

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Chief Officer – Citizen, Culture and Facilities

Council: 23 June 2021

Subject: Delivery of services during the public health emergency

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to bring key information before Council following the motion approved at Council in May 2021 on the organisation's performance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1** It is recommended that Council notes the content of the report.

3. Background

- 3.1** At the May 2021 full Council meeting Elected Members approved the following Motion:

MOTION - COUNCIL SERVICES – COUNCILLOR DAVID MCBRIDE

This Council acknowledges the challenges faced by all our staff in delivering effective services to residents during the public health emergency.

A concern highlighted by residents has been the difficulty in contacting the council, this has included the phones going unanswered; and for those who do get through they can find themselves being passed from pillar to post with no resolution.

In addition, tenants who have submitted enquires via email, have also highlighted that they have been unlikely to receive a response from council staff.

There are issues of concern around claims that Occupational Therapy assessments now have waiting lists over a year long. This service is vital to vulnerable adults who have suffered health issues such as a stroke which has impacted on their mobility and independence. Without an OT assessment, they are unable to receive the aids and adaptation needed to allow them to live comfortably at home.

Another concern raised by residents are the delays for those who are awaiting notification about council housing or a move to another tenancy. It appears that these families have been significantly impacted during COVID. An example of this is that tenants are experiencing stress and anxiety as they have often all been stuck at home during the pandemic in housing which is overcrowded and have nowhere else to go to causing a detrimental effect on their mental health.

This council is also concerned about the backlog in housing repairs. In particular tenants want to know how long it will take to clear the existing emergency repairs; they also want a timeline of when outstanding routine repairs that are already in the system will be completed; and finally, they want to know when the council will open up to taking on new repairs which they have been unable to report over the last year.

Given the above concerns, this Council calls for a full report to be presented to the June Council meeting for consideration by elected members.

- 3.2** In May 2021 each Service Committee of the Council heard from Chief Officers on levels of performance in 2020/21 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Elected Members also noted the Chief Officer Delivery Plans that outlined activity that would be taken forward in 2021/22.

4. Main Issues

- 4.1** The concerns raised in the motion will be addressed in sections below, followed by reference to wider responses by the Council during this period.

Contacting the Council via Contact Centre, Website and Social Media

- 4.2** In advance of the national lockdown in March 2020 proactive steps were taken to ensure the Council's Contact Centre team of 14 employees had received the necessary IT and equipment to work remotely. This foresight enabled the team to offer a continuous delivery of service immediately after the lockdown was announced and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This was not the case across Scotland with some Councils offering an emergency-only service in the first few months. Working largely from their homes, the team undertook all their normal duties as well as received training to rapidly take on additional workload such as responding to the National Assistance Helpline, providing access to Self-Isolation Support Grants, and generally supporting the most vulnerable in our community.
- 4.3** Operating a Contact Centre from home environment during a pandemic creates unavoidable challenges for employees such as isolation, intermittent loss of network access, new workstyles, barriers to knowledge transfer within the team, as well as Covid-19 related absences. In addition the role of a Contact Centre operative is reasonably specialised, requiring extensive knowledge of a number of Council ICT systems, as well as various service areas (for example, Waste, Housing, and Council Tax). These factors made it difficult to train up additional employees to be redeployed into this in-demand area, so staffing levels were largely maintained at pre-pandemic levels. Despite this the existing employees delivered a key and valued service to West Dunbartonshire's citizens.
- 4.4** Across 2021/22 the Council's Contact Centre answered an average of 78% of all calls received. This is lower than normal performance which sits above 90%, and reflects the challenges highlighted at 4.3. It also takes account of the surge in calls experienced during July to November 2020 after Council Tax reminders were issued and residents sought to defer or alter payments. And finally it recognises that during the pandemic calls from residents have typically been more complex or less easily resolved and that

has meant the call durations have increased. The net effect of these factors was that fewer calls could be answered per day by the team and so residents were either required to wait longer to be answered than normal, or choose to end their call and try at a different time.

