

Report to: Scrutiny Committee

Date: 04 December 2023

Title: Housing Services – Current Operating Pressures

Report of: Tim Whelan, Director of Service Delivery

Cabinet member: Councillor Peter Diplock, Cabinet member for housing and planning

Ward(s): All

Purpose of report: To provide Cabinet with a summary of the current operating context and the challenges this is presenting to the delivery of housing services in the Borough.

Decision type: Non-key decision

Officer recommendation(s): To note the contents of the report and the activities that Council teams are taking to address these.

Reasons for recommendations: To provide information about the current operating context.

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1. Introduction

1.1. This report provides information about the strategic operating context within which the Council is delivering housing services. It summarises the current cost, regulatory and demand pressures, and outlines how these are impacting the key services that are; delivering repairs & maintenance; collecting income; managing tenancies; and supporting residents facing homelessness. It also considers how these pressures are affecting the delivery of new homes. The report goes on to set out the steps each service is putting in place to address the variety of challenges they face.

2. National & local operating context

2.1. The operating context is complex and characterised by a series of financial pressures, economic uncertainties, and regulatory changes that are challenging the viability of business plans and placing new demands on service delivery. These are set out below.

- **Impact of higher inflation and interest rates** - costs relating to housing provider's employees (council and contractors), materials, energy, and borrowing have all increased significantly. This has impacted on all services, but the consequences for maintenance spend and the viability of new housing developments have been of particular concern. Although inflation has begun to fall, providers will need to continue to carefully assess the impact of higher

costs on (Housing Revenue Account) business plans and keep their resilience under close review.

- **Government rent cap** - in autumn 2022 the Government departed from the long-established policy of increasing rents by CPI +1%, to lessen the impact of the rent uplift on tenant incomes. In its place a 7% cap on increases was introduced, putting further strain on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plans by limiting income, and requiring additional savings measures to be put in place.
- **Cost of living crisis** - reduced living standards have a dis-proportionate impact on those with the lowest incomes, and this is having a negative impact on levels of rent arrears across the sector. A survey¹ of 28 local authorities, undertaken by the National Federation of ALMOs², found that 85% of the authorities surveyed reported an increase in arrears, with the average owed by affected tenants rising to £527, an increase of 23% in twelve months. Data for the latest available quarter shows that there has been an accompanying rise in the levels of possession warrants issued in England & Wales, up 52%³ in a year, whilst mortgage repossessions are also on the rise. This will further increase pressure on homelessness services.
- **Private rented sector (PRS)** – the sector is under pressure as large numbers of landlords look to exit the market, in large part due to higher mortgage costs. Nervousness about legislation ending ‘no fault’ evictions has also been a significant concern for landlords, although the Government have recently announced that this will be delayed indefinitely, pending reforms to the court system. As a result of this reduced supply many areas have been seeing record increases to rents. In Eastbourne, households on low incomes face a particularly difficult challenge as Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates have failed to keep pace with the 30th percentile rents to which they are supposed to be matched. Figure 1 (below) compares LHA rates against the very cheapest advertised rents across East Sussex.

Figure 1 – LHA as a percentage of lowest advertised rent on Rightmove (Sept 2023)

	Eastbourne			Hastings			Lewes			Rother			Wealden		
	LHA	Rent	%	LHA	Rent	%	LHA	Rent	%	LHA*	Rent	%	LHA	Rent	%
Shared	£75	£110	68%	£75	£115	65%	£99	£133	74%	£87	N/A	N/A	£102	£127	80%
1 bed	£138	£173	80%	£115	£167	69%	£184	£202	91%	£138	£156	88%	£173	£173	100%
2 bed	£176	£202	87%	£150	£196	76%	£230	£254	91%	£178	£219	81%	£219	£219	100%
3 bed	£207	£248	84%	£196	£265	74%	£276	£312	89%	£228	£288	79%	£276	£277	100%

