committee are asked to note and where appropriate comment on the contents of this report.

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children

1. Summary of Impact: The Council has ensured that statutory services and support have been maintained and residents supported during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
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Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy
 2. BBB Priority: Children and Young People Excellent Council Safe Bromley Supporting Independence Healthy Bromley
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: No Cost
 2. Ongoing costs: Not Applicable
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Operational Housing
 4. Total current budget for this head: £7,649k + £646k specific COVID grants
 5. Source of funding: 2020/21 Revenue Budget, Next Steps Accommodation Programme Grant, Rough Sleepers Initiative Grant & COVID Winter Grant
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Personnel

1. Number of staff (current and additional): N/A
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: N/A
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: N/A – For information only
 2. Call-in: N/A
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Procurement

1. Summary of Procurement Implications: N/A – For information only
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected):
More than 5000 households approach with housing difficulties which could lead to homelessness each year.
There are currently approximately 1740 households in temporary accommodation.
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? No
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: N/A

3. COMMENTARY

- 3.1 Staff in Housing Planning and Regeneration responded swiftly to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; ensuring that all frontline emergency services remained operational and that resources were diverted to those most in need of critical assistance.
- 3.2 Whilst a small number of officers have continued to provide in-person assistance at the Civic Centre for those presenting in an emergency the majority of staff have been working at home since March 2020. Services have quickly adapted, and a significant amount of work has been undertaken in order to keep in touch with clients in order to support them and to ensure that they are able to access support and essential services.
- 3.3 We worked jointly with colleagues providing supported accommodation; such as Orchard & Shipman, Evolve, Hestia, Depaul and Bromley Croydon Womens Aid to review the needs of residents; moving those that were considered to be at high risk or providing additional support to those identified as needing to shield. We provided assistance and guidance, including input from Public Health, to ensure that schemes were able to operate in a "Covid Safe" manner and ensured that where it was needed each organisation was able to access additional financial support in order to provide for additional staffing etc. It should also be noted that many of these organisations provided additional support and resources independently without seeking reimbursement from the Council and their response to the initial lockdown should be commended. In order to ensure that stability is maintained across these services the Council has utilised the powers granted to it in order to extend each of the contracts with these providers. Not only will this allow for the best possible service to be provided to residents but will also allow for the markets to re-stabilise.
- 3.4 A particular challenge for the service has been the additional assistance given to assist those effected by rough sleeping as part of the government's "Everyone In" initiative and the work that has followed that. It was crucial that we assisted this vulnerable group quickly to safeguard their wellbeing and prevent the spread of the virus. During "Everyone In" a total of 92 people who were identified as sleeping rough or at risk of rough sleeping were accommodated. 56 are currently still in emergency accommodation and officers continue to work hard to provide longer term accommodation and support for this group. At one point there were over 30 of this group housed in commercial hotels as an emergency measure, that is now down to 2.
- 3.5 Across London more than 5000 households have been accommodated under "Everyone In". Under the amended Code of Guidance Councils have been tasked with ensuring that these households are supported into settled accommodation. This has understandably led to concerns about the impact this will have on the private rented sector as there is insufficient social housing available to meet this increased demand. Through London Councils' Bromley and the other London boroughs have jointly agreed maximum incentive levels that will be paid to secure accommodation so as not to inflate the market. The working group also ensure that information is readily shared in order to identify poor practice and accommodation which does not meet minimum safe standards for accommodation.
- 3.6 Working jointly with colleagues from Public Health, MHCLG and Thamesreach we formed a Rough Sleepers Response group to provide critical oversight and additional support to those brought in under "Everyone In". This has allowed for a clear referral and rehousing pathway to ensure any person or agency who has knowledge of a rough sleeper can refer them through to our services for assistance and for enhanced services to be allocated to those clients with the most complex needs, with services working together to ensure that timely, joint interventions are put in place.
- 3.7 When officers carried out the rough sleepers headcount in November; an annual exercise which sees staff from housing, the police, charity workers and volunteers go out in the early hours of

the morning to visit common bedding down sites and areas where there have been reports of rough sleepers we thankfully only identified 1 rough sleeper. They, unfortunately, are well known to the service and have not accepted repeated offers of assistance, but we continue to try to help.