- 4.5** The total number of calls to the Contact Centre general enquiries number team in 2020/21 was 47,566. Across the year, the average queue was 3 minutes 35 seconds. Further detail on the Contact Centre performance is included in Appendix 1.
- 4.6** Elected Members will be familiar with the Council's resident satisfaction survey. This involves an independent firm calling 100 different residents from West Dunbartonshire every month (1200 per year) to test how content they are with Council services. This survey illustrated that resident satisfaction with the Contact Centre increased in 2020/21 to 86% compared with 84% in 2019/20.
- 4.7** Another important measurement of satisfaction is the number of complaints received. During 2020/21 12 complaints were received in relation to general answering of phones. This compared to six complaints in 2019/20. While this was an increase of six complaints over the year this was not deemed by CCF management to indicate any evidence of a service issue within the Contact Centre.
- 4.8** Citizen Services is committed to continuous improvement, and also recognises that resident expectations are increasing as Scotland moves out of lockdown. Moving forward the management team is working to re-establish Contact Centre performance levels back to those achieved pre-Covid-19. This project will involve working with a range of Council services which the Contact Centre acts as the frontline support for. Activity will focus on ensuring the adapted work processes put in place by service areas to cope with Covid-19 disruption are reviewed to further support residents. In addition, as the pandemic recedes the return to more normal working arrangements for Council services will also lead to improvements.
- 4.9** The Citizen, Culture and Facilities (CCF) Delivery Plan for 2021/22 presented at Corporate Services Committee in May 2021 also referenced a number of improvements and commitments in relation to the Contact Centre environment. These included reviewing the telephony system upgrade in December 2019 and exploring further improvements alongside our ICT colleagues such as call recording and call wait time announcements. The team will also explore the transfer of the Emergency Out of Hours telephone numbers to this new technology. In the Quality Standards section CCF retained the target to answer 90% of all telephone calls to the Contact Centre within 2 minutes. Elected Members will be updated on the progress of these actions at Corporate Services Committee in November 2021 when the six-monthly performance information is shared.
- 4.10** Citizen Services also operates the Housing Repairs Contact Centre. This faced the same challenges as the Council Contact Centre listed at 4.3 but once again was able to maintain services throughout the year. In total 33,518 calls were made to the Housing Repairs Contact Centre, of which 80% were answered. The average queue time was 5 minutes and 20

seconds. In recent months, as Building Services re-open for non-emergency repairs, call volumes have increased by 23% per month compared to the 2020/21 average, and this is leading to longer waiting times. This is the result of the backlog of non-emergency repairs from the Covid-19 lockdown that need to be added to the system and completed by Building Services. Once this surge in demand is resolved the Housing Contact Centre performance should improve once again.

- 4.11** Citizen Services also operates the Council's website and this platform helped residents undertake a record number of online transactions in 2020/21 compared to previous years, as follows:

Year	Online Transactions	Per month
2018/19	35,251	2,938
2019/20	41,929	3,494
2020/21	43,032	3,586

The Council also saw the number of residents who are registered to use its online myaccount services rise to 23,363. This gives them access to a host of services such as reporting missed bin collections, reporting road issues, and amending Council Tax direct debit payments.

- 4.12** The monthly satisfaction survey asks residents how content they are with the Council website. During 2020/21 this measure dropped by 3% but still retains a very high level of satisfaction at 87%.
- 4.13** Social Media is also a key vehicle for the Council to engage with its residents. During 2020/2021 our audience increased by 3,000 individuals across our platforms. In total the team issued 1,400 posts on Facebook and Twitter during this time, and these led to 1,648,603 engagements on Facebook. More than 52,000 comments were received via Facebook from citizens. In total 16,000 queries from citizens were responded to over social media.
- 4.14** The monthly satisfaction survey asks residents how content they are with how the Council communicates with them. In 2020/21 satisfaction on this measure increased from 63% to 75% based on responses.

