

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – THURSDAY, 23
NOVEMBER 2023



Title of Report	HOUSING REPAIRS PERFORMANCE 6 MONTH FOLLOW UP	
Presented by	Jane Rochelle Head of Housing	
Background Papers	Previous update report March 2023	Public Report: Yes
Financial Implications	The successful use of HRA funds to meet the demands of our tenants is key to the performance of our Repairs service. The approaches to greater rigour and changes to funding use are the events we expect to see of a financially astute service, and this work supports the new CDP targets around a well-run council.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	There are no direct legal implications from the content of the work. Legal services have provided support to the service to appoint new contractors and ensure good contract management.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	The challenges set out in the report around recruitment are well known in the sector. The measures taken to date are key to ensuring the successful running of the service in a post covid and increased regulatory environment.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Reason Agenda Item Submitted to Scrutiny Committee	Follow on report requested by Committee earlier this year to update on status.	
Recommendations	THE COMMITTEE IS RECOMMENDED TO: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. NOTE AND COMMENT ON THE CONTENT OF THE REPORT 2. AGREE A FURTHER PROGRESS REPORT TO BE CONSIDERED BY THIS COMMITTEE IN 12 MONTHS TIME. 	

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This Committee received a report in March 2023 which set out housing repairs performance and highlighted the issues impeding delivery of an efficient and good housing service to Council tenants. As part of that report, a follow up six-month update was requested by Members, which is the purpose of this report.
- 1.2 This update is now some months after the start of the new Head of Housing, and a similar time frame on from an independent assessment of the service by the Housing Quality Network (HQN). The HQN report and the previous report to members of this committee highlighted similar areas for action namely Resources and Repairs Management, Contractor Management, Engagement and Culture, Strategy and Policy (e.g. Asset Management Plan, active housing policies) and Systems. These areas have been used to shape this report, including the action plan attached, which is already underway with progress being made. In addition, set out in paragraphs 2.1 to 2.4 below, is a reminder and update to the current service position.

2. HOUSING REPAIRS

- 2.1 The Council's repairs teams look after Council social housing stock, which is circa 4,200 homes spread across the district. Tenants report repair requests through either phone, email, online, in person, via their Housing Officer or councillor referral. Excluding Emergencies, which have a four-hour window to attend and make safe, three broad types of repairs category are currently used:

- **High Priority** (right to repair) – classified as those which could cause risk to tenant or the property and covered by the right to repair scheme. This means they are life threatening, will cause injury or impede the tenant's welfare, are a major threat to tenant security and/or will cause more than minor damage to the property. Depending on the issue these should be actioned in one to three days and may require follow up visits to address non-priority elements of work (e.g., boxing a pipe back in after a leak is fixed).
- **Tenants' Choice** – these are repairs which are not high priority and where Tenants have a choice of dates and times to get this work completed. The completion time is dictated by the appointment made, which can be up to sixty working days subject to resource availability.
- **Scheduled Works** - are those which fall outside of the High Priority and Tenants' Choice categories. Generally, these are larger scale repairs or replacement components with a longer lead-in time. They are sometimes grouped together to create more economic programmes of work and may require an inspection to scope up materials to order, arrange for scaffolding or skips, and possibly involve multiple operatives. These are planned in advance and scheduled with residents. The Council's small number of leaseholders would generally be subject to this category in order for cost sharing to take place.

- 2.2 The above categories were introduced with the new housing system QL. They do not currently align with the sector standard which is:

- Emergency (four hours make safe);
- Urgent (five days to repair);

- Routine (20 working days);
- Scheduled (between 60 and 90 days).

2.3 The Housing Service intends to move to this type of standard once it has progressed through the necessary policy consultation to make this change. It is important to make the distinction between what is categorised as a repair and a planned renewal. Investment programmes which deliver cyclical component replacement, are managed by the Asset Team not the Responsive Repairs Team (currently referred to as Housing Commercial Services). In addition to the above, sometimes inspections are required before the work can commence to fully diagnose the issue. This may influence whether the request from the Tenant is treated as a repair or a renewal, and consequently, which of the above categories that the work is allocated to and the time before any repairs query fully enters the queue for work.

