



## **Scrutiny Panel**

**18 August 2020**

**Report of** Chief Executive, Colchester Borough Homes **Author** Gareth Mitchell  
Matt Armstrong

**Title** **Review of the Colchester Borough Homes Recovery Plan (COVID-19)**

**Wards affected** All

### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report details the approach taken to COVID-19 Recovery by Colchester Borough Homes and reports on progress made to date.
- 1.2 It provides the framework and methodology used to develop the recovery of services, highlighting in particular the close alignment to the Council's recovery programme.
- 1.3 At the time of writing this report the majority of services have resumed under COVID-19 Secure arrangements. The recovery stage will complete on the 31<sup>st</sup> August and will move into a transformation stage, building on the recovery of services into a new way of working, ensuring the services CBH provide are delivered in a safe and efficient way.

### **2. Action Required**

- 2.1 To review the Colchester Borough Homes approach to recovery from COVID-19 and ensure it is aligned with the strategic direction and principles of the Council's recovery programme.

### **3. Reason for Scrutiny**

- 3.1 To ensure the approach taken in recovering services (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 to date) since the COVID-19 restrictions were put in place by Government are sound and aligned to the Council's strategic direction, principles and objectives.
- 3.2 To ensure the transformation phase (1<sup>st</sup> September 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) as detailed in this report is sound and in line with the Council's recovery plan, contributing towards its strategic objectives.

### **4. Background Information**

4.1 Colchester Borough Homes triggered its Business Continuity Plan on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 reverting to providing a critical service provision only, which included:

1. Daily contact (via telephone) with all tenants in Sheltered Accommodation
2. An Emergency Repairs Service
3. Maintaining a customer services phoneline
4. Maintaining a housing options and homelessness service remotely

All offices were closed and every office-based worker was able to work from home, partly assisted by a decision made previously in our working smarter project which allocated laptops, mobile phones and data to every employee. The move to working from home went very smoothly.

The government guidance for Landlords restricted service of notices on tenants in order to reduce the threat of homelessness and limited how homes could be let. General tenancy enforcement has been restricted to protect tenants affected by COVID-19.

4.2 The overall response was led by the CBH Chief Executive, who has participated in Council response management meetings throughout the pandemic and has led the Housing Cell under the Council's emergency arrangements. The CBH Director of Operations led the operational response and the Director of Business Improvement took the organisational planning lead. The corporate management team met three times per week to ensure quick responses to government advice. Board members were updated weekly via MS Teams with Board and Committee meetings remaining in place, being held virtually.

## **5. Recovery**

5.1 Recovery planning started immediately, and the Director of Business Improvement attended the Council's recovery planning steering group to ensure the plan fed into the overall objectives of the Council.

5.2 The recovery project aimed to not just recover services but use this opportunity to transform the services CBH deliver and "build back better". The structure identifies 3 key streams to recover which aligned to the Council's recovery plan:

- Our Organisation
- Business
- Customer and Community

The 3 key streams were underpinned by the organisation's 6 strategic delivery plans:

- Our Organisation – People Plan and the Leadership Plan
- Business – Business Development Plan and the Value for Money & Technology Plan

- Customer and Community – Customer Plan and Community Plan

The structure at appendix A follows the Agile project management methodology and details the project owners, project managers and how our recovery feeds into the Council's recovery plan.

### 5.3 **Project Objectives**

The project objectives were:

1. To reinstate service delivery taking account of new risks to ensure health and safety of customers, staff and contractors.
2. To use the recovery plan as a business transformation opportunity and retain the beneficial new ways of working.
3. To make best use of technology in the workplace and in delivery of services.
4. To strengthen our Business Continuity Plan to ensure minimum disruption for future outbreaks.
5. To use our Community Plan to continue and develop local partnerships.

### 5.4 **Project Principles**

The Corporate Management Team created a set of principles which were applied in the planning of recovering services. This ensured that we captured and kept the good working practices established during the pandemic, used the opportunity to transform the way we manage and deliver our services; and ensured our recovery aligned itself with the Council's recovery plan. There is rationale detailed behind each principle to clarify the meaning of each one at appendix B.