Tenant Emails

- 4.15** Housing Operations and Tenancy Management was maintained as an essential service throughout Covid-19 restrictions. Inevitably, some core functions were delivered or prioritised differently and some service elements suspended, such as routine estate management visits.
- 4.16** During the periods of lockdown, the housing service made thousands of additional outbound calls focused on tenant welfare and assisted hundreds of tenants with gas, electricity and essential food expenses.
- 4.17** A number of employee issues have arisen in the course of the period since last March which have, in addition to high volumes of correspondence, resulted in unavoidable delays in responding to some phone calls or email.

An example of the challenge for our employees was trying to respond to calls at home while looking after children, or struggling with limited connectivity. We acknowledge the frustration this may have caused tenants and we are sorry for this. While complaints in this area rose from 16 in 2019/20 to 32 in 2020/21 this is seen as a performance dip caused uniquely by the pandemic, and not a reflection on the performance of the service overall.

- 4.18** Housing has also initiated a review of how the service handles communication with tenants to ensure arrangements remain suitable for more flexible working practices in future.
- 4.19** Another area where tenants may be emailing the Council is the housing repairs service. These are progressed by the Council's Central Administration Service (CAS). Management in this area has confirmed that they typically receive around 1,000 emails per month and commit to responding within 10 working days. The mailbox has been consistently managed throughout 2020/21 and has never experienced any backlogs or issues with delayed responses. There has been no breach of the 10 day turnaround during this period, and in early June 2021 the team were achieving a 'same day' completion rate on email handling.

Occupational Therapy

- 4.20** During the COVID-19 pandemic the Community Older Peoples Team (COPT) and Adult Care Team (ACT) continued to deal with urgent/critical referrals in line with government guidance. Lower priority referrals were placed on already existing waiting lists.
- 4.21** Use of Attend Anywhere and other digital platforms were developed and used by both teams, however due to the nature of the work undertaken by the specialist professionals within the teams, some face to face assessment is always required.
- 4.22** Staff shielding, sick leave, maternity leave and vacancies have further compounded waiting list length of wait during this period.
- 4.23** Initial referrals into COPT and ACT decreased at the outbreak of the pandemic however these have started to rise and are now back in line with 2019 referral levels. It has been noted that those being referred to the various specialist professionals within the teams have become physically deconditioned during periods of lockdown and are generally presenting with higher levels of complex needs.
- 4.24** Due to this deconditioning, individuals are requiring higher levels of support and/or intervention and as a result, rehabilitation programmes are taking longer to complete due to the complex nature of individuals.
- 4.25** The COPT and the ACT work with individuals to maintain their independence, enabling them to remain at home or in a homely setting for as long as possible. The teams work with individuals to reduce further deterioration and aim to prevent admission to hospital.
- 4.26** All referrals received for Occupational Therapy intervention are screened by

one of the qualified Occupational Therapists Mon-Fri through the Duty processes.

- 4.27** A triage system is in operation. For each referral received, information available on systems i.e. Carefirst and clinical portal is reviewed. Contact is also made with services involved, such as the referrer, client and carer and a decision is made regarding priority of referral.
- 4.28** Individuals experiencing difficulties with essential transfers i.e. bed, toilet and chair or where moving and handling concerns have been identified are prioritised and a duty visit carried out to provide essential equipment/information and advice.
- 4.29** All individuals referred into the service are advised of the outcome of the triage process. If placed on the waiting list they are provided with a letter from the service advising of this and providing service contact details. They are asked to make further contact with the service if their condition changes prior to being allocated a worker to carry out a full assessment.
- 4.30** During lockdown all individuals on the Occupational Therapy and Occupational Therapy Assistant waiting lists were contacted by phone twice, by a qualified Occupational Therapist, to review their difficulties and establish if their priority had changed. Where an individual's priority had changed, they were allocated to a worker who undertook an essential visit to ensure correct therapeutic intervention/provision of equipment as appropriate.
- 4.31** The table below illustrates current waiting times for Occupational Therapy, and Occupational Therapy Assistant, in both the Adult Care Team and the Older People's Team.