¹ On the edge, Cost-of-living findings from the council housing sector, August 2023 – Nat. Fed. of ALMOs / Association of Retained Council Housing - [On the Edge: Cost-of-living findings from the council housing sector - NFA National Federation of ALMOs](#)

² On the edge, Cost-of-living findings from the council housing sector, August 2023 – Nat. Fed. of ALMOs - [On the Edge: Cost-of-living findings from the council housing sector - NFA National Federation of ALMOs](#)

³ Ministry for Justice for the period April to June 2023, August 2023 - [Mortgage and Landlord Possession statistics: April to June 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Unsurprisingly, it is those authorities (Eastbourne & Hastings) where LHA covers the least percentage of rents, that have the greatest homelessness pressures. The PRS in Eastbourne is relatively large, housing 27%⁴ of all households, so this impact of this is of real concern.

- **House prices** - although these have fallen from their recent peak, for many households the prospect of buying a home remains bleak. In high value areas like Eastbourne, the gap between household income and the income needed to buy a home is staggering, with the latest Local Housing Needs Assessment⁵ concluding that those living on the median household income for the town (£35k), would struggle to buy even the cheapest properties available on the market (with a standard 10% deposit).
- **Social rented sector** – housing only 13%⁶ of households, the sector in Eastbourne is relatively small when compared to England, where 17.1% of households rent from a social landlord. Rates of new build are improving, but historically low stock additions and *Right to Buy* sales have restricted supply, at a time when demands have risen.
- **Homelessness pressures** – levels of statutory homelessness are rising, with the number of households across England found to be homeless (rather than threatened with homelessness) when they sought assistance, up by 10.7% (n=41,950)⁷. The ending of a private rented sector tenancy because the landlord wishes to sell or relet the property, or because of rent arrears, were the leading causes of homelessness. There were 1,175 homelessness presentations across East Sussex in the first quarter of 2023/24, a rise of 24% compared to the same period a year earlier. Meanwhile, the national rough sleeper count showed an increase for the first time in five years, registering a 29%⁸ rise across the South-East.
- **Temporary accommodation** – The rise in homelessness numbers is reflected by a 10%⁹ increase of households residing in temporary accommodation. Local authorities in England spent an estimated £1.6B¹⁰ on housing them in 2021/22 and increases over the past year will have seen costs spiral further. Across East Sussex there are now over a thousand households living in emergency accommodation, being housed at a cost of £11.2M per year.

⁴ Census data analysis – Office for National Statistics, January 2023 - [Housing, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ Lewes Local Housing Needs Assessment (Draft), September 2022 – AECOM.

⁶ As per footnote 4.

⁷ All figures reported by Dept. of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities for the period Jan to March 2023, July 2023 - [Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁸ Annual rough sleeper count – Dept. Levelling Up, Housing & Communities - [Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ As per footnote 7.

¹⁰ Research briefing for UK House of Commons, January 2023 - [Households in temporary accommodation \(England\) - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#).

- **More pro-active regulation & new legislation** – Government and the Regulator of Social Housing are introducing stronger regulation (Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023), in response to concerns about fire safety, high levels of dis-repair impacting tenant welfare, and housing provider’s failures to respond to reports of damp and mould, following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. The key elements of the new approach are, a suite of performance measures (introduced in April 2023) designed to give tenants a more transparent view of landlords’ service delivery, tougher consumer standards to take effect from March 2024, and the Building Safety Act 2022, introduced to improve the construction and repair of high-risk buildings. This new regulatory focus will affect all housing services, but repairs and housing quality standards are those areas likely to fall under the most scrutiny, adding cost at a time when budgets are already under intense pressure.
- **Pilot review.** In April the Regulator of Social Housing provided feedback on a visit they undertook as part of the Council’s participation in their voluntary Consumer Regulation Testing Pilot. After taking time to understand how the Governance arrangements are set up between the leadership team, Eastbourne Homes Limited (EHL) board, and the Council’s Cabinet. Their feedback challenged whether the arrangements in place provided for fully effective accountability to Cabinet and indicated that this could be a focus of any future reviews under the new regulatory regime. As an immediate measure was the provision of a new quarterly report from Homes First to Cabinet, whilst the proposals for the future of EHL were considered by Cabinet in November.
- **Retro fitting / sustainability** – To meet the Government’s target of achieving net-zero by 2050, providers have been asked to ensure that all their stock is rated at Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) Band C or above by 2030 (it remains unclear how the September 2023 Government policy announcements affect this). With so many competing stock investment priorities the money needed to deliver this is highly likely to require funding from outside provider’s current business plans.

