

Item no:



Meeting: COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Housing & Housing Development

Date: 8 JANUARY 2024

DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF HOUSING REPAIRS

Author – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332
Lead Officer – Denise Lewis Ext No.
Contact Officer – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332

Contributors – Councillor Sarah Mead, Chair of Community Select Committee;
Councillor Alex Farquharson, Vice-Chair of Community Select Committee; Assistant Director, Denise Lewis

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the performance of Housing Repairs Service.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

2.1 The issue of scrutinising the performance of the Housing Repairs service was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 9 March 2023, and this choice was confirmed by the Committee when it reconsidered their work programme on 27 June 2023.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The scope for the review was agreed when the Committee met on Wednesday 26 July 2023. [Community Select Committee Wed 26 July 2023 -](#)

[Repairs Scoping Document](#) It was agreed that the scope should include a focus on:

- Look at the current repairs standards – consider the policy on ‘emergency’, ‘urgent’ and ‘routine’ repair works, and the scope of works currently undertaken, (e.g. fencing and other renewals) which Housing consultant Ridge were also reviewing for the Council.
- Contractor focus - Provide a presentation from the SBC housing contractor focusing on some key stats including the breakdown on the volumes of works e.g., emergency, urgent etc, % of first-time fix, staffing overview, some examples of what’s working well and where the challenges are.
- Client focus - Provide insight from the Council’s housing consultant with an overview from the ‘client’ in terms of the work of Ridge, how the refreshed housing asset management strategy will hopefully increase the proactive / planned maintenance programmes and look at the need to review the Stevenage Standard i.e., the fencing policy.
- Look at the current process officers use regarding receiving, logging and carry out repairs to see if it is fit for purpose as Members are “concerned that the current processes do not appear to be straightforward or be running well”.
- Identify ways to improve the current service including, where possible, streamlining the process to have one point of contact for tenants from the point they register a repair request this would help to co-ordinate all repairs in the property, especially important in cases where there are multiple repairs needed in the same property.
- Improve Communications (The context is to avoid cases where “the current process requires too many steps with too many operatives and subcontractors to get a repair resolved”) Members are concerned that “Tenants are being told a repair will happen, then it doesn't and there doesn't appear to be any process for letting the tenant know what is going on and why,” “Communication about repairs is poor or non-existent leading to anger and frustration for tenants.
- Early identification of cases that could be described as in the “too difficult box” – (The context is a Member quoted a case where “there has been a flooding issue that has been going on for multiple years, and it appears that no one can get to the root cause of the problem, so it falls into the ‘too difficult box’”).
- Make better use of technology – (For instance, tenants can send a photo of the problem, such as a blown down fence, that perhaps doesn’t need an officer to inspect before materials are ordered and repair booked etc. if the photo shows the extent of the repair).

2.3 Process of the review

- 2.3.1 The Committee met on 3 occasions in total with 3 formal Committee meetings to undertake the review as follows: On 26 July 2023, 19 October 2023 and 14 November 2023, and held 1 site visits days on 29 August 2023 to visit the Repairs Team to view the repairs booking system, as part of this

visit 2 CSC Members accompanied repair operatives on visits to tenants' properties.

2.3.2 The Committee interviewed the following witnesses:

- Housing Repairs Service Delivery Manager, Dean Stevens
- Assistant Director, Denise Lewis
- Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas

3 THE COMMITTEES FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Community Select Committee re scrutiny of the Housing Repairs Service

3.1.1 Following the formal meetings of the Committee 26 July 2023, 19 October 2023 and 14 November 2023, various observations were made by Members and are detailed below, which have led to the recommendations in the report at section 4.

3.1.2 The review found that there were many challenges that need to be addressed to provide a fit for purpose repairs service. However, before focusing on the challenges the recent improvements that had been made needed to be recorded, these included the reduction in the service backlog since the Covid pandemic; the new scheduling system providing real-time insights; the new booking hub and enhanced collaboration and aligning work with repair planners and supervisors to give clear accountabilities of the service.

3.2 Quantifying the current repairs standard.

3.2.1 The review looked at quantifying the current repairs standards looking at the policy on 'emergency', 'urgent' and 'routine' repair works, and the scope of works currently undertaken, (e.g., fencing, and other renewals) which Housing consultant Ridge were also reviewing for the Council.

3.2.2 Officer response: There is no current policy or standard and therefore needs to be picked up as part of the suite of policy, procedures and processes we need to put in place as part of the Repairs service improvement plan.

3.3 Contractor focus

3.3.1 The review received a presentation from the SBC housing contractor focusing on some key stats including the breakdown on the volumes of works e.g., emergency, urgent etc., percentage of first-time fix, staffing overview, some examples of what's working well and where the challenges are.