Occupational Therapy Waiting Lists as at 7th June 2021

Number of Weeks on Waiting List	ACT OT	ACT OTA	COPT OT	COPT OTA	Total
0-4	6	20	19	50	95
4-8	1	22	11	52	86
8-12	5	19	10	22	56
12-16	5	12	14	26	57
16-20	2	18	4	19	43
20-24		4		5	9
24-28		11			11
28-32		14			14
32-36		16			16
36-40		2			2
Total	19	138	58	174	389

Key

ACT – Adult Care Team

COPT – Community Older People's Team

OT – Occupational Therapist

OTA – Occupational Therapy Assistant

- 4.32** As is illustrated by the table, around 75% of people are waiting 16 weeks or less for their assessment. Higher numbers of people are awaiting assessment by an Occupational Therapy Assistant. Occupational Therapy Assistants generally work with clients whose needs are less complex or significant.
- 4.33** In addition, it is recognised that the process and time scales for implementation of special needs adaptations needs to improve and that work is ongoing to review, consider actions and monitor performance.
- 4.34** As updated at previous Council meeting, OT services are delegated to the Integration Joint Board, so no recommendation has been brought to Council for this meeting. The HSCP is keen to make a significant improvement on these waiting times, and a proposal to fund additional staff, including Occupational Therapists and Occupational Therapy Assistants has been drawn up and will be considered by the HSCP Board at its June 2021 meeting.
- 4.35** The potential of allocation of funds from the reserves provides the opportunity to have a positive impact on the residents of West Dunbartonshire and the waiting lists. It would address issues earlier before they reach crisis ensuring that individuals get the right service at the right time.

Delays to tenancy moves

- 4.36** Due to Scottish Government rules, property moves were considerably restricted due to Scottish Government guidance in the immediate aftermath of the first lockdown, with limited essential exceptions. Accordingly only 43 properties were let in the first quarter of 2020/21, down over 75% on typical activity levels.
- 4.37** Service recovery was focussed on addressing the backlog of vacant properties in line with restrictions easing in the second quarter and this progress was maintained for the remainder of the reporting year, with processes in place to maintain allocations as an essential function, particularly for homeless households. This led to a total of 702 allocations for the year 20/21, down from 779 the previous year (9.9% reduction).
- 4.38** The availability of properties however was constricted by fewer households moving under the circumstances, with only 677 tenancies terminated, compared with 906 the previous year (25.3 % reduction).
- 4.39** In addition to fewer lets being available overall, the proportion available to the general waiting list or Council tenants seeking to transfer was further reduced owing to an increase in homelessness during the initial stages of the pandemic, with 63% of available properties being prioritised to alleviate homelessness in line with Scottish Government guidance.
- 4.40** The service continues to focus on returning the number of void properties and the time taken to let properties to those levels achieved pre-Covid-19..