The current operating context has created pressures on the business plans and budgets of housing providers up and down the country, and Eastbourne is no exception. The remaining sections of this report review the impacts these are having on service provision and summarise some of the work being undertaken to address them.

3. Housing Options & Wellbeing

3.1. Operating context – key pressures on the service

- Interest rates ⇒ Landlords exiting the market, resulting in more no of fault evictions.
- Private rented sector ⇒ Rising rents impacting affordability and increasing arrears.
- Private rented sector ⇒ Reduced supply impacting ability to place at risk households.
- Cost of living ⇒ Making it harder for tenants to afford increasing rents.
- Inflation ⇒ Tenants may prioritise spend on rising food / utility costs over rent.

- Social rented sector ⇒ Low availability of vacancies building up demand.

3.2. **Impact on the service**

Inflation has increased the costs of delivering all Council services, but it is emerging pressures around homelessness that are causing the most concern. Higher rents, a reduced supply of homes as landlords choose to exit the sector because of less favourable market conditions, and reduced tenant incomes due to rises in the cost-of-living, have all played a part in increasing demand. The dedicated housing options triage team responded to over 1,300 calls in the first three months of 2023/24, of which 372 resulted in formal homelessness applications. This is a 27% increase compared to the same period a year earlier.

Investigations completed by the casework team so far this year confirmed that tenancy failure in the private rented sector is now the leading cause of homelessness in the town, most commonly because the landlord was seeking to sell or relet their property (so called 'no fault' evictions), or because of rent arrears. Friends or family no longer willing to accommodate, and domestic abuse were the other leading causes, which mirrors the nationwide picture.

This extra pressure places more demand on the statutory responses that the Council must make in terms of advice, investigation, and an interim duty to place priority need households in temporary housing. At the end of August there were 311 households living in nightly paid emergency accommodation, an increase of around 60% on the number a year ago. This provision is extremely costly and the unfavourable housing benefit rules mean that not all of the housing benefit paid out to cover rent by the Council, can be reclaimed from Government. In 2022/23 the net financial cost to the Council was £2.6M and this is expected to rise to £3.6M for the current financial year, placing a strain on the general fund that will reduce the Council's ability to fund other services and, ultimately, could risk its ability to produce a balanced budget.

Meanwhile, local levels of rough sleeping are rising also, and in July the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) team worked with 62 cases across the course of the month. This is a 38% increase on the 45 cases reported in July 2022, with the cost-of-living crisis and the ending of 'everyone in' Covid provision likely to be the leading contributory factors behind this increase.

3.3. **Addressing the issues**

The team have deployed a series of positive initiatives to help reduce demand pressures and lower the numbers of households living in emergency accommodation, by:

- Focussing on 'pre-prevention' work, through the activities of the triage team that actively negotiates with landlords and family members, signposts to advice agencies, and helps with home searches.
- Forming a 'virtual hub', bringing together partners to deliver early actions to address issues for customers to help reduce high-cost interventions at crisis point.
- Converting voids in HRA stock for use as temporary accommodation, to reduce the financial cost to the general fund. Around 60 households are now housed in this way.