- i. Use technology to its full potential
- ii. Build back better
- iii. Develop our agile approach to work
- iv. Use customer insight to inform service recovery
- v. One company approach
- vi. Set achievable plans and targets
- vii. Ensure plans are flexible and sustainable

### 5.5 **Communications and Engagement Plan**

A Communications Plan was established to ensure consistent messages were communicated to all stakeholders - channels were established so regular messaging and updates were achievable and remained aligned with the Council's recovery plan. A summary of the communications channels and methods are as follows:

- Residents updated frequently via post, social media, News and views magazine and our website

- Tenants COVID-19 leaflet (for home visits) and videos via website, email and in person
- Board update to members fortnightly (previously weekly) via MS Teams
- Portfolio Holder (and Ward Councilors) update weekly via briefing and email
- Staff Bulletin weekly via email
- Live CEO/Directors' broadcast to staff (including recording to watch back) fortnightly via MS Teams

Internally the corporate management team met three times a week during the response phase (now reduced to weekly) and agenda items are reserved at the majority of meetings for COVID-19 and recovery updates.

## **6. Our Approach**

6.1 Whilst reacting daily to government advice during March and April, the management team identified the pressures within the business and concentrated time and resource in support of the service heads. From an establishment of 213 staff, only 9 were unable to work due to shielding, or childcare issues, where their primary role was field based. These staff were re-deployed into activities that could be done from home such as calling vulnerable tenants. The remainder of the business worked from home with the exception of those staff delivering the critical service provision as detailed in item 4.1. Daily updates were provided to the management team on the workforce status, allowing swift redeployment to react to pressures on the ground. Only three members of staff were off work with COVID-19 symptoms over the period, two returning after 14 days and one remained off for 3 months due to an underlying health condition. A large part of the organisation was able to remain delivering their primary role due to the ability of the organisation to work in an agile way.

### **6.2 Project List**

A project list was established listing all sub-projects, initiatives and actions required to get services resumed. The recovery plan was outcome based, the outcomes being listed on the project plan to allow the programme team to measure progress and success. Start and end dates were listed for coordination with other recovery streams. Risks were identified and mitigated against and equality issues arising out of disrupted, or partially resumed services, were identified and mitigated. Resource and budget requirements were identified as part of the planning, allowing the programme team to redeploy staff where required and manage the budgets in resuming services.

### **6.3 Lessons Learnt**

An exercise was conducted towards the end of May with the Corporate Management Team to capture the lessons learnt during the pandemic and has been kept updated as services resumed. This allows sharing of good working practices across departments and a consistent approach to new ways of working.

### **6.4 Tenant Consultation**

It was identified early on that the success of any service resuming was that tenants were listened to and were a part of the transformation. Some statutory services didn't require consultation and were resumed quickly, but where the next phase of recovery has identified better ways of delivering, managing, communicating and monitoring services, we will consult with tenants to ensure it works for them. Consultation methods will include pilots, telephone conversations, feedback and online surveys.

## 6.5 Change Management

Resuming and in many cases transforming services requires staff to be brought into the new ways of working and delivering services. The project team are using the John Kotter change management methodology which has 8 steps to ensure the change is successful and stays in place once a service is resumed. The 8 steps run in sequence and project managers were required to satisfy themselves each step has been completed before moving onto the next. As a management team we recognised staff had change forced onto them during this pandemic and that it is vital they are fully behind the new ways of working before we implement them.



## 6.6 Recovery Dashboard

A recovery dashboard was created which detailed the status of each service that was being resumed. A Red, Amber, Green indicator was used to quickly identify the service status. This dashboard was shared internally and a website version, with less detail, is available for our residents.

## 7. Recovery Progress

CBH has now resumed all its services, some in full, others under social distancing measures where required. All backlogs and waiting lists have been addressed and the resumption of services has been designed to deliver the annual programme and budgets within the remainder of the financial year. Some of the key achievements are listed below.

## 7.1 **Our Organisation**

### **a. Preparing our office accommodation for staff to return**

The CBH pods in Rowan House have been prepared to allow staff to adhere to social distancing, there is space for 33 staff at any one time. Additional cleaning is in place and a booking-in system allows numbers to be managed and the ability to report under track and trace. A space at the Greenstead Local Housing Office (GLHO) has also been prepared to conduct customer interviews when required. The remainder of GLHO and the Gosbecks Road office remain closed.

