

MID SUFFOLK COUNCIL CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

From: Councillor Jill Wilshaw – Cabinet Member for Housing	Report Number: CMU21
To: Council	Date of meeting: 26 July 2018

TO PROVIDE AN UPDATE FROM THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

Additional HRA Borrowing

The Government have recently announced the regulations on bidding for additional HRA borrowing, which includes the opportunity to use additional borrowing along with Homes England Grant or Right to Buy Receipts. In addition, on 26 June 2018, a multi-billion-pound boost to social housing across England was confirmed by the Secretary of State for Communities, The Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP, as part of the drive to build the homes communities need. Around 23,000 new affordable homes will be delivered through a £1.67 billion government investment deal. This will include at least 12,500 social rent homes in high cost areas in a move to support families struggling to pay their rent.

The question on what a high affordability locality is has been answered as follows:

“High affordability pressure areas are defined as those where there is a difference of £50, or more, per week between average social and private rents at the local authority level”

As a result, Babergh & Mid Suffolk both qualify to bid for the additional borrowing, should it be required to support our ambitious plans to build new Council home. We only have until Friday 7th September to bid, and submissions need to meet certain criteria as a result we have developed a project team that is working on the development of a bid, should we feel it would assist our current ambitions and support our current Housing Revenue Accounts.

Financial Inclusion and Universal Credit

Almost all post codes within Babergh and Mid Suffolk are now part of Universal Credit Full Service. We have three Tenancy Support Officers who all work one day per week at their nominated Job Centre (Ipswich, Stowmarket or Sudbury), where they carry out personal budgeting support to those claiming UC.

Since 1st April we have assisted almost 60 clients with personal budgeting support and have received really positive feedback on the service we are providing from the Department of Work & Pensions.

Housing Solutions

The Housing Solutions service has been working extremely hard to manage the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The team have taken over 200 applications from those either homeless or at risk of becoming so within 56 days. This is more applications than the team took in the whole of the last financial year. There have been 100 cases accepted under the new 'prevention' duty and 30 cases under 'relief' duty.

Of those 130 cases owed a prevention or relief duty, the team have managed to discharge duty (successfully prevent homelessness) in 45 cases and have only accepted one household as homeless under S184 of the Housing Act. A large number of these cases remain open and are being actively engaged with to prevent or relieve homelessness. The team have conducted 75 in depth comprehensive telephone appointments and 119 face to face appointments. The additional amount of administration time required under the new legislation is significant and we are carefully monitoring the new processes and ways of working and adapting things as necessary to try and give officers more capacity.

LGA Housing Advisers Programme

A bid has been submitted to the LGA Housing Advisers Programme to 'Improve access to the Private Rented Sector'. The bid is requesting specialist adviser support to deliver a project with the Housing Solutions Team to increase access to the private rented sector for those at risk of homelessness. This is a key focus of the new Homelessness Reduction Act and if successful it would enable the team to bring this project forward and deliver it sooner than currently planned.

Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's)

Property Services are working closely with the other Suffolk District and Borough Councils and Suffolk Fire and Rescue to ensure we have a consistent approach to the new HMO legislation. A joint protocol is being produced which details the required standards in all HMO's. All associated documentation e.g. application forms and information material will be the same across all Suffolk authorities.

An associated Licence Fee Policy is to be discussed by Cabinet shortly.

Tenant Engagement Project

Tenant Board

The Tenant Board is now in existence, with a membership of five residents.

Their first official meeting is scheduled for the 24 July with a team-building session, and this will mark the start of a 6-month capacity building program. This program will give them the knowledge and skills that they need to effectively scrutinize our landlord services and comment on policy and service-delivery. The terms of reference have also been agreed.

Tenant Sounding Board

The first Tenant Sounding Boards will be agreed with the Board. It is hoped that the initial Sounding Board will comprise of some of the previously involved volunteers who are still keen to contribute, but who do not feel that the Board is the right group for them.

Communication

The next stage of the Tenant Engagement Project will include wider communication with tenants in Babergh and Mid Suffolk both to inform them about the Board and seek more volunteers. This may well take the form of tenant newsletter, but we will try to move towards increased digital communication from that point onwards.

Income Management Strategy

The Income Management Strategy 2015 – 2020 is currently being reviewed to determine which of its pledges have been achieved, and which are still outstanding. It is our intention to present this review alongside the new Income Management Policy to Cabinet in the forthcoming months.

Income Management Policy

This is in first draft and is being developed by the Tenant Services Professional Lead, Polly Bearman, and the Income Team. The policy intends to bring all housing-related income (rents, service charges, rechargeable repairs, sundry debts etc) under the remit of the Income Team and put a greater focus on debt prevention.