3.3.2 Officer response:

- Housing Repairs look after circa 8,500 tenanted properties.
- During 2022/23 carried out over 2,000 emergency repairs, nearly 5,000 urgent repairs and over 14,000 routine repairs.
- 95% of repairs are fixed first time.

3.4 **Client focus**

3.4.1 The review sought to provide insight from the Council's housing consultant with an overview from the 'client' in terms of the work of Ridge, how the refreshed housing asset management strategy will hopefully increase the proactive / planned maintenance programmes and look at the need to review the Stevenage Standard i.e., the fencing policy.

3.4.2 Officer response: A summary of the findings from the Ridge review was shared with CSC Members at the Committee's meeting on 14th November, much of what Members heard echoed the findings of their own review with challenges around previously working in silos leading to poor communication between teams (separate Repairs and Investment teams) and with tenants, a lack of written procedures, and a need to improve the use of data.

3.5 **Current process for logging repairs**

3.5.1 During the site visit to the repairs team, Members looked at the current process officers use regarding receiving, logging and carrying out repairs to see if it is fit for purpose as Members are "concerned that the current processes do not appear to be straightforward or be running well".

3.5.2 Officer response: During the site visit on 29 08 23, Members saw the current IT software system for logging and allocating repair works. This system, coupled with a proactive workforce, enabled jobs to be logged and allocated in a logical way, so this has largely been dealt with now, but was dependent on a skilled team of officers to monitor the process interpreting the repairs requests to make sure the correct trades people are allocated the work. Therefore, the proposed new customer self-serve portal (NEC) for repairs would in the future need to be supported by accurate schedule of rates for the time and material required to complete the repair. In addition, the two instances where Members attended tenants' homes as part of their site visits, the trades people were unable to complete the repair due to the wrong information about it being communicated/logged, so there appears to be definite room for improvement.

3.6 **Streamlining the process to have single point of contact.**

3.6.1 Members had recommended that officers consider identifying ways to improve the current service including, where possible, streamlining the process to have one point of contact for tenants from the point they register a repair request this would help to co-ordinate all repairs in the property,

especially important in cases where there are multiple repairs needed in the same property.

- 3.6.2 Officer response: A single point of contact for tenants sounds attractive but could make matters worse. Within the Repairs service this isn't practicable, it's better that all staff have access to up-to-date information on repairs, so that anyone can deal with any queries. Not one person in the service manages the whole process. Initial reports come in via CSC (or increasingly will be on-line). Officers agree communications with customers' (and internally) needs to improve and this is a theme emerging from the Ridge review so improvements will need to have a heavy focus on this area.

3.7 **Improve Communications**

- 3.7.1 Improve Communications There were some cases where in the view of Members "the current process requires too many steps with too many operatives and subcontractors to get a repair resolved" Members were concerned that "Tenants are being told a repair will happen, then it doesn't and there doesn't appear to be any process for letting the tenant know what is going on and why," and "Communication about repairs is poor or non-existent leading to anger and frustration for tenants"

- 3.7.2 Officer response: As per other responses, communications (internal and external) will be a theme in the improvement plan – some of this is about policies, processes /procedures which will ensure clarity on roles and responsibilities, including communication with customers, but some of it is about culture and there will be an element of performance management in there too.

- 3.7.3 It was clear to the Committee from the interview with the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development, that the Executive Member was very unhappy with the way some officers were currently not communicating effectively to hand over work to the relevant teams, citing a persistent cultural problem with some officers not taking initiative or not responding to emails or telephone messages.

3.8 **Early indication of difficult cases**

- 3.8.1 Early identification of cases that could be described as in the "too difficult box" – (The context is a Member quoted a case where "there has been a flooding issue that has been going on for multiple years, and it appears that no one can get to the root cause of the problem, so it falls into the 'too difficult box'"

- 3.8.2 Officer response: Again, if we have good processes and procedures this will pick up complex cases/issues. Sometimes these arise because it is not clear if these are 'repairs' or 'major works' and responsibility can be blurred at present because there isn't currently a process for how teams manage these between them. Also, within Housing there is a need to build relationships between teams to support better collaborative working.

3.9 **Make better use of technology.**

3.9.1 Members asked officers to look at making better use of technology, an example provided was encouraging tenants to send a photo of the problem, such as a blown down fence, that perhaps doesn't need an officer to inspect before materials are ordered and repair booked etc. if the photo shows the extent of the repair.

