

Agenda Item	<b>5.</b>
Report No	<b>HP/07/20</b>

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Housing and Property Committee

**Date:** 13 August 2020

**Report Title:** Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2020–30 June 2020

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

### 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update for quarter 1 on key housing performance indicators and provides information on housing service activity during lockdown and emerging recovery issues.

### 2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

1. **Note** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020;
2. **Note** the work that has been undertaken to continue priority housing services during the Covid-19 emergency; and
3. **Note** the initial impact of the emergency on key housing indicators and the challenges likely to be faced during the recovery phase.

### 3 Implications

- 3.1 Resource - There are no direct resource implications arising from this report, although the report highlights some of the financial impacts on the Housing Revenue Account.
- 3.2 Legal - There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) - There are no equality implications arising from this report.
- 3.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever - There are no climate change/Carbon Clever implications arising from this report.

- 3.5 Risk - Risk is managed through regular review and reporting to allow corrective action to be taken if necessary. Risks in relation to housing performance and income collection are covered in this report.
- 3.6 Gaelic - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

## **4 Background**

- 4.1 The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) has set out the performance indicators that it will use in its scrutiny of landlords. The Regulator has collected key data from all social landlords on a monthly basis during the coronavirus emergency.
- 4.2 This report provides performance information based on the reporting framework recommended by the SHR. Further performance information by Council Ward can be found on the Highland Council Intranet ward reporting pages.  
[http://www.highland.gov.uk/staffsite/info/13/members\\_intranet/37/ward\\_reporting/2](http://www.highland.gov.uk/staffsite/info/13/members_intranet/37/ward_reporting/2)
- 4.3 The period covered by this report was one of exceptional circumstances arising from the coronavirus emergency. This affected every area of housing service delivery and impacted on every one of our 14,000 tenants and our other housing customers. The emergency demanded changes to the way services were delivered at short notice. As well as providing information on the immediate impact on key performance indicators this report provides a summary of the way services were delivered during the emergency and some of the emerging issues for the recovery phase.

## **5 Housing services during the Covid-19 emergency**

- 5.1 Comments on service areas covered by key performance indicators are provided in section 6 of this report, along with specific performance information. This section of the report provides information on how we approached a wide range of other housing services during the emergency.
- 5.2 **Tenant engagement and welfare**

The priority for Housing staff in the early phases of the emergency was identifying and offering advice and assistance to the most vulnerable tenants and other housing clients. During the emergency we also prioritised communication of advice and information to all tenants. It should also be acknowledged that Housing staff were very active in taking calls through the Council helpline and in proactive welfare checks on our tenants throughout the emergency.

- 5.3 Throughout the first few weeks of lockdown the Tenant Participation Team focussed on contacting as many tenants as possible to carry out welfare checks as follows:-
- Direct contact by phone - 3,264 tenants
  - Email contact – 3,973 tenants and;
  - Text message contact – 6,858 tenants.

5.4 The emails and texts contained a link to an online survey on tenant welfare needs which was completed by 2,703 tenants. Any tenant requiring support or assistance was referred to the local Community Hubs for action. The texts and emails also contained a link to a digital Tenant Briefing which was uploaded to the Highland Council website and updated regularly with useful information for tenants throughout the lockdown period. This briefing was also promoted on social media.

5.5 Digital interaction with tenants has increased greatly over the past few weeks with more than 40 interested tenants now taking part in regular "Teams" meetings with staff and other tenants. The Tenant Participation Team have been delivering online Tenant Scrutiny training to a new group of tenants keen to take scrutiny forward. Online Tenant Area Forum meetings for Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross, Inverness and Lochaber are scheduled for August.

#### **5.6 Tenancy and Estate Management**

We have continued to deal with complaints and other tenancy matters. Routine home visits and tenancy inspections were not possible during lockdown. Staff continued to follow up on tenancy management issues through telephone / e-mail / video calls. Arrangements for liaison with Police Scotland on antisocial behaviour continued as normal. Currently we are able to undertake home visits where that is thought to be necessary to safeguard clients and taking into account relevant national guidance.

#### **5.7 Gypsy / Travellers**

The Scottish Government issued specific guidance on services to Gypsy / Travellers during the emergency. We have maintained a full service in relation to Council sites and visits and advice on unauthorised encampments although court action seeking removal of unauthorised encampment remains suspended.