2.4 There are, therefore, two main origins of works to Council homes:

- asset management (where properties are managed to comply with regulations such as the Decent Homes Standard) and;
- law compliance with Building Safety Act 2022, Health & Safety Act 1974 etc and tenant reporting.

This report is focused on the latter, Responsive Repairs and work carried out largely by the in-house repairs team.

Performance

2.5 Annex A to this report sets out a selection of performance information regarding the repairs function and is an update to that provided in the previous report. In summary this shows that:

- In April 2023, the Support Team went through an audit process to data cleanse the outstanding work-in-progress. This discovered works that had been duplicated, cancelled or completed, and also those which had not been scheduled into the dynamic resource scheduling system, hence the sizable dip in performance at that time. This is more a system and recording anomaly than actual orders completed.
- Whilst orders completed in target dipped, there was a correlating decrease (May, June, July 2023) in incoming resident calls, suggesting fewer Tenants were calling to chase aged repairs orders, and hence works are being completed without chase.
- Right To Repair 1 (RTR1 in the annex A) has remained consistent. There has been an increase in 'Out of Hours' spend, this is due to prioritising this class of work to ensure tenant safety. It also reflects that many tenants work and report emergency works outside of current operational hours, so these works are covered by an out of hours contractor as well as the internal repairs team to make sure all urgent works are completed quickly. Inflationary costs for contractors and rising "No Access" charges are contributory factors to the large increase in costs for this category. Right To Repair 3 (RTR3 in annex A) has seen erratic performance since June 2022, corresponding with the loss of key personnel in the Responsive Repairs Team and the loss of a multi-trade plumber. These positions have remained unfilled and are being addressed via contractors where possible.
- Tenant Choice (TC in the annex A) continues to fall below target. This is caused by a combination of shifting focus to achieve more RTR1 and RTR3

jobs, which have safety implications. This is also despite attempts to recruit resource to deploy on Tenant Choice work. During the process review work (see below), it has been identified that both the efficient scheduling of new jobs and the required follow-on works from RTR1 jobs are not performing well; this is in the process of being addressed and is the subject of a process review. The knock-on effect of jobs that were already reported months before, and are then further delayed, often results in a bigger, more time consuming and expensive job to repair than was originally reported. Consideration is being given to a sector specialist contractor solution being procured to address this (see below).

- Scheduled works (SW in the annex A) continues to fluctuate. This can correspond with periods of inclement weather, lack of resource (external contractors, scaffold, materials), operative sickness or larger orders reducing availability in the schedule. When considering the number of components replaced and the capital expenditure of these, progress over the past few years has significantly increased since pre pandemic (2019/20) and following a peak year in 2021/22 (and the use of external support to achieve this). The Head of Housing is in the process of appointing a contractor to help to continue to address this backlog.
- In summary, the data presented is showing that:
 - The in-house team has capacity to deliver circa 800-900 components per annum when fully staffed. This is a broad requirement of the Council's stock upkeep annually and includes major work in void properties as they arise. A programme larger than this needs additional resource – e.g. the impacts of COVID and need to 'catch up' aged work.
 - Urgent works have performed consistently over this period, however, this is at the cost of successfully delivering scheduled works.
 - This picture is similar to that presented to members in March 2023, with the internal repairs team able to service around 50% of the service demand from Tenants. The work-in-progress is growing larger and subsequently jobs take longer to complete. This is impacting Tenants satisfaction and morale of the Teams.
- Complaints data also provides another area of performance measurement. Between Q1 and Q2 this year there has been a reduction in stage 1 complaints of a quarter (42 to 32), a slight rise in stage 2 escalation (16 from 11), and a decrease from four to one referrals to the Ombudsman. Requests for service have remained broadly stable. This paints a general picture of customer service improving, and supports the move to prioritise complaints where possible, but this is caveated by the performance data issues set out above.