- Delivering a Wellbeing Service to help referred individuals access specialist support focussed on sustaining tenancies and securing employment. The service supported 103 individuals in the past year and is currently providing active support to 41 more.
- Increasing efforts to collaborate with local landlords, through a branded Direct Lets scheme, helping to reserve a pool of homes that can be used for placements.
- Launching the *Engage before Eviction* service in August, promoting the team's role in negotiating and mediating between landlords and tenants to stave off eviction.
- Appointing a new specialist advisor role to help manage any additional homelessness demands arising from former asylum seekers who are granted leave to remain in the United Kingdom. There are around 350 asylum seekers housed in Home Office accommodation across the town.
- Tackling the increase in rough sleeping head on, working with other districts and boroughs to secure funding for the purchase of new homes, including a new short stay assessment unit in Ceylon Place, with space for eleven rough sleepers, who will be given intensive support and assistance with move-on to settled accommodation.

Through deploying these actions, the triage team has reduced the numbers of new presentations, whilst the case work team have directly helped 113 households retain or secure homes in the private rented sector. The numbers of households living in temporary accommodation has also been stabilised and is down from the peak of 326 placements in March.

Even with these measures in place, the Council is still on schedule to receive almost 1,500 homelessness applications across the year. So, to reduce pressures further a recent decision has been taken to prioritise the letting of social housing vacancies to those households living in temporary accommodation, above others on the waiting list. This decision will be kept under close review, and plans are afoot to rebalance allocations between homeless and other housing register applicants, alongside a full review of the allocations policy. This review has been commissioned and will report to Cabinet in early 2024.

3.4. **The view ahead**

The team is rolling out further plans to help tackle demand, including:

- Introducing a new 'dynamic procurement system', creating competition between accommodation providers to help reduce nightly charge rates.
- Enhancing the monitoring of registered provider's vacancies to ensure their commitments under nomination agreements are being fully met.
- Recruiting new officer roles to undertake early intervention visits in residents' homes, enhance capacity in the Wellbeing Service, and embed a dependency support worker in the team. All three roles have been secured with external funding.
- Working with domestic abuse support providers to look at how 'sanctuary schemes' can, for appropriate cases, safeguard residents in their existing homes.
- Holding further engagement events with partners. The September event attracted 200 colleagues from twenty partner agencies, many of whom are focussed on deploying key preventative measures on behalf of the service.

Finally, the move from a 'virtual hub' to office premises is imminent, providing a cohesive space for the team and partners, and increasing the capacity for joint working and up-front prevention.

All these steps will help stabilise demand, but securing lasting reductions in homelessness pressures and the associated budgetary threats will undoubtedly require the development of new models of temporary accommodation and a step change in the scale of delivery of new affordable homes.

4. Repairs & Maintenance

4.1. Operating context – key pressures on the service

- Inflation ⇒ Significant contract price rises, with the Mears contract price up by 28%.
- Supply chain ⇒ Prices of some materials rose by more than 50% post-Covid.
- Rent cap ⇒ Reduced income to fund repairs and capital investment in homes.
- Regulation ⇒ Increased capital works requirements on safety works & Decent Homes.
- Regulation ⇒ Higher monitoring and inspections costs to deliver new regime.
- Regulation ⇒ Increased liabilities and higher risk of regulatory breaches.
- Sustainability ⇒ Significant costs of upgrading the energy efficiency of Council homes.

4.2. Impact on repairs & asset management service

For repairs these pressures have meant that contract price costs have increased significantly, placing the available budgets within the HRA under greater financial pressure than in previous years. The resultant constraints on the service mean that careful choices about which repairs can be undertaken have to be made and that additional monitoring of spend on the budget is necessary.

On the capital works side budgets are also subject to substantial pressure, with funding only able to cover those works necessary to meet statutory health & safety regulations and Decent Homes standards, rather than the wider set of improvements that stock condition surveys indicate will be needed over the coming years.