#### **5.8 Sheltered Housing**

Daily contacts have continued at all schemes. This has been via the Help Call system rather than personal visits. Use of common rooms / guest rooms was suspended prior to lockdown and these remain closed. We introduced an increased cleaning regime for common area in sheltered housing complexes and this is being maintained.

#### **5.9 Garden Aid**

During the initial period of lockdown the service was suspended. We began work from week commencing 1 June following consultation with service users.

#### **5.10 Capital Programme**

All on site work was suspended during lockdown. Back office work in relation to planning and pre-site activities has continued. Following discussion with tenants and contractors some external works started on site from 20 July, but many internal works will be slow to progress as a result of national guidance on safe working practices, tenant shielding practices and contractor capacity. Therefore, there has been slippage in the current year capital programme and the emergency has had an impact on developing the next 5-year HRA Capital Plan. This is the subject of a separate report to the Committee.

## 5.11 Aids and Adaptations

We have continued to provide adaptations where it is possible. This has been limited to emergency adaptations. Most clients are in a shielding category and so a case-by-case professional assessment is required on whether works can proceed.

## 5.12 Safe at Home Referrals

This service refers to additional security related work for victims of domestic abuse. We have continued to provide this service throughout the emergency and have been working closely with our public protection partners to support victims of domestic abuse during the pandemic.

## 5.13 Gas Servicing

The annual servicing of our gas appliances has remained a priority to ensure the health and safety of our tenants. In line with national guidelines, we have been carrying out gas servicing where it has been possible to achieve access. As at 1 August we had 83 properties which were currently outwith their annual servicing date as a result of tenants advising us of their shielding requirements. We are continuing to prioritise safety checks and expect to be fully compliant with our annual gas servicing regime by early September.

## 6 Quarterly Performance Information

6.1 The remainder of this report provides the standard data reporting on key housing performance indicators with commentary on the effects of the emergency and some of the issues that may affect performance through the recovery phase.

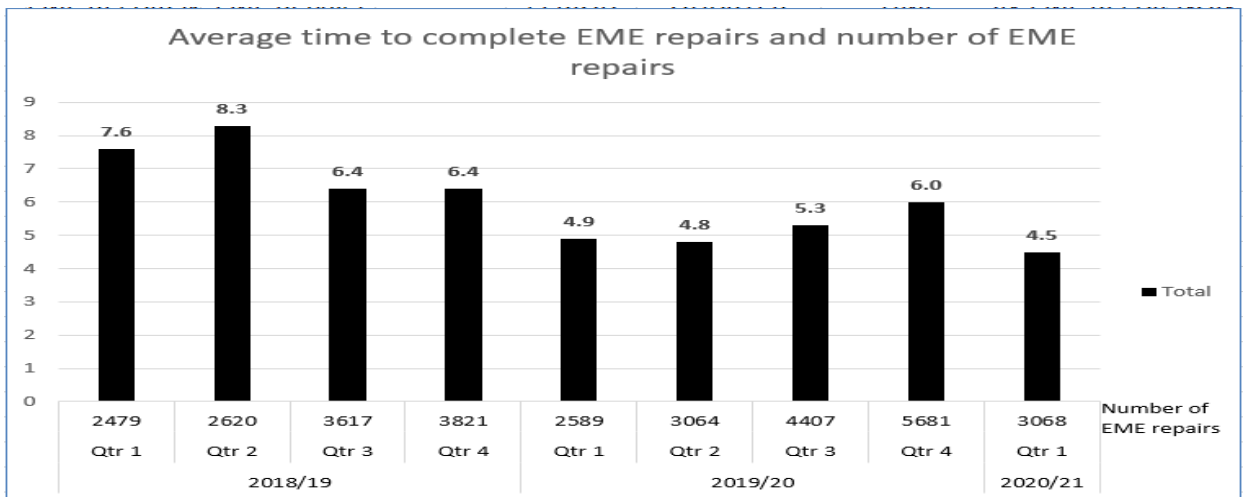
## 7 Housing Repairs

7.1 The key indicators for measuring repairs performance are the average time taken to complete Emergency repairs and Non-emergency repairs.