3.9.2 Officer response: We already have the ability for tenants to send in photos to help with repairs diagnosis – Officers could look at how much this is used already in CSC and if we can promote this more with tenants. But again, need to manage expectations of tenants as it will not avoid inspections in all cases.

The Ridge review suggests we have appropriate technology to support the service but need to make better use of this, so again that will be a theme in the improvement plan. Examples:

- Using data on types of repairs to understand what drives demand on service and how we can reduce this through cyclical and planned works.
- Investigate remote diagnostic tools such as Switchee and Aico but more likely to be viable for a targeted % of stock as installation across the stock would take a long time and be very expensive in terms of both initial capital outlay and ongoing revenue requirements in terms of data monitoring and reporting but could look at business case but not until 2024/25 at earliest given other service priorities.

3.10 **Climate Implications regarding Housing Repairs & Scheduled Replacement Programmes**

3.10.1 Head of Climate Change Input: Housing Repair services have a significant role in decarbonising the Council's services. Firstly, in terms of direct emissions, the service's use of fuel must be monitored and aimed at reducing. The vehicle fleet renewal could be critical. SBC is currently analysing the switch from the current diesel used in our fleet to HVO (Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil), a biowaste-based fuel, which would reduce our fleet emissions by up to 90%. This is a temporary measure that must be complemented with the transition, in the short-term, from the current ICE vehicles to EVs. Based on the last available information we can observe that the housing fleet includes primarily mini and panel vans and a few caged tippers, travelling about 239,000 miles per year, using 32,500 litres of diesel and emitting 87.9 tonnes of CO₂, which is about 11% of our total fleet-related emissions.

3.10.2 If fuel is used in other machinery (non-road), this should also be monitored and electrical or energy efficient alternatives should be explored, subject to technological availability and costs.

- 3.10.3 Digitalising the diagnosis, creating platforms so that tenants can report problems and avoid in-person inspections would help to avoid business travel.
- 3.10.4 The successful outcomes from Housing Repairs services also have a relevant impact on the reduction of emissions in Stevenage, e.g., avoiding gas leakages or improving the energy efficiency.
- 3.10.5 Indirect emissions from the service must also be considered, particularly those related to carbon embodied in the materials, machinery and tools that are utilised. As the service is one of the most relevant in terms of the Council procurement, the sustainable and responsible procurement actions implemented are of interest. Issues such as increasing the lifespan of the materials, improving the energy efficiency and durability of the machinery or tools, and avoiding unnecessary packaging, as well as promoting local sourcing can be addressed.
- 3.10.6 Finally, it is also relevant to supervise the end of life of the products used by the service, in particular the waste management and the levels of repairing, reusing, and recycling that allow it to reduce the carbon footprint.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the Community Select Committee agrees the conclusions of the report as well as the recommendations below and that these will be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.

4.2 Recommendation 1- Development of a suite of Policies and Procedures for Housing Property Services:

- 4.2.1 That the Assistant Director Building Safety and Housing Property Services be recommended to develop a suite of policies, procedures and processes so that issues like quantifying the level of a repair into an agreed standard can be established which should help the authority manage repairs in a more planned way.

Reason:

There is no current repairs policy or standards and therefore needs to be picked up as part of the suite of policy, procedures and processes we need to put in place as part of the Repairs service improvement plan. The need for this recommendation is also referenced at paragraphs 3.5 (current process for logging repairs) and 3.8 (flagging and dealing with complex cases)

4.3 **Recommendation 2 – Improved Communication both internal and external:**

- 4.3.1 That (i) the Assistant Director Building Safety and Housing Property Services be recommended to improve communication both internal and external, ensuring that all team members communicate effectively with tenants and with colleagues to get repairs resolved quickly and efficiently; and (ii) the repairs service improve communications with tenants via direct engagement, social media and newsletters so that tenants are aware of the implications of missing appointments. When there are repeated failures to keep appointments there should be a charge made against the tenants rent account.

Reason:

- (i) As per other review findings, communications (internal and external) will be a theme in the Repairs improvement plan – some of this is about policies, processes /procedures which will ensure clarity on roles and responsibilities, including communication with customers, but some of it is about culture and there will be an element of performance management in there too, with Manager's ensuring that all teams communicate properly so that the repair task in hand is resolved as quickly and efficiently as possible within agreed response times and agreed solutions. The session with the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development made it clear that there needs to be a concerted effort to improve internal and external officer communications.
- (ii) During the site visit to the repairs team, it was apparent that it is commonplace for appointments not to be kept by tenants. The reason's stated for why appointments are not kept were as follows:
- The correct telephone number was not provided (a correct telephone number needs to be recorded with the original request)
 - The tenant not responding.