These pressures are set against a backdrop of the tougher new regulatory Consumer Standards and sustainability targets, and as the most 'in demand' service, these will place maintenance delivery performance under even more intense scrutiny. Although consultation is ongoing, the new regulatory regime is expected to introduce more stringent data collection requirements, more regular inspections, and revised (possibly higher) Decent Homes standards. Maintaining compliance with these will introduce extra costs to business plans, whilst not maintaining compliance will introduce a much higher risk of regulatory breaches. The requirement for providers to have all their stock rated at Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) Band C or above by 2030, will require additional funding through HRA business plans.

4.3. Addressing the issues

A number of key actions have been put in place to help manage these constraints. For responsive repairs these have included taking call handling back in house to

improve the customer experience and efficiencies, and negotiating reduced levels of increases to the schedule of rates in the main responsive contract held with Mears.

For capital works a strict prioritisation of work types is the main tool being used to manage budgets, with the works focussed on safeguarding health and safety and upgrading electrical safety in tenants' homes taking priority.

4.4. **The view ahead**

The actions above can only be deployed as short-term measures, and it is clear that further steps are needed to bridge the gap between required works and the funding available. Some positive plans that will help are already on the horizon, including:

- Delivering IT and process updates that will allow CX to be used as the lead system for managing repairs, enabling the integration of commitment accounting with finance systems, and making more accurate data available to inform stock investment plans. These measures will improve transparency and allow costs to be better controlled.
- Re-tendering repairs contracts to facilitate the appointment of multiple and specialised contractors, reducing costs by introducing competitiveness into the local market, and lowering the charges associated with the sub-contracting of works. The plan is to implement the new contracts from April 2025.
- Giving careful consideration as to how targeted disposals can play a more effective role in supporting the funding of capital works, and whether Council housing companies can be used as a vehicle to fund the renovation of high-cost voids (which could then be used as temporary accommodation for homeless households).

5. **Income Collection**

5.1. **Operating context – key pressures on the service**

- Cost of living ⇒ Tenants are impacted more as they have lower incomes.
- Inflation ⇒ Tenants may prioritise spend on rising food / utility costs over rent.
- Rent cap ⇒ Despite the cap, rent increases are higher than in past years so are having a major impact on tenant incomes.

5.2. **Impact on the service**

The service is performing well, with arrears at the end of August standing at 3.35%. This figure is below the 4% target and lower than the level a year ago, bucking the wider trend of increasing arrears across the sector. These outcomes are even more encouraging, given the risk to rent collection associated with the predicted impact of the 7% rent increase on tenant's budgets.

Below the headline figures there are some limited causes for concern, with the average amount of arrears rising by 4% (from £582 to £607) since April, and the number of households in debt increasing by 6% (from 892 to 946 households) across the same period. These trends need to be closely monitored.

5.3. **Addressing the issues**

This performance has been achieved by applying a balanced approach to support and enforcement, using a dedicated team of officers focussed on delivering early interventions when arrears arise, supporting tenants to manage their budgets, and producing advice and awareness campaigns targeted at tenants, as well as wider groups of residents across the town. Over the past year this work has included:

- Promoting the take up of Government and Council funded cost-of-living support, via targeted online campaigns, at cost-of-living and Homes First roadshows, in tenant newsletters and in leaflets accompanying rent increase letters.
- Deploying a rigorous process to secure direct payments for any Universal Credit recipients with a history of arrears, or those requiring support with budgeting skills.
- Promoting the availability of Discretionary Housing Payments to eligible private and social housing tenants.
- Signposting residents to commissioned services, including local partners at Citizens Advice, Brighton Housing Trust, and local foodbanks.
- Working closely with Homes First's Tenancy Resolution & Wellbeing teams to provide additional support to those tenants living with complex needs, who can often experience concurrent issues of debt, exploitation, and anti-social behaviour.