7.2 We have continued to provide a full emergency repairs service throughout the emergency and have undertaken other high priority work and external repairs at an increased volume over the last 2 months.

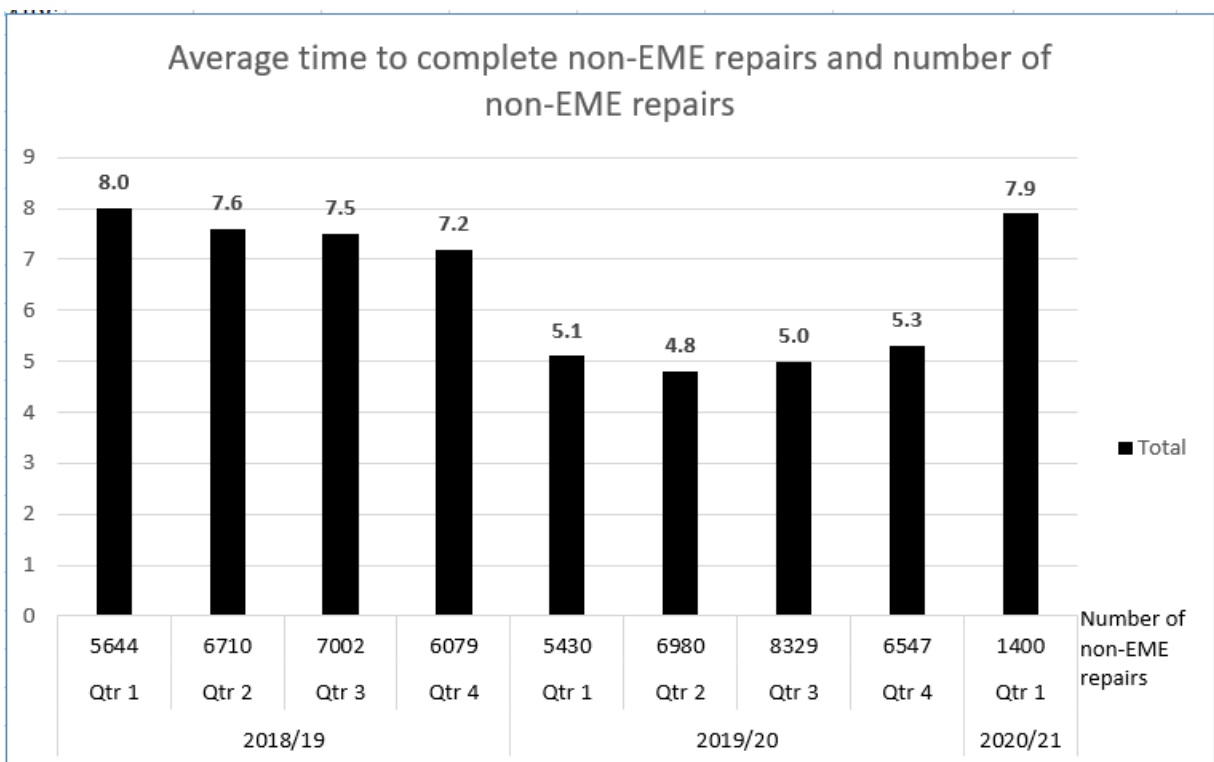
7.3 Table 1 details performance on the average time taken to complete emergency repairs and Table 2 details the average time taken to complete non-emergency repairs. To give an indication of relative work volumes the number of repairs completed each quarter, from which the percentage is derived, is shown below each bar on the chart.

7.4 **Table 1: Average length of time taken to complete emergency repairs (hours)**  
Target 14 hours



7.5 The chart shows excellent performance in the average time to complete emergency repairs in Quarter 1. The number of emergency repairs completed has been around the average level.