Income Team Performance

The overall performance of the Income Team has only weakened by less than 1%, over the past year as can be seen below:

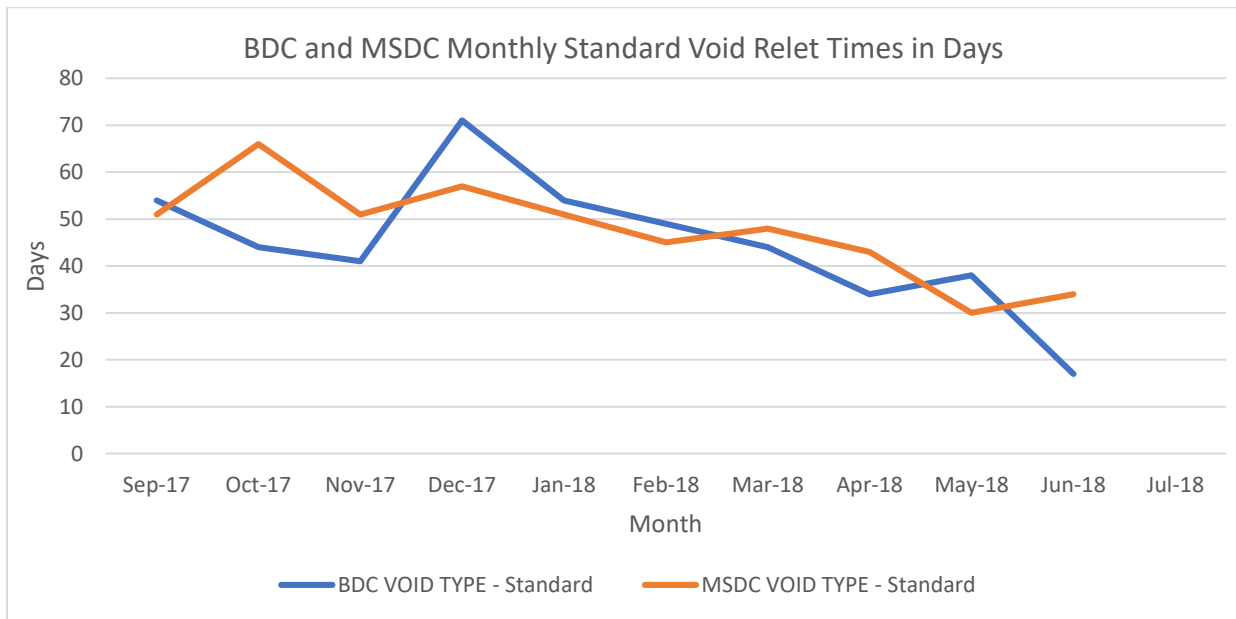
% of Local Authority Housing Rent collected	Babergh	Mid Suffolk
2017 - 2018 Quarter 1 (target 98%)	98.39%	97.98%
2017 - 2018 Quarter 2 (target 98%)	98.33%	97.81%
2017 - 2018 Quarter 3 (target 98%)	98.17%	97.60%
2017 - 2018 Quarter 4 (target 98%)	98.11%	97.46%
2018 - 2019 Quarter 1 (target 98%)	98.01%	97.26%

This has, in part, been the effect of Universal Credit, however changes within the team have already improved performance in the past two months, on an individual officer basis. Performance is being closely monitored and will be supported further by the introduction of an Income Management Policy.

Void Improvement Project

A project team was formed in December 2017 a Project Management Plan was approved with a target to reduce standard void re-let times by 10 days from December 2017 – April 2018.