Housing Repair Backlog

- 4.41** Building Services has continued to undertake emergency and essential repairs throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as void housing, homeless repairs, and gas servicing - all within appropriate government restrictions. After the first lockdown, all external capital and revenue funded repairs resumed.
- 4.42** There were times, in line with government restrictions when a normal repairs service was provided, however since November 2020, the service could only respond to emergency and internal essential housing repairs. Despite this, during 2020/21 we carried out 22,521 reactive repairs (compared with 30,661 in 2019/20) and 5,592 emergency repairs (compared to 5,151 in 2019/20).* * *figures exclude cyclical, planned, void and homeless property repairs, gas servicing and repairs to the Council corporate buildings and educational establishments.*
- 4.43** Continuing to operate the Council's maintenance and repairs services and the capital improvement programme, has been challenging in the pandemic with management and support teams required to work from home.
- 4.44** From 26 April, Building Services were permitted to resume full service provision – including undertaking internal reactive housing repairs. The up to date position as of 8 June, confirms we have 4,755 live reactive repairs, with 3,410 of these reported prior to 26 April 2021(now classed as “outstanding repairs”). During the period 26 April – 8 June, a total of 2,899 reactive repairs have been completed, of which, 633 were “outstanding repairs” reported prior to 26 April.
- 4.45** Progress on the outstanding repairs is being hindered for a number of reasons. These include the loss of a number of craft workers during 2020/21 as alternative opportunities beyond the Council have emerged. The surge in construction across Scotland since lockdown restrictions eased has made it difficult to recruit new craft workers. In addition Building Services is currently experiencing high levels of absence which is having an adverse impact on delivery. There are also UK wide shortages and pinch points emerging in material supplies. Building Services and procurement are taking all possible steps to mitigate the impact on services.
- 4.46** A further challenge is that urgent reactive repairs reported on or after 26 April will take precedence over those “outstanding” repairs which are reactive and non-urgent. This prioritisation will inevitably lead to frustration amongst tenants but Building Services must undertake a considered triage arrangement
- 4.47** Elected Members may be aware that a review of Building Services was undertaken in 2018/19 with a plan developed to support significant and continuous improvement. Systems, processes, roles and responsibilities, management capacity and workforce culture are key factors impacting on increased productivity and efficiency. Much of this work was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but significant focus is being applied on this action plan as Building Services resumes normal work.

- 4.48** A number of key commitments with regard to outstanding non-urgent routine repairs have been agreed by management moving forward:
- A commitment to complete outstanding repairs within 6 months, i.e. by 31 October
 - A commitment to complete these repairs in chronological order i.e. oldest first provided this meets tenant's requirements and availability
 - A commitment to create dedicated teams to focus solely on the outstanding repairs
 - A commitment to reallocate team members from other work streams to tackle repairs wherever possible
 - A commitment to keep tenants informed on progress through appropriate forums including Housing News, social media, and text messaging
 - The potential to utilise targeted overtime if that meets tenant availability
 - The recruitment of agency workers and sub contractors where possible
- 4.49** Complaints linked to Housing Repairs fell by 27% during 2020/21. While this is a positive short-term trend it requires further monitoring before any significant conclusion can be drawn. It also needs to be put in context as there was also a 21% reduction in emergency and non-emergency repairs carried out during the year due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

Wider Council

- 4.50** When considering Council performance during the public health emergency it is important to review the unprecedented impact that Covid-19 had on the organisation. This began with the closure of most offices, and the requirement for employees to work from home wherever possible. For many employees – frontline and office based - this was challenging due to employees having caring responsibilities for children or elderly and ill relatives. There were also many employees – 233 at the high point – who were shielding from Covid and so were unable to perform any frontline duties. Many teams working from home needed to do so using new processes that often could not match the speed of those used in the office in pre-Covid times, or which could not offer residents the same level of support that they would normally receive. Employees also experienced different levels of performance from their home broadband and this impacted on their ability to deliver as normal. For example the performance of some broadband providers was much poorer than others, while some employees also struggled with system speed because there were multiple users in their household all placing heavy demands on their broadband. Those employees working on the frontline needed to do so using new safety protocols that again slowed down the usual pace of service delivery.
- 4.51** At the same time as these challenges were being faced, the Council also had to take on new responsibilities in a number of areas such as supporting more than 2,000 households that were shielding across West Dunbartonshire; providing financial grants to residents and businesses struggling with the impact of Covid; delivering Covid testing for large staff groups, and the procurement and distribution of significant levels of PPE; the provision of Childcare Hubs and the delivery of online teaching and

teaching resources; the distribution of free school meal vouchers; and the operation of vaccination centres across the local authority. These additional tasks were often undertaken using the existing employee resources, and at the same time as maintaining many normal Council services.