7.6 **Table 2: Average length of time taken to complete non-emergency repairs (days)**  
Target 8 days



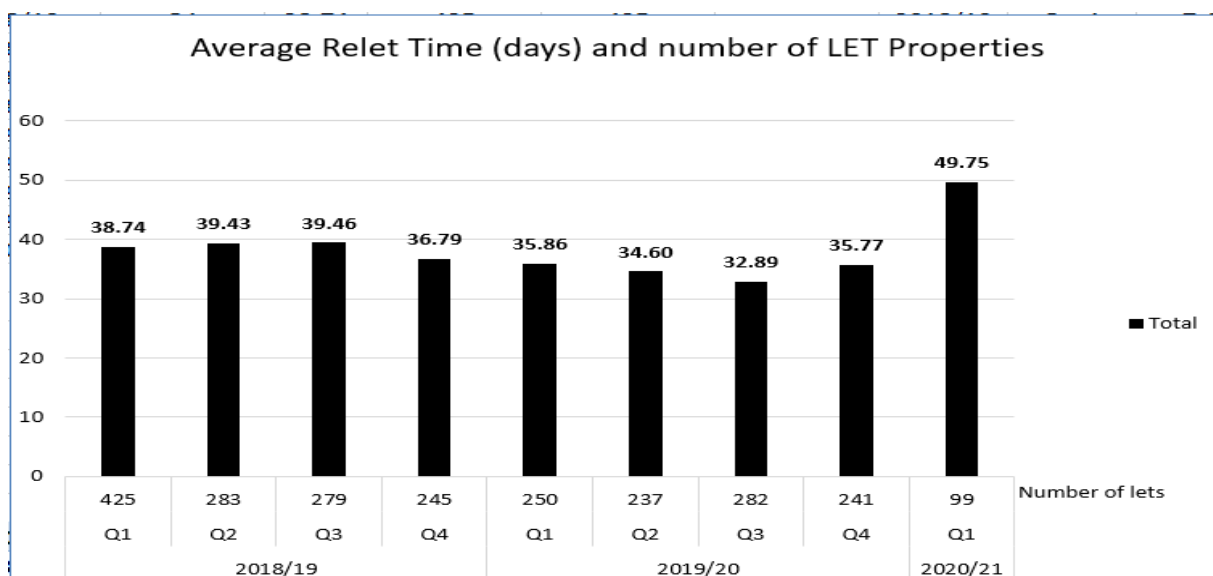
7.7 The graph shows that the average time to complete non-emergency repairs increased substantially in quarter 1, although performance remained within the Highland target. It also shows that this average was based on a significantly reduced number of repairs completed. This pattern is consistent with the approach to prioritising emergency work during the emergency. This approach was based on national guidance.

7.8 Following the initial easing of lockdown a backlog of approximately 1,300 non-emergency repairs had built up. We are targeting the oldest repairs first but where possible we are also clustering repairs where a tradesperson can reduce travel time. As at 1 August, this backlog was approximately 800 non-emergency repairs. Reducing the backlog further will take some time as additional safety measures are required and in some cases tenants have indicated a willingness to delay their repairs as a result of their shielding requirements. Unfortunately, these backlog repairs will be completed outwith the target times for non-emergency work. We can therefore expect a significant reduction in reported performance on timescales in the new quarter.

## 8 Housing Allocations and Reletting times

8.1 Table 3 below provides information on the trend in average re-let time. To give an indication of reletting activity the number of houses allocated each quarter is shown below each bar on the chart.

8.2 **Table 3: Average re-let time (days) Target 35 days**



8.3 The graph shows the clear impact of the emergency on reletting activity and average reletting times. In line with national guidance, housing allocations were happening at a greatly reduced level and focusing on homeless clients and other high needs cases.

8.4 Repairs teams continued to undertake reletting repairs on a targeted basis during the emergency, however changes to working practices inevitably extended the time taken for repairs.