5.4. **The view ahead**

The overriding focus will be on maintaining the current approach to rent collection (it is working), whilst keeping track of a number of emerging risks that could increase pressures on the service over the coming year. These risks include:

- Concerns about the impact of the April 2024 rent increase. There is no indication as to whether the Government intends to follow a CPI+1%, or a capped increase next year, but either will result in a high rent uplift for a second successive year.
- Similar concerns about the impact of service charge increases, which are uncapped and can have a dis-proportionate impact on tenants living in blocks and on estates.
- Further cuts to the amounts awarded to support discretionary housing payments, which have already seen 29% reductions applied over the past two years.
- An acceleration of the rollout of Universal Credit, which will reduce the amount of direct payments to Homes First, amend the levels of rent support that some claimants receive, and increase the risk of delays and disruption to payment cycles.

To help address these the team will continue to work with advice agencies to offer targeted support to those tenants transitioning to Universal Credit, alongside the additional support offered to tenants living with complex needs. New work will focus on delivering data driven interventions to help better determine which tenants are likely to fall into arrears and delivering plans to automate some aspects of rent collection, utilising autodial, and SMS facilities.

6. New home delivery

6.1. Operating context – key pressures on the service

- Inflation ⇒ Increasing costs impacting HRA capital funds available for development.
- Rent cap ⇒ Reducing income impacting HRA capital funds available for development.
- Inflation & interest ⇒ Higher build and borrowing costs impacting scheme viability.
- Inflation & interest ⇒ maximising rents charged reducing tenant affordability.
- Regulation ⇒ Higher costs of stock maintain divert investment from new homes.

6.2. Impact on the service

These pressures continue to impact on the Councils ability to deliver new homes, reducing capital funds available for development and stretching the viability of individual schemes. Along with other local authorities the Council has been actively lobbying the Department for Levelling Up, and through this has managed to secure small reductions in Public Works Loan Board borrowing rates and increased levels of Right to Buy receipt retentions for the next year. These measures are welcome but will not alone resolve the extent of the financial pressures faced. Grants from Government remain available for affordable housing (Affordable Homes Programme 2021- 26), which the Council has successfully secured on its own schemes, but the amount offered has not increased proportionately with cost rises in the current operating environment.

These same pressures face private developers, and the pipeline of affordable homes contributions secured via Section 106 agreements, which is already impacted via viability constraints in the town, is likely to come under further pressure.

For prospective tenants, rents at or close to 80% market rents create affordability challenges, particularly for working tenants not in receipt of full housing welfare benefits, and those tenants that are looking to move into work or increase their hours.

6.3. Addressing the issues

Despite these challenges the team is delivering a pipeline of new developments, helping meet the Corporate Plan commitments to build new Council homes. This diverse programme of sustainable new build schemes and acquisitions, which uses a mix of HRA capital funding and Government grants, comprises of around 150 homes, including:

- Thirteen recently handed over homes at Brede Close and Fort Lane.
- Nineteen homes at the Glenn, Southfields Road, scheduled to handover this Autumn.
- Twenty homes at Calverley Close, Old Town, scheduled for completion in 2024/25.
- Up to thirty purchases, utilising funding secured from the *Single Homeless Accommodation*, *Next Steps Accommodation*, and *Local Authority Housing* funding programmes. These are providing new homes for former rough

sleepers, and families arriving through the *Ukrainian Family* and *Afghan Resettlement* schemes.

Beyond these schemes feasibility and early due diligence is being undertaken across a further nineteen Council-owned brownfield land sites, identified as having the joint capacity to deliver around 60 new homes.