Current Challenges

- 2.6 There are a number of things going well within the repairs service; overall complaints are reducing, compliance with policy and procurement is being addressed and the service is maintaining its ability to deliver on urgent work. Medium term changes to pay approaches are well on the way to being addressed, as are steps to increase support resources. However as stated in earlier updates to the Committee, this is a medium/long term recovery process and there are still significant areas of work.
- 2.7 The below bullet points summarise the main challenges faced in the repairs service at this point:

- Demand - The services' biggest challenge at present is demand outstripping supply of resources. The only way to address this is to increase the resources to enable work progress to catch up (see resources section below). This stems back from the issues already identified in the services previous reports, of in effect a cessation of works of c12-18m due to the compulsory lockdowns during the Covid period.
- Resources - recruitment for the in-house team has always been challenging. The Council is trying to recruit particular trades in a highly contested marketplace which post Covid has seen a step change. With a number of people reducing their hours or leaving the maintenance sector, in turn making them harder to recruit. This is a recognised national and cross sector issue affecting most providers from house building companies through to private and social landlords alike and is not unique to the Council. It is also impacting on contractors. Several actions are being taken to address this which include a revision to the total pay approach for operatives to make us more comparative to the market and consideration as to whether the structure of the team is fit for purpose.
- Inflationary cost pressures - whilst earlier this year there were some supply issues for key components, this has improved. However, the significant increase in inflation has impacted on both the cost of goods (from building supplies through to issues such as glass, doors and windows). But it is also having an impact on any services via third parties – for example support contractors and outsourced services (such as the majority of Gas works). There still remains some volatility in supply.
- Availability of robust data – some key data (for example asbestos surveys) are required to ensure the smooth planning of non-urgent works. An Asset Management team restructure has been undertaken but there remains the resourcing issues identified above. In view of this, a complete stock condition survey has been commissioned to enable the data on our properties to be refreshed, and in doing so this will improve knowledge of Council properties and as result improved work scheduling.

Resources

- 2.8 In light of the issues identified regarding the in-house resources, it is clear from the service review that there is a significant need for a contractor to assist with catching up delayed work in progress. The appointment of a contractor to address this issue is imminent. They will also support the on-going need for repairs work into the future. They will collaborate with Council operatives to deliver the overall repairs service for at least the next year.
- 2.9 The Council's Housing Service has always worked with a series of contractors, but this approach will help in having a main contractor for catching up our aged work in progress, focus on priority works (including damp and mould) and help in managing demand going forward.
- 2.10 Other work regarding contracts has included a tightening of contract management and re-engaging with some existing suppliers to ensure that the Council is getting both the required service and value for money. As part of this approach, the pre and post work inspection regime is being increased to ensure that work in tenants' homes is consistent and meets the standard expected.

Repairs Management and Systems

- 2.11 As noted above, the Service has undertaken a process mapping and then redesign of the way in which repairs' requests from tenants are handled. This is from the very first contact through to job completion. Coupled with the themes and learning from the complaints data, this has shown there are areas for improvement and provided the data and reasons behind the proposed restructure set out above.
- 2.12 In addition, changes to IT systems has been instigated to ensure that they match the new processes and better link to ensure the best outcome for tenants. This has necessitated retraining staff, and the instruction of new tablets for operatives, making it easier for them to work on site. These will directly prompt all operatives to consider any damp and mould issues and any safeguarding issues which will be reported back automatically and immediately from their device to the support officers Inbox. Once complete this will enable improved job management via the new scheduling staff (as part of the impending restructure work), ensuring that the right operatives and right equipment and supplies are sent to each job, and any changes to jobs or tenants' availability is managed tightly to ensure the best use of resource. This will not only deliver a better customer experience to tenants but will also satisfy the Regulator of Social Housing that the Council has robust knowledge information management systems.

Engagement and Culture (with staff and with tenants)

- 2.13 As set out above, it is proposed that changes to who, and how tenants engage with are made. In anticipation of the above the team has already undertaken several pop-up events with tenants over recent months. These events attended by Property and Housing staff produced over 100 contacts and made it easy for Tenants to contact the Council face to face. The Service has undertaken a joint event with East Midlands Housing and representation of Tenants with the Housing Ombudsman to promote understanding of the Ombudsman's service. Tenancy audits have commenced, where staff visit every Tenant to ensure that they are receiving the service they expect and to find out if additional support is needed. Whilst it will take some time to visit every tenant, the aim is to have this completed by next autumn. Finally, staff training has increased on customer service, safeguarding, handling difficult conversations, identifying and triaging damp and mould, etc so that the team is as well trained as possible.