### **b. To implement new working practices**

Guidance has been written (based on government guidelines) for staff working at home, in the office, on the estates and within a tenant's home (with and without PPE in case of known COVID-19 cases). New working practices to ensure services can continue to be delivered have been developed using technology and communication has improved.

### **c. To ensure governance arrangements are fit for purpose**

All Board and Committee meetings occur virtually via MS Teams and the scheme of delegation was updated to accommodate quick decision making. Public input (voice your view) is enabled via the CBH website and social media.

### **d. Ensuring the health & safety of our staff and customers**

Individual risk assessments have been developed in particular for staff in the clinically extremely vulnerable and clinically vulnerable groups and all BAME staff, to support their ongoing working arrangements, or their return to work. Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) have been developed for all activities within a tenant's home and contractor RAMS have been checked and approved prior to their return to site. Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments are being completed for staff working from home and appropriate equipment provided to staff to enable safe home working.

## 7.2 **Business**

### **a. Housing Revenue Account and General Fund projects (inc. new projects)**

The Design and Construction Management team has worked throughout the lockdown due to much of its project work being in the planning and design phase. The Mercury Theatre project remained open (the only Arts Council-funded project to do so) and work continued under the government guidelines. Recent procurements for the garage site housing development projects have gathered local contractor interest with an appointment imminent.

### **b. Resuming the Capital Programme**

The Capital Programme restarting was an opportunity to assist our local contractors to become operational again and to stimulate the local economy, which was one of the Council's economic recovery plan objectives. The work has been carefully re-programmed to ensure the work is completed within year. Tenant Liaison Officers have communicated with tenants to explain the procedures put in place for their

safety, this has been well received with an approximated 80% take-up of capital works.

Many of our local contractors, who had furloughed their staff, were apprehensive about restarting their business. We listened to their concerns and provided the reassurance of consistent work, support in being COVID-19 compliant and assistance in planning work programmes. Staff resolved issues quickly and efficiently so contractors could be confident no barriers would be encountered when restarting work. This collaborative working aims to ensure the capital programme is completed on time.

**c. Recovering the repairs backlog**

There were 774 repairs in the system at the time of lockdown, all have now either been completed, no longer required or booked-in to be completed by the 14<sup>th</sup> August. All trades (including sub-contracted trades) are operational and a full repairs service will be in place by the 5<sup>th</sup> August.

**d. Compliance**

CBH has proactively managed and monitored compliance against the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) consumer standards, has reported compliance status monthly to the RSH via CBC and remains in a good position versus the national picture for housing providers. At the time of writing there are 53 outstanding gas services due to tenants shielding or access issues, and electrical testing and full fire risk assessments have resumed. All other compliance has remained in date throughout the pandemic.

**e. Making the most of Technology**

Technology solutions identified throughout the business in order to adhere to social distancing have included electronic signatures, MS Teams video conference training and the use of electronic forms. New IT equipment has been procured and distributed, mobile handsets are being trialed and ways to improve customer contact are being investigated further.

### **7.3 Customer & Community**

**a. Our response to the Homeless 'Everybody in' government instruction**

On 26 March 2020 Luke Hall MP, Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing, wrote to all Local Authorities asking them to safeguard as many homeless people as possible to protect their health and prevent COVID-19 transmission. The letter requested that everyone who was sleeping rough, or at risk of being homeless, be accommodated by the end of that week.

At the same time hostels, night shelters with shared accommodation and other accommodation providers closed alongside all other non-essential businesses.

Over one week the Rough Sleeper Outreach team accommodated 38 people who had been referred to CBH as rough sleeping. Since 26 March, 57 rough sleepers have been provided with emergency accommodation.

Supporting a number of rough sleepers has not been without its challenges, however the partnerships and local support has collectively helped us to sustain people in the emergency accommodation. Our local partnership with Essex County Council and the Public Health team has been invaluable to support this process, and our local multi-agency group has provided a range of support services. Our Rough Sleeper Outreach team and support network includes a Mental Health Social Worker, NHS-funded nurses who are able to provide regular health checks using Beacon House as a base, and a drug and alcohol specialist seconded from Open Road.