- 3.8 There are now over 1740 households in temporary accommodation; this is a net increase of 21 per month which is up against previous projections but which is not unexpected given the impact felt as a result of the pandemic. Were it not for the additional pressures brought about by the pandemic the number of households in temporary accommodation would be keeping pace with the projections which have been previously reported. In addition to the increased number of rough sleepers we have also seen an increase in parental evictions and relationship breakdowns. Rent arrears are increasing and whilst evictions have been temporarily halted we are likely to see a surge of eviction action as we move through into 2021.
- 3.9 We are concerned about the number of families who are facing financial hardship as a result of job losses and reductions in income. Officers in Housing have been undertaking pre-emptive work through our Money Advice, Housing Management and Housing Options teams to intervene early and attempt to bring any increasing arrears down before they become unmanageable and run the risk of leading to eviction action being commenced. As well as reaching financial arrangements we have also sought to make best use of Discretionary Housing Payments to support households.
- 3.10 Our two Visiting Officers have made over 1185 'virtual visits', keeping in contact with clients in temporary accommodation via telephone and email in order to ensure that they are ok and are able to access any support that is needed.
- 3.11 Alongside other officers in the Council we have worked to secure 50 ex-housing association homes that were earmarked for disposal and which will now be used as permanent homes for households on our Housing Register.
- 3.12 Working closely with the MHCLG, officers applied for Next Steps Accommodation and Rough Sleeper Initiative Funding and received a combined grant award of £494,904. This has enabled us to meet the increased demands for accommodation as well as allowing access to more support and a wider variety of essential items to help those most in need. We are working closely with partner agencies to ensure that the grant is fully utilised in order to achieve the agreed delivery plan.
- 3.13 Bromley agreed to re-open its Housing Revenue Account (HRA) in July 2020 and 3 sites have been approved for Planning Permission; Burnt Ash Lane (Bromley) – 25 new homes, Bushell Way (Chislehurst) – 25 new homes, Anerley Road (Anerley) – 10. These are exciting developments which will see Bromley innovatively using otherwise under-utilised land such as car parks and former care homes to provide good quality, affordable homes for households owed a rehousing duty by the Local Authority. All three sites are on track for completion in accordance with the delivery plans previously reported to Members and feasibility studies are progressing in order to inform the next stages of the process.

4. IMPACT ON VULNERABLE ADULTS AND CHILDREN

- 4.1 This Pandemic has brought additional difficulties for all of our clients. In maintaining the service and ensuring that we remain in contact with clients and provided not only basic but enhanced support to those that need it we have been able to maintain our statutory functions.

4.2 Bromley received £754k under the Covid Winter Grant Scheme; £151k of which will be utilised by Housing to provide assistance for vulnerable households buy food, pay utility bills and provide warm winter clothing for children.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Housing budgets is currently estimated at around £1.9m, which mainly relates to additional/increased costs of nightly paid accommodation, and delays in the achievement of budgeted savings.

5.2 These costs are partly covered by specific grant allocations totalling £646k. The Council has also received non-specific COVID-19 grants which can fund some of the remaining costs; however as set out in the Budget Monitoring report that was scrutinised by the Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS Committee on 18th November 2020, it is currently estimated that there will be a net cost to the Council of around £12m as a result of the pandemic.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 This report sets out how the Council has responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic in terms of the Council's housing and homelessness duties under the Housing Act 1985 and the Housing Act 1996, Part 7. As part of performing these duties the Council has received and distributed certain grants as permitted within the grant awards. The Council has also re-focused service provision including extending service contracts in compliance with procurement law and the Contract Procedure Rules.

6.2 The demand for homeless accommodation has continued to increase following the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act 2018, as the duties towards homeless households are expanded. The Act placed a duty on councils to try to prevent homelessness and a duty on public bodies to refer people at risk of homelessness, flagging those most vulnerable to homelessness and rough sleeping so they could receive support

6.3 The Homelessness Code provides statutory guidance on how to interpret and apply the homelessness legislation and contains details of good practice that local authorities should adopt. It is not legally binding but local authorities are required to have regard to it. The Code has recently been updated to add further categories to those in priority need to reflect the impact of the coronavirus pandemic including people sleeping rough who should be carefully assessed, including their age and underlying health conditions.

6.4 Best Value Duty Guidance and case law under the Local Government Act 1999 is applicable where authorities are reviewing service provision and making arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way its functions are exercised, an authority must regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness in considering overall value, including economic, environmental and social value.

Non-Applicable Sections:	POLICY IMPLICATIONS / PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS / PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	