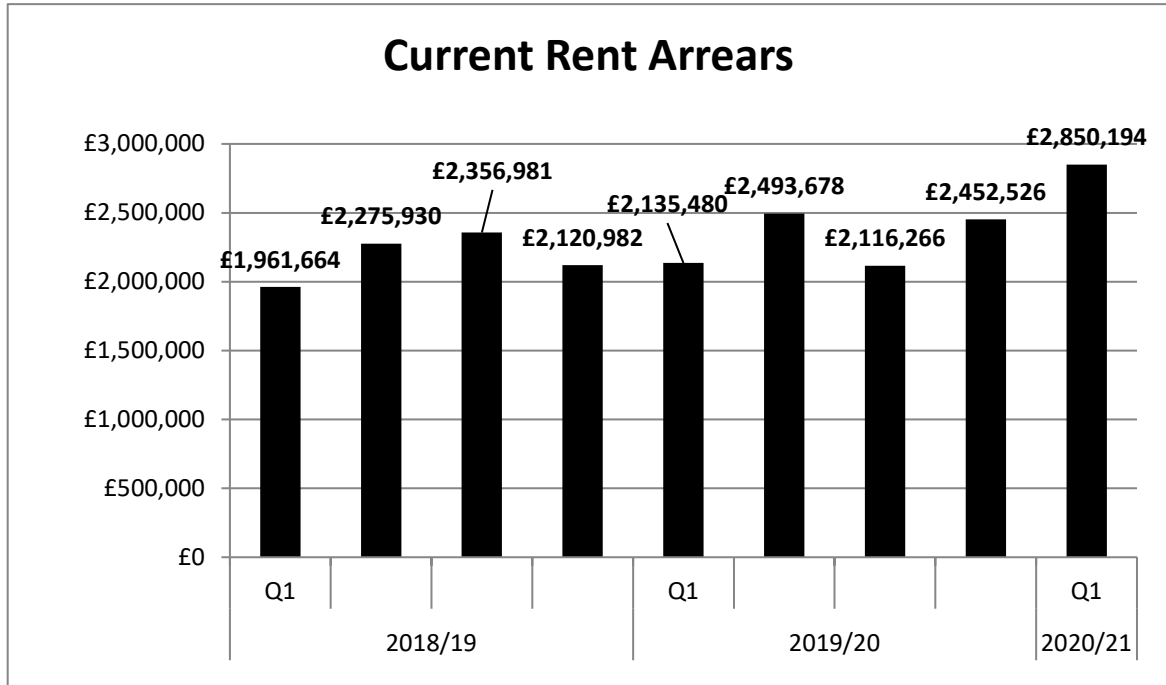
8.5 Although housing allocations activity was reduced during the quarter, a number of households have still faced complex housing issues and staff have continued to undertake housing options work and provide information and advice to people with housing problems through telephone or video calls rather than face to face.

8.6 During recovery it is expected that there will be greater pressure on the service to address a “backlog” of needs.

## 9 Rent Arrears

9.1 The key performance indicator for rent arrears is the value of current arrears. Table 4 shows the trend in current arrears.

9.2 **Table 4 – Current Rent Arrears**



9.3 We have continued to provide a full service in relation to rent arrears but without home visits, which has previously been the main approach in the management of rent arrears. Although home visits are not being undertaken routinely staff are following up rent arrears through telephone / e-mail / video calls and we have also introduced a structured text messaging service which replicates the rent arrears escalation process. This different method for contacting tenants in arrears has resulted in an increased number of contacts since the start of the emergency. These processes have been linked to the tenant engagement and welfare actions described above.

9.4 Other changes to practices have involved the re-wording of arrears reminder letters to remind tenants of the requirement to maintain rent payments and to seek support where required. We have also reviewed some of our escalation processes to ensure that all tenants in arrears are aware of the support available to them during the emergency.

9.5 Despite the efforts being made to contact people in arrears we are seeing the value of rent arrears increase. This appears to be due to greater numbers of people not at work, and / or with reduced income. Many people are claiming Universal Credit for the first time and it is expected these numbers will increase when the “furlough” scheme ends in August. Table 5 below shows the number of tenants claiming benefits since the start of the lockdown period.