For many people in the rough sleeper community this has been a welcome reprieve and has provided an opportunity to have a steady income and access to support with drug and alcohol issues. Others have improved their health and wellbeing and some have returned to live with family and friends.

Recovery work has focused on moving these individuals out of the emergency accommodation and into permanent housing with appropriate housing-related support. This work is ongoing and as at the 30<sup>th</sup> July, 21 rough sleepers remain in emergency accommodation out of the original 57 accommodated.

#### **b. Supporting our Customers**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant to many, particularly to those who are on a low income, or dependent on benefits.

CBH have maintained contact with tenants, particularly those who are vulnerable and those who have rent arrears. Regular rent statements and letters to advise on arrears balances have continued to be sent and those in arrears have been encouraged to make contact for support, particularly those who have needed to claim welfare benefits.

Wherever possible agreements for repayment of missed rent payments, or an agreed reduced payment schedule have been made, reprofiling rent collection through to the end of March 2021. Where a discretionary housing benefit payment has been available, our team have supported tenants to access it. We have continued to work in partnership with Christians Against Poverty debt advisors (CAP) and Citizens Advice, who provide a “fast track” service for CBH tenants.

Where families require intensive support to assist them with tenancy matters and debt, we work with Catch 22’s Family Support Service, who can access additional support.

#### **c. Viewing and letting properties**

We made changes to our process as a result of COVID-19 and have made the decision to retain these changes to improve the customer journey.



We now arrange viewings and sign the applicant up to the tenancy at the same time where possible. We are currently trialing an online signature app that will enable the lettings process to be fully automated.

Gateway to Homechoice is online which enables us to send the conditions of tenancy to applicants before viewing and complete the sign up at the property without any further appointment, which has reduced the number of touch points during the process for the applicant.

**d. Restoring community safety and community confidence**

We have been proactive and carried out 4000 welfare calls to potentially vulnerable tenants to ensure that they are coping well and we also increased our communication to our tenants, through our social media channels, our website, our tenants newsletter and letters to ensure that they are not missing new government information which may benefit them.

Anti-Social Behaviour reports have increased during the Pandemic and we have been keeping in regular contact with our customers throughout. We have served Community Protection Warnings and Notices to help encourage positive behaviours, we have also used partial closure orders and full closure orders on high level drug activity and related ASB to support our communities.

**e. To maintain rent collection**

During March and April there was a considerable reduction in rent collected, although the income levels are beginning to recover. At the end of June 95.03% rent had been collected compared to 95.40% at the same time last year. A 0.36% reduction in income – around £27,000.

Most of the rent accounts with increased arrears are those tenants who already had a high arrears balance and continued to struggle to make payments. The number of cases with an arrear of more than £1,000 has increased from 63 at year end to 102; with 18 tenants now owing more than £2,000. The highest arrears case now owes £3,426, and currently has a suspended Court Order.

**8. Next steps**

- 8.1 The next stage for the organisation is the Transformation Phase which will cover the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020 and the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. It is expected new challenges will arise during this period as restrictions are lifted such as the impact of the furlough scheme ending, the eviction ban ending, the pausing of Operation Shield and the possibility of a national recession. There is also winter planning to consider, and any potential impacts from Brexit and local outbreaks/lockdowns related to COVID-19.
- 8.2 A PESTEL and SWOT analysis was conducted by the management team and we are currently in the process of agreeing a project structure for the transformation stage. The

projects will be incorporated into the organisation's strategic delivery plans, led by a senior manager and progress reported monthly.

## **9. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications**

- 9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed on the impact of CBH's response to COVID-19 upon customers and staff. The outcome of this identified that older and disabled customers were more vulnerable to the negative impact of moving to critical service provision only. This was mitigated by being proactive in contacting all of our vulnerable customers to conduct welfare checks, ensuring access to food and medication and signposting customers to support and befriending services. This related to 1500 tenants over the age of 70 and 1300 tenants (under the age of 70) with a physical or mobility disability.
- 9.2 Tenants with a learning disability were also contacted for a welfare check as the anti-social behaviour team noted an increase in the exploitation of vulnerable tenants and have been working closely with Essex Police to counter potential impacts of drug-related activity.