Strategy and Policy Updates

- 2.14 A review is currently being conducted, through the tenant scrutiny panel of the repairs standards (i.e. what tenants can expect from the service) and also the Council's void standard (i.e. how new homes are presented to new tenants). This work is progressing well.
- 2.15 A refresh of the Housing Revenue Account Asset Management and Business Plan is just commencing. Whilst not specifically or immediately impacting day to day repairs work, this will drive future approaches to the management of Council stock and the way in which future demand is managed. All member briefings regarding this work have been set up.

Looking forward

- 2.16 In summary, this update report on repairs performance has set out the current work within this part of the housing service. There remains an increase in work requests

overall, set against a significant backlog of long-term works due to Covid impacts. In addition, there are human resource constraints that are limiting the ability to deliver.

- 2.17 The actions set out in this report show the progress being made in addressing these issues. As highlighted in the previous report, this is not a simple or necessarily quick fix. But through a combination of changing the resource model, the offer in the marketplace to future staff, working with new partners, system and performance changes the Service is on the road to recovery.
- 2.18 The backlog of works is being stemmed through the use of third parties, and inroads are being made into particular issues such as those mentioned regarding complaints, disrepair, mould and damp; however, with the above in mind, it is likely that this will take some time to return to the desired high level of service. As noted above, urgent repairs and those of an urgent nature are being progressed within tolerance, however, this is at the expense of planned improvement works and longer term scheduled works.
- 2.19 To drive this work forward an action plan has been developed (Annex B) and will be managed under the CDP targets before Council at the time of drafting this report. This will cascade down through the Directorate Business Plan into the Service Plan for Housing. However there has been considerable work undertaken since the last report to this committee – a high level summary of which is set out below:
- Appointing a new Head of Housing – charged with assessing the service, developing and then delivery of action plan
 - Reviewed by external body and development of action plan for service
 - Renegotiated contracts with key suppliers focused on greater efficiency and financial compliance, key performance indicators regarding delivery of service to tenants and adherence to “Big 6” compliance factors and contract design management where appropriate.
 - Appointed a key contractor for catch up activity
 - Significant process change (ongoing) in the handling of repairs requests, how these are managed, arranged and checked
 - Progressing a new pay and performance approaches for operational staff making base salaries more competitive to attract new talent and retain existing.
 - Several changes in staff, with some leaving the service and others recruited for competent and qualified input. Increased level of training, a full trade skills assessment to be rolled out to all operatives.
 - Significant training and activity on compliance, and specific focus around customer service and management
 - Commenced work on Asset Management Plan and new Business Plan – which will appraise the repairs and asset management of Council stock over the medium / long term (members will be engaged with this process and it completes over the next six months)
 - Commenced complete stock survey– assessing the entire stock portfolio to enable the asset plan work.
 - Task Finish Group undertook review for Damp, Mould management, paper to be provided
 - Appraisal of new Regulatory requirements.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	Insert relevant Council Priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local people live in high quality, affordable homes - Our communities are safe, healthy and connected
Policy Considerations:	None directly Policy review and development of standalone Damp & Mould policy, Disrepair Policy, Debt Management, Recharges, Compliance (Big 6) Policies & Procedures, Mutual Exchange
Safeguarding:	n/a addressed at operational level
Equalities/Diversity:	n/a addressed at operational level
Customer Impact:	None at this point – but the actions of the report are aimed at improving services to tenants and hearing our Tenants Voice
Economic and Social Impact:	Improving our tenants' homes aims to increase the ability of our tenants to live in suitable surroundings
Environment, Climate Change and Zero Carbon:	None specific but contractor will enable us to consider funding options for decarbonisation in housing and bring a wider supply chain to us
Consultation/Community Engagement:	n/a addressed at operational level Tenants involved in recruitment
Risks:	The approaches set out in this report summarise the high-level approaches to balancing the risks of delivering the service overall. There are challenges presented around services which are covered by statutory responsibilities as a landlord and consider the increasing level of scrutiny and governance from both the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman. The introduction of Consumer Standards and new inspection regime from April 2024 as well as the new powers bestowed upon the Ombudsman
Officer Contact	Jane Rochelle Jane.Rochelle@nwleicestershire.gov.uk Head of Housing