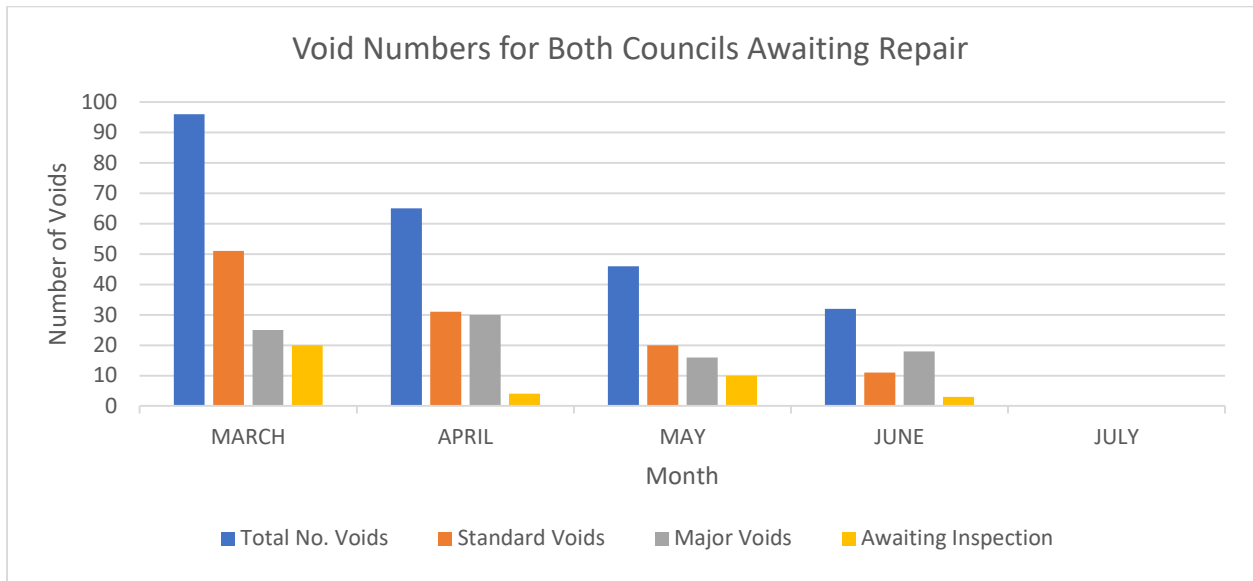
As at June 2018, standard void times have reduced by 37 Days for BDC and 17 Days for MSDC. This exceeds the 10-day target and a positive downward trend towards the long-term target of 21 days. Members will be reassured by the positive downward trend in the following graph. BDC and MSDC Monthly Standard Void Relet Times in Days



BDC and MSDC Monthly Void Relet Times in Days

	BDC	MSDC
	STANDARD	STANDARD
SEP 17	54	51
OCT 17	44	66
NOV 17	41	51
DEC 17	71	57
JAN 18	54	51
FEB 18	49	45
MAR 18	44	48
APR 18	34	43
MAY 18	38	30
JUN 18	17	34
JUL 18		

The graph below shows the decline in void numbers to a manageable level that creates the capacity for the improved performance. The reduction in the number of voids awaiting repair now means BMBS has enough resource to repair standard voids within 7-10 days.



Building Services Update

A revised Business plan for BMBS has recently been discussed and approved by Cabinet prior to a review by our Overview & Scrutiny Committee. A further report will be considered shortly by Cabinet in light of recommendations put forward by O & S.

It has been agreed that the focus of the Building Service Team will change slightly to focus on the following:

BMBS will provide an inhouse repairs and maintenance service to both Babergh & Mid Suffolk with a priority on delivering an efficient, value for money service that places a high-quality customer service above a surplus generating “commercial” business.

Housing Strategy

Work continues on the development of our Housing & Homelessness Strategies for which the intention is to seek Cabinet approval of the final draft in December this year. In the meantime, Cabinet will review a draft in September prior to a formal consultation during September and October.

In recent weeks we have held a member session which has informed the debate and the development of the current draft of the Strategy.

Working with Community Land Trusts/ Development of Rural Housing

On Wednesday 4th July, officers from Babergh & Mid Suffolk held a Rural Housing event in conjunction with Hastoe Housing at Lavenham Village Hall. The morning involved a number of presentations and key note speakers discussing Community Land Trusts, Rural Exception sites, and Housing Need surveys. There were a wide range of attendees from parishes across Babergh & Mid Suffolk.

Managing the Risk of Fire

On Sunday 8th July, a fire took place within a resident's flat at Sydney Brown Court, Hadleigh, which is a Very Sheltered Scheme owned by Babergh and managed by Orwell Housing. Whilst the tenant managed to raise the alarm and get out safely, the case has been managed as part of 'Disaster Recovery' when a significant incident takes place.

This is involving a Tactical Management Team meeting daily since the fire to complete tasks, as part of a wider action plan focussed on (i) Ensuring the tenant returns to her flat as soon as possible. (ii) Reviewing current practice across all our Housing Sites, and (iii) Reflecting on Future & Best practice to ensure the management of Fire and Fire Prevention is of the highest standards.

In the past three years there have been eight significant fires in council tenants' homes that have resulted in insurance claims being made.

We therefore intend to learn from these examples and produce tenant friendly information guides with the aim to prevent fires in our council housing stock in the future.

The Foyer

Following agreement by Cabinet earlier this year it is intended that the Council will exchange contracts by the end of July on the purchase of accommodation that will provide 17 additional units of temporary accommodation, in Stowmarket.

Providing works are completed on time and to schedule, we are expecting the first households to move in early September.