## **10. Strategic Plan References**

- 10.1 The recovery plan's 3 key streams link directly to the Colchester Borough Homes Strategic Plan as set out in 5.2. There has also been close coordination and alignment with the Colchester Borough Council Recovery programme, including through CBH senior management membership of the CBC Recovery Steering Group

## **11. Consultation**

- 11.1 During the recovery of services customer insight was used to plan and deliver services under COVID-19 restrictions. This was predominately gathered through analysis of the calls received by the call centre and communication with partnering organisations. A Residents Panel was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> June to consult residents on the CBH response to COVID-19.
- 11.2 Further consultation with residents will be conducted during the transformation stage to ensure the resumption of services is inclusive and meets expectations.

## **12. Publicity Considerations**

- 12.1 Regular updates to our customers via letter, email, social media and our website has kept them up to date on the progress made on the recovery plan. A dashboard showing the status of the services we deliver is on the CBH website and can be found [here](#).

## **13. Financial implications**

- 13.1 The majority of the services CBH deliver are funded through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) where the impact of COVID-19 is directly linked to the rent collection (see item 7.3(e)) which is managed through the 30 year HRA Business Plan. This means the impact is different to that on the General Fund (GF) where the effect is much more pronounced. Services funded through the GF, such as Housing Solutions and homelessness have received some additional government funding during the pandemic. Whilst rent collection has been affected, arrears within the stock remain a debt that will be recovered over time.

#### **14. Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications**

- 14.1 CBH made over 4000 welfare calls to potentially vulnerable tenants to ensure that they were coping once restrictions were put in place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March and we have continued regular contact with our sheltered tenants. Our housing management system was adapted to enable tenants to report if they were isolating or had COVID-19 symptoms so we could tailor our service delivery to individual circumstances.
- 14.2 Guidance has been written, recorded and communicated to our staff and contractors to provide COVID-19 safe procedures for our customers. We will respect our tenants' individual requirements and can take additional precautions when entering their homes.
- 14.3 Our anti-social behaviour team has remained operational throughout the pandemic, providing reassurance to our customers that poor behaviour is challenged in order to provide a safe environment for everyone to live in. The lockdown period has seen an increase in reports of serious nuisance and crime and we have worked closely with the Police to deal with matters using civil enforcement.

#### **15. Health and Safety Implications**

- 15.1 Health and safety of both our customers and staff have been at the forefront of our decision making and throughout the pandemic. CBH have followed government advice, resuming services as restrictions were lifted.
- 15.2 As services resumed risk assessments were carried out for all aspects of work and where contractors were delivering works, risk assessments and method statements were required to be updated on how the work was to be delivered.
- 15.3 Where compliance could not be met due to COVID-19 restrictions a risk-based approach was taken in accordance with government and the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) guidance, in particular around gas servicing.
- 15.4 CBH have been proactive in promoting staff health and welfare by providing guidance on working from home and 'protecting your mental health'. A wellbeing survey was conducted on the 4<sup>th</sup> May which showed a positive result on the measures put in place for staff such as regular communication updates, regular contact with managers, wellbeing challenges and support in enabling a home working environment.

## **16. Risk Management Implications**

- 16.1 Risks were identified within the recovery plan and mitigated in the planning of resuming services. The corporate risk register was kept updated and previous mitigations already in place were stress tested for effectiveness.

## **17. Environmental and Sustainability Implications**

- 17.1 The recovery of services has created an opportunity to transform the way we work which is the focus on the next phase. Environmental impacts have and will continue to be considered as part of the resumption and transformation of service delivery. Most prominent is the reduction in car travel and the efficiencies realised through agile working.
- 17.2 A key element of the Council's economic recovery is the stimulus of the local economy. Following the Cabinet decision on the 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, proposals for accelerating the capital investment programme have been submitted to the Council which include energy saving projects.

## **18. Appendices**

- Appendix A - Recovery Plan Project Structure
- Appendix B - Project Principles