**Table 5 – Analysis of housing tenants in arrears**

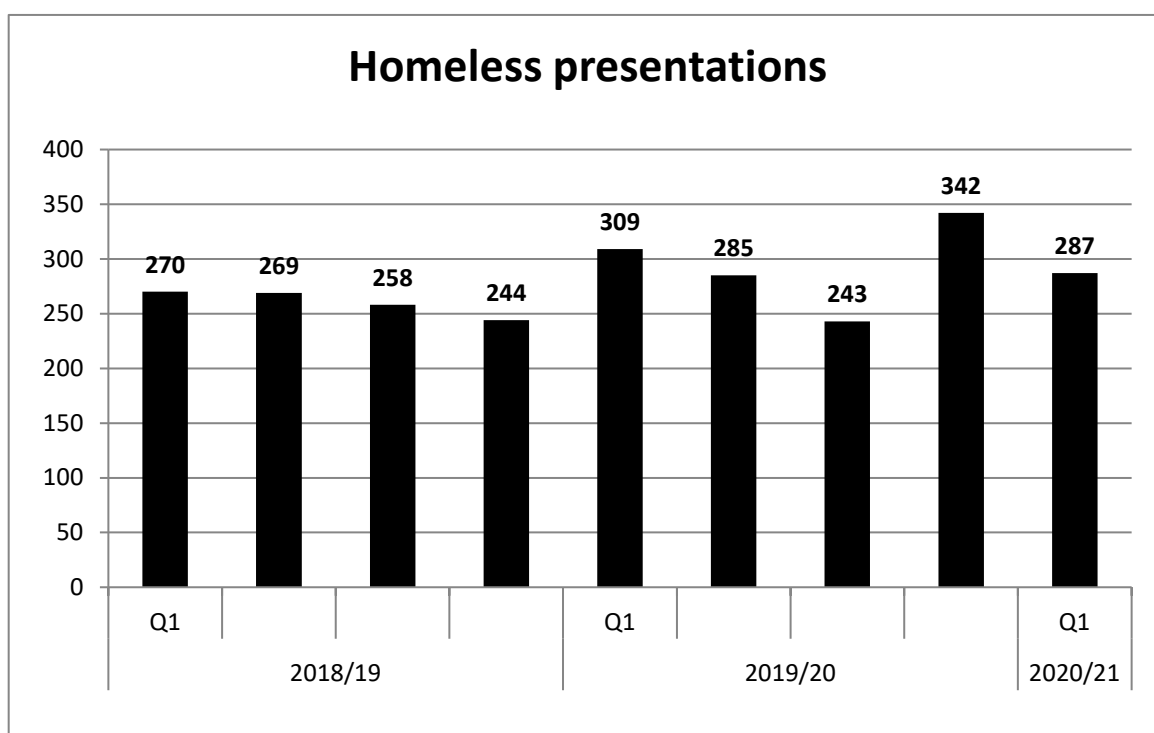
Type of benefit	Number of tenants at 21 March 2020	Arrears	Number of tenants at 27 June 2020	Arrears
Universal Credit Housing Element	3517	£1,381,551	3973	£1,905,065
Full Housing Benefit	3062	£37,116	3063	£34,617
Partial Housing Benefit	1938	£81,814	1830	£88,493
Not claiming benefit	5275	£821,508	4820	£852,311
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13,792</b>	<b>£2,321,990</b>	<b>13,686</b>	<b>£2,880,486</b>

9.7 In line with national policy we have not progressed any rent arrears cases to court during the emergency and it is anticipated that any extension of the national moratorium on court action will have an impact on arrears recovery. Our Rent Arrears Working Group is undertaking an assessment of the operational impact of increasing rent arrears due to the emergency.