6.4. **The view ahead**

The team are working hard to deliver this new housing supply, which is providing valuable new affordable homes, but the numbers are simply not enough to meet the level of demand resulting from local housing pressures. So, alongside these the Council is actively considering alternative ways of boosting affordable housing delivery, by working with partners to enable development, through:

- Accelerating work to understand the opportunities and constraints of 'key development sites', each with the potential to accommodate more than 25 homes. There are 28 such sites across the town, including three in the Meads area due to be vacated by the University of Brighton next year.
- Reviewing levels of section 106 housing provision and taking steps to ensure that all opportunities for maximising affordable housing quotas are being taken.
- Participating in 'One Public Estate', a consortium of public agencies, including the NHS, East Sussex College Group and East Sussex County Council, reviewing estate strategies to identify sites that can be brought forward for residential development.
- Developing a more active programme of engagement with registered housing providers, to promote the availability of sites across the town and check their appetite for development or regeneration.

As part of a forward plan the Council are also considering options for delivering lower cost temporary accommodation for homeless households, via the purchase of accommodation for use as hostels, long-term leasing, new mechanisms to fund the refurbishment of high-cost voids in HRA stock, and the capacity for change of use for under-utilised retirement housing blocks.

This work will be steered through the Affordable Homes Working Group, a newly convened meeting of officers who regularly discuss how planning, development and allocations can best meet housing demand.

7. **Tenancy Services**

7.1. **Operating context – key pressures on the service**

- Cost of living ⇒ Tenants experience lower wellbeing and are left more vulnerable.
- Inflation ⇒ Tenants may restrict spend on food / utilities again impacting wellbeing.
- Rent cap ⇒ Rent increases drive financial hardship and susceptibility to exploitation.
- Inflation ⇒ Restricting funding available to maintain communal areas and estates.

7.2. **Impact on the service**

Cost-of-living pressures have had a dis-proportionate impact on social housing tenants, with rising levels of financial hardship resulting in Homes First managing greater numbers of marginalised households, who experience lower levels of wellbeing and higher degrees of vulnerability.

These higher levels of marginalisation have contributed to more anti-social behaviour (ASB) being reported to the team and left more vulnerable households at risk of domestic abuse, addiction, and exploitation. At the end of June 2023 the team was managing an active case load of 124 serious cases of ASB, harassment and domestic abuse.

The look and feel of estates are a key concern for tenants, as well as being a key driver of satisfaction overall. The budgetary challenges set out in section 3, above, are placing severe restrictions on the level of communal and external decorations being undertaken, and there is real concern that this will lead to a rapid deterioration of the look and feel of the Council's estates.

7.3. **Addressing these challenges**

The service has put in place a number of strategies and plans to help reduce the impact that these issues are having on local communities, to help manage the associated risks and the impact of vulnerability on tenants. These include:

- Implementing a triage approach to tackling ASB, hate crime and domestic abuse. The most serious cases are now managed by a dedicated Tenancy Resolution Team, whilst lower-level cases remain with specialist advisers, to be managed alongside other tenancy issues.
- Deploying a balanced approach of enforcement and support, focussing on early intervention, close working relationships with the police, and effective signposting to other partners where cases are precipitated by mental health issues or other complexities.
- Pursuing possession orders and eviction through the courts to address high-risk and serious cases of ASB, or where the earlier action taken has not worked.
- Employing a dedicated officer to support residents displaying hoarding behaviours, signposting them to services that can address associated anxieties, whilst delivering practical help to de-clutter and tidy homes. Better Care funding has been used to support the programme, which is currently working with 45 residents.
- Supporting multi-agency forums that tackle high-risk cases of ASB, hate crime and the exploitation of tenants by criminal gangs through cuckooing (where vulnerable residents homes are taken over for use as drug dealing dens).
- Appointing a specialist advisor to renew how Homes First respond to tenants reporting domestic abuse, delivering an approach aligned to the DAHA¹¹ accreditation scheme. This places the interests of victims at the centre of actions designed to promote safeguarding and reduce risk. So far this year the service has supported 79 residents.