4.4 **Recommendation 3 – Make better use of technology:**

- 4.4.1 That officers make a better use of technology to enhance the service this could include (i) encouraging tenants to send in digital photos and videos of the repair; (ii) using data on in year repairs against previous years to see trends and to profile the type of work that would be expected in different age/style housing stock; (iii) consider as a future development using remote diagnostic tools that are available in the housing sector or the development of an in-house housing App that tenants could use to report on repairs and general stock condition.

Reason:

As detailed at paragraph 3.9 in the report Members have found that technology is already being used but there were many opportunities for the new technology to be embraced which was also a component of the independent Ridge Repairs review, which has recommended that electronic systems such as Switchee and Aico (remote diagnostic tools) be invested in.

4.5 **Recommendation 4 – Work with the Customer Service Centre regarding training:**

- 4.5.1 That the Assistant Director Building Safety and Housing Property Services (i) be invited to work with the Customer Services Centre (CSC) to improve training to help them clearly identify if the work is a repair or planned investment and (ii) develop a checklist of questions for use with CSC Officers to ask the tenants to ascertain as much information to accompany the original request.

Reason:

Following the site visit to the Repairs Team it was apparent to Members that the wrong information was being captured by the Customer Services Centre staff which caused confusion and delay with the repairs team.

4.6 **Recommendation 5 – Review of the booking system:**

- 4.6.1 That the scheduling system (DRS) be reviewed by the repairs team after the original booking and prior to sending out repairs operatives to ensure everything is in place to avoid the need for a future visit.

Reason:

As above, this was evidenced by Members during their site visit to the repairs team.

4.7 **Recommendation 6 – Streamline working between Investment and Repairs:**

- 4.7.1 Notwithstanding that the Investment and Repairs teams are now within the same business unit, there is still a need for the investment and repairs teams to have closer collaboration between them with a standardised process whereby the repair's team are not relied upon to attend a job only to discover it is an investment team consideration not a repair. When this is the case, communication to be provided to the tenant to avoid the case appearing to fall into a 'black hole'. If a case is passed from repairs to investment - repairs closes the case which when reported causes confusion and frustration.

Reason:

As observed by Members during the evidence gathering sessions, and based on their experience of ward cases, there are currently incidents of poor communication from time to time amongst officers that need to be improved to provide a more seamless service to improve the customer experience.

4.8 **Recommendation 7 – Development of an audit trail via a tracker for each repair /enquiry:**

- 4.8.1 That the process and journey of each tenant's request for a repair (whether it be defined as a repair or housing investment) be able to be traced and the initial request is the start of the timeline for the resident.

Reason:

Members were of the view that a tracker should be established for every type of repair request to show tenants where they are in their customer journey and provide an accurate timeline for a repair with various milestones recorded throughout.

4.9 **Recommendation 8 – Development of Customer Self-serve App:**

- 4.9.1 That the booking hub that is currently under development be brought back to Community Select Committee Members to view to establish the efficacy of the booking system. While there are improvements in use of technology, it will remain the case that there will be residents who cannot access it and officers will need to resume a client facing approach.

Reason:

In relation to the booking hub, Members were advised that this was currently under development but that it was envisaged that a customer could report a repair and make an appointment at the same time. Members were concerned that this was likely to cause issues with customers mis-diagnosing an issue and the wrong operatives being sent out to a property. Officers assured Members that the schedulers would review the reported repairs to consider the most appropriate operative to be sent out. It was agreed that this issue should be re-considered by the Committee once the booking hub was operational.

4.10 **Recommendation 9 – Collecting feedback from all stakeholders**

- 4.10.1 To collect feedback on performance from all stakeholders.

Reason:

It was evident that tenants, Members and the Portfolio Holder are all unclear on the existing processes. In order to evaluate any new policy, feedback should be collected to establish its success. The aim will be clear understanding of the journey of an individual case and the decisions attached to it.

5.1 Legal Implications

- 5.1.1 There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.2 Equalities Implications

5.2.1 The main group who are affected by seeking Housing repairs are the tenants who are predominantly from lower income households or who are in receipt of benefits and are otherwise spread across the other 9 recognised E&D protected characteristic groups. Having an accessible service for disabled and low-income households is therefore very important. If tenants are left with a property that is in need of repair and the matter takes in some cases many weeks to resolve this puts them at a disadvantage as they are relying on a good service from the Council as their Landlord.

5.3 Climate Change Implications

5.3.1 The climate change implications are detailed at paragraph 3.10.

APPENDICES:

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS – [Notes of Site Visit to Housing Repairs Team 29 August 2023.pdf \(stevenage.gov.uk\)](#)