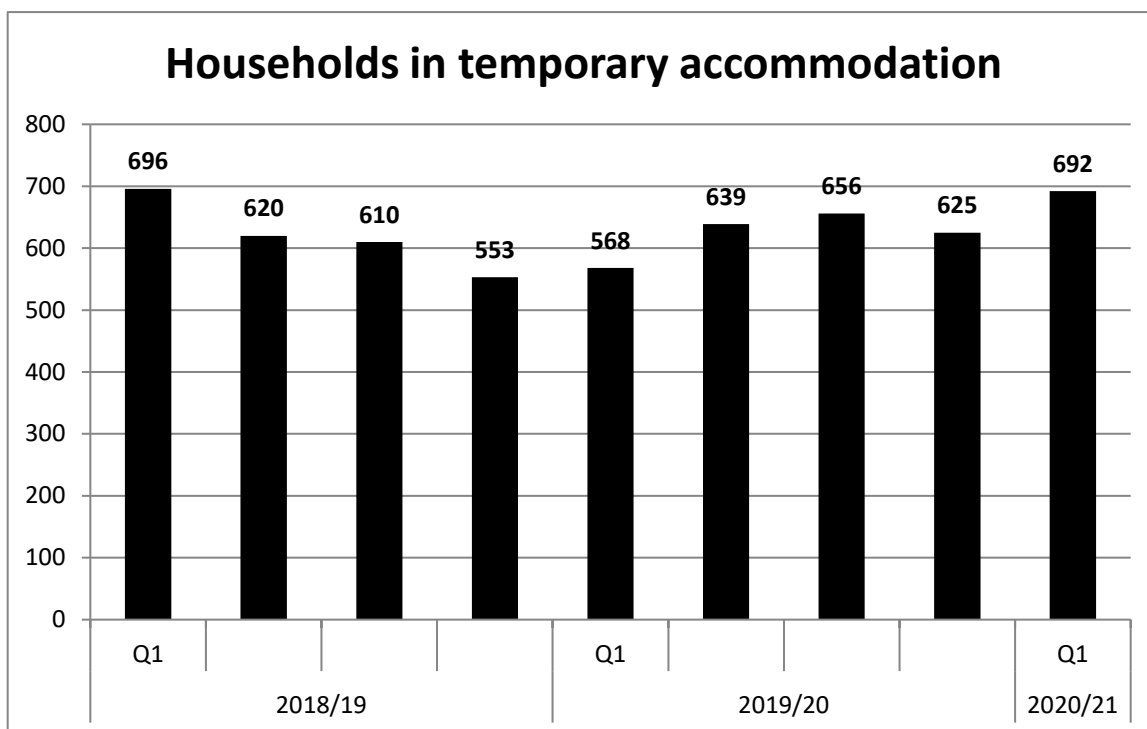
## 10 Homelessness

10.1 We have continued to provide a full service throughout the emergency but mainly dealing with cases without face to face contact via telephone / video call / social media / e-mail. We have continued to provide housing support to vulnerable homeless and other housing service users. Unfortunately face to face contact is only taking place in response to crisis with most support undertaken through telephone / social media / e-mail.

10.2 Performance information on homelessness is noted in Tables 6 and 7.

**Table 6 - Homeless presentations per quarter**



**Table 7 – Households in Temporary Accommodation**

10.4 Table 5 (above) shows that numbers of homeless presentations have been slightly higher than normal over the last 2 quarters. Table 6 (above) shows an increase in the numbers of homeless people in temporary accommodation.

10.5 Behind these reported figures, the coronavirus emergency has presented a number of challenges for housing options and homelessness staff as well as for accommodation and housing support providers. Despite focussing reletting activity to address homelessness and increasing the numbers of temporary furnished accommodation units in use, we are seeing increasing numbers of people in temporary accommodation and have had to increase the number of private sector houses in multiple occupation in use as temporary accommodation. It is generally predicted that rates of homelessness are likely to increase nationally during the recovery phase. A more detailed report has been provided to the Committee on homelessness.

## 11 Summary

11.1 The housing service has faced a number of challenges throughout the emergency. As a service which is based very much on face-to-face contact with tenants and other customers, and where many aspects of service delivery are focussed on vulnerable clients, it has not always been easy to adapt working practices to balance staff and client safety with service demands.

11.2 Although we have continued to meet our legal duties and have focussed on supporting our most vulnerable clients, the following issues have emerged: -

1. Despite the use of alternative methods, the loss of personal face to face contact will have been a negative factor for many vulnerable clients;
2. We have a backlog of people in temporary accommodation which increases the cost to the Council and risks breaches in legal duties;
3. We have an increase in new rent arrears cases and a backlog of existing cases and rent arrears are increasing abnormally;

4. We have faced some community tensions due to difficulty in dealing with tenancy conditions enforcement / antisocial behaviour;
5. We have a backlog in non-emergency repairs; planned maintenance; capital and environmental works;
6. Rent loss due to voids has increased; and
7. We have had to suspend important service development work on rent arrears, homelessness, housing options, housing allocations and repairs.

11.3 The Scottish Housing Regulator has been collecting key performance information from all Scottish Social Landlords since May 2020. These indicate that the challenges faced in Highland are consistent with national trends.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

Date: 20 July 2020

Author: David Goldie, Head of Housing & Building Maintenance

Background Papers: Scottish Housing Regulator: The Scottish Social Housing Charter: Indicators and Context Information