¹¹ Domestic Abuse & Housing Alliance (DAHA) standards - [Who we are - daha - Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance \(dahalliance.org.uk\)](https://www.dahalliance.org.uk)

Over the past year the team have put in place a new approach to recording estate and block inspections, supported by new processes agreed with Neighbourhood First and new software. Related initiatives have included improving the quality of information on estate inspection boards and introducing branded uniforms as part of a programme to improve Homes First's visibility on estates. A detailed review of all estate service contracts is currently underway, but concerns remain that any resulting improvements could be impacted by the lack of external decorations in the capital programme.

7.4. **The view ahead.**

Over the next year the team plan to further enhance the support offer to tenants:

- Working with Brighton Housing Trust, the ESCC commissioned housing support provider, to review service levels and ensure that the impact of referrals is optimised.
- Drawing on the expertise of a new drug and alcohol support worker, to assist current tenants living with dependency issues.
- Harnessing the power of data tools currently deployed by the income maximisation team, to help identify tenants experiencing financial hardship and tailor the support offered.
- Implementing outcomes from the review of estate service delivery, to drive value for tenants and help mitigate the impact of reduced redecorations on the look and feel of estates.

8. **Corporate Plan & Council Policies**

8.1. Taking steps to address the challenges presented by the current operating context, will help support the successful delivery of the Eastbourne Corporate Plan 2022-2026 (refreshed), which sets out clear goals for the Council to:

- Increase the number of new homes purchased and built.
- Reduce the number of families housed in temporary and emergency accommodation.
- Utilise public sector land and assets, in discussion with other partners.
- Promote sustainable, quality, affordable homes, including low-cost home ownership.

Over the coming months officers will continue to drive the delivery of the current steps being taken to counter these housing pressures and work new measures into 2024/25 business plans.

9. **Business case**

9.1. There is no single business case covering the subject matter of this report. Related strategies and plans set out how individual services are delivered and how targets are set and measured. These include housing & homelessness strategies, asset management strategies, and corporate plans.

10. **Financial appraisal**

10.1. The report above details the challenging financial and operational context in which the Council is delivering housing services. The issues are varied and complex

and ranges from the impact of inflation and increasing interest rates, the impact of government policy on rent setting, and the impact of increased homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures regionally where government subsidy payments only cover a proportion of the expenditure the council incurs. The Quarter Two financial monitoring report which is also being presented to committee highlights the scope of financial pressures the council faces. However, this report also identifies several strategies that should reduce the financial impact to the council and help to mitigate the financial pressure that have been identified [in the Q2 finance report].

Deputy Chief Finance Officer consulted on 7th November 2023.

11. Legal implications

- 11.1. Legal advice has been, and will continue to be, taken in respect of the numerous work streams arising out of this report and in respect of legislative changes that impact upon the provision of housing services.

Lawyer consulted: 13th November 2023 (Legal ref: 12514-JOINT-KS).

12. Risk management implications

- 12.1 Specific risks associated with this report are set out in the individual business plans and strategies associated with the services delivered. However, a sector risk assessment issued every Autumn by the Regulator of Social Housing, provides a useful barometer of the key issues facing the sector. The 2022 statement highlighted many of the issues covered in this report, including the risks associated with:

- Inflationary and interest rate pressures, labour shortages and supply chain disruption.
- Failure to ensure that homes are maintained to Decent Homes standards and an inability to respond effectively where dis-repair is reported.
- Evidence of systematic failure to maintain properties by some sector providers.
- Failure to comply with health & safety obligations in full.
- A lack of preparation for new requirements set out in the Building Safety Act 2022.
- Not taking measures to protect rental income by failing to identify tenants at risk and not offering them adequate support.
- Providers failing to meet their core obligations of providing good quality housing services to tenants.
- Not having in place plans to meet new regulatory requirements strengthening obligations to engage with tenants and provide them with transparent reports of performance.

13. Equality analysis

- 13.1. There are no direct equality implications for the Council arising from the recommendations set out in this report.

14. Environmental impact analysis

14.1. There are no direct environmental impact implications for the Council arising from the recommendations set out in this report.

15. Appendices

15.1. None

16. Background papers

16.1. None.