- 4.52** Despite this situation the Council responded strongly. A major factor in this was the significant investment in Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) that had been undertaken in recent years to facilitate flexible working and accessing Council systems and data from anywhere – including from home. This resulted in delivery of a system which supports Use Your Own Device (UYoD) technologies and remote access. At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic WDC was able to quickly scale up our remote access solution and by 31 March 2020 West Dunbartonshire Council had more than 1,300 devices connecting remotely. The ability to rapidly scale up our remote access users and offer a UYoD capability resulted in WDC being able to offer remote working to our employees quickly and without having to deploy desktop devices to employees homes. The volume of remote connections continued to grow and ultimately reached more than 2,300 devices connecting. In addition WDC had over 6,000 Chromebooks available for pupils and teachers.
- 4.53** This quick and sustained response led to positive feedback from residents being recorded by the Telephone Satisfaction Survey. Amongst the 1,200 residents contacted satisfaction with the Council overall rose to 89% from 87%. Satisfaction with the way West Dunbartonshire runs things rose to 84% in 2020/21 compared to 74% in 2019/20. In terms of value for money for services delivered this also rose from 65% to 71%. Those residents who agreed they would speak highly of the Council rose from 54% in 2019/20 to 71% in 2020/21. Complaints also fell 8% with 738 being received across 2020/21 compared to 805 in 2019/20.
- 4.54** The Council's response during the pandemic was also reviewed at the Audit Committee meeting on 16 June 2021. This followed a sub-group, made up of Members of the Audit Committee, meeting to consider a number of questions posed by Audit Scotland in their recent guidance called "*Audit Scotland COVID-19 Guide for Audit and Risk Committees*". Supported by the Audit Shared Service Manager, the sub-group noted that West Dunbartonshire Council was well placed to address the key issues identified in the Audit Scotland Guidance. In total 29 questions were posed such as '*How have IT services performed during the pandemic*' and '*What barriers, if any, have affected your organisation's ability to continue to provide services for individuals and communities during the pandemic?*'. The Council was judged by the cross-party group to have achieved the maximum rating possible for 28 of the questions, with the remaining one given a green lower risk rating. The conclusion reached by the sub-group was: "*It is clear that the issues raised by Audit Scotland are being actively and directly addressed by the Strategic Leadership Team in partnership with elected members. This is evident from the various reports which have been submitted to elected members since March 2020.*"

5. People Implications

- 5.1** While there are no direct people implications linked to this report, it is

important to acknowledge the demands the Covid-19 pandemic has had upon Council employees. The changed-ways of working and general disruption to home and work life has led to higher levels of stress being experienced by the Council workforce than was the case in pre-pandemic times. The Council has responded proactively with a range of supportive measures in order to assist employees during this challenging period. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of our valued employees at this time – and previous notes of thanks from Elected Members and senior Council officers in relation to this have been welcomed and appreciated.

6. Financial and Procurement Implications

- 6.1** There are no financial or procurement implications linked with this report.

7. Risk Analysis

- 7.1** This report is for noting and does not propose a change to any existing service or policy so there is no requirement for a risk analysis.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

- 8.1** This report is for noting and does not propose a change to any existing service or policy so there is no requirement for an Equality Impact Assessment screening.

9. Consultation

- 9.1** This report has been consulted on with all Chief Officers as well as Finance, Procurement, Legal, Strategic HR, Building Services, HSCP and Citizens Services.

10. Strategic Assessment

- 10.1** This report supports the following Council strategic priorities:

- Open, accountable & accessible local government
- Efficient and effective frontline services that improve the everyday lives of residents

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Date: 16 June 2021

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Appendices: Contact Centre performance during 2020/21

Background Reports None

Wards Affected: All