

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Housing and Housing Development
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RESPONSIVE REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE POLICY

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KEY DECISION

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To present a new draft Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy, which will be subject to further consultation with tenants and leaseholders, ahead of a final version being presented for approval later in the year.
- 1.2 The key objective of the policy is to keep residents' homes safe and in a good state of repair, and in so doing provide assurance that the Council is meeting legal and regulatory requirements.
- 1.3 This policy supports the Council's Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan 2024-2029 and the key priority of maintaining good quality homes.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Cabinet consider and approve the draft Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy, which will be subject to further tenant and leaseholder consultation, for no less than 6 weeks.
- 2.2 For the final Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy to be presented to the Cabinet for approval in Quarter 3, 2024/25.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 A good repairs and maintenance service is one of the most important services provided by a social landlord. Not only is it the service that affects the greatest proportion of tenants, but it is also the service that is most highly valued and can have the greatest impact on tenants' quality of life.
- 3.2 Resident satisfaction with the delivery of repairs and maintenance services is a key focus area for the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 and the Safety and Quality Standard set out the following expectations of Registered Social Housing Providers:
- (1) that repairs and maintenance issues should be able to be reported easily;
 - (2) that timescales for the completion of repairs are clearly communicated to tenants and that take appropriate steps are taken to deliver to them;
 - (3) that tenants are kept informed about repairs and maintenance to their homes, with clear and timely communication;
 - (4) that landlords understand and fulfil their maintenance responsibilities in respect of communal areas;
 - (5) that the delivery of repairs and maintenance is informed by the needs of tenants and provides value for money.
- 3.3 As a Registered Provider, the Council is required to meet a range of regulatory and legislative responsibilities. To achieve this there is a need to ensure that there is an adequate level of oversight, awareness and understanding of key issues and responsibilities around responsive repairs and maintenance.
- 3.4 When considering overall satisfaction across the social housing sector, the Housemark Membership and Sector Performance Mid-Year Report shows a significant decline in satisfaction over the last five years. A number of factors are believed to have influenced this trend, including the Covid-19 Pandemic, the UK economic downturn, cost of living, material availability, cost inflation, labour availability and the energy crisis etc.
- 3.5 In response to tenant feedback and complaints information the Council commissioned an external consultancy company to review its Repairs and Maintenance service. The review was completed during 2023 and an improvement plan has been developed and is being implemented. This includes the need to have a clear Repairs and Maintenance Policy, which sets out clear roles and responsibilities of the Council and its tenants.
- 3.6 Despite the significant challenges and difficult decisions that the Council has faced, the Council remains financially resilient and continues to deliver improvements to its housing repairs and maintenance services, including:
- a. The council completed 19,780 repair jobs and in Quarter 4 reported the following: 92% (3593) of 3906 non-emergency repairs were completed on time. 91.5% (3980) of all repairs (4347) were completed on time. 135 void property refurbishment works were completed, which has reduced the number of voids that are 'work in progress' to 38 during Q1 2024/25.

b. In addition, further training and expansion of the Customer Service Centre (CSC) Knowledge Base has helped increase staff knowledge and access to timely information, which has reduced the average call response and handling times for repairs.

c. A service review of both Voids and Repairs was completed in 2023/24 along with Scrutiny Reviews of the Repairs and Void Service by the Community Select Committee. The recommendations made have informed the Council's improvement plans that are to be delivered over the next 12-18 months.

d. Following a review of current arrangements, new interim contractors have been appointed to support the Repairs Service, including for specialist works such as roofing, pending a procurement process to award longer-term contracts in 2024/25.

e. A fencing programme has been put in place by the Housing Investment team, which carried out fencing works on 342 properties in 2023/24 and aims to clear the historic backlog of fencing repair jobs during 2024/25.

f. New ways of working for the Repairs Supervisors and Maintenance Surveyors have been introduced to increase first time fix rates, productivity, and customer satisfaction.

g. Developed a 'Booking Hub', a new online reporting repairs service, which will allow customers to select their own repair appointment times, which has been released in-house for testing, prior to being offered to tenants.

h. The Council entered into the final year of its Major Refurbishment Programme (£50m+) raising the standard and quality of over 500 plus low to medium sized flat blocks.

i. Building Safety and Investment Plans were approved by the Executive in July 2023 (10 buildings in scope including 2 new build schemes delivered in 2023/24).

j. All building safety regulatory milestones have been met and 100% compliance across all safety measures (Gas, Fire, Water, Lift, Asbestos) was achieved in May 2024.

k. 94% of the Council's housing stock met the national Decent Homes Standard. This improvement in performance is as an outcome of the annual 3-star gas servicing contract which is now well established and ensures that where a boiler is deemed in poor condition and in need of replacement this will be actioned immediately, ahead of the replacement through the planned programme.

3.7 The Housing Repairs Service was subject to scrutiny review by the Council's Community Select Committee during 2023/24, and a set of recommendation were approved on 9 March 2023. The recommendations of the Committee have been used to help inform the new draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy.

3.8 In response to the independently commissioned and internal scrutiny reviews and a detailed assessment against the Regulator of Social Housing Consumer Standards, the Council has developed a Repairs Improvement Programme. The related projects are being delivered as part of the Corporate

Transformation Programme to address the root causes of the issues highlighted.

- 3.9 The Council is currently procuring new support contractors for the Repairs and Voids service to help deliver this policy successfully. A report on the proposed contract award will be presented to Cabinet in Quarter 3 2024/25.
- 3.10 Work is also underway to develop an internal agreement between Housing Asset Management (client) and Repairs and Maintenance (internal contractor) teams to establish effective monitoring of the implementation of this policy.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 The draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy can be seen in Appendix A.
- 4.2 Tenant and Leaseholder consultation commenced in February 2024. This initially targeted tenants and leaseholders who had raised a repair in the last 12 months and was later expanded to focus groups and pop-up events across the town and social media. Approximately 100 responses had been received by the end of June 2024.
- 4.3 Key feedback themes include the need to:
 - improve communication and information sharing (newsletters, reminders, leaflets);
 - listen to customers and acting on feedback;
 - clear roles and responsibilities between SBC and customers;
 - undertake regular inspections of all council owns homes;
 - improve the level of customer service;
 - reduce waiting times for certain jobs and ensure all repairs are completed within timescales.
- 4.4 The new policy has been developed taking into account the feedback from residents, the revised Complaint Handling Code and Housing Ombudsman Service reports including the most recent on *Attitudes, respect and rights – relationship of equals*.
- 4.5 The main revisions to the policy include:
 - a. Clear roles and responsibilities (tenants, leaseholders and Council).
 - b. Priorities and timescales.
 - c. Appointments and missed appointments.
 - d. Access to properties.
 - e. Rechargeable repairs.
- 4.6 Appendix 1 of the main policy sets out a Fencing Policy which seeks to standardise the specifications of all types of fencing work SBC will undertake within its housing stock. This will not only help manage expectations and

demands on the service but help ensure costs are sustainable within the HRA Business Plan.

- 4.7 The Fencing Policy has been shaped using benchmarking information and the approach is in line with that taken by many other local authorities. The draft Fencing Policy can be found in Appendix B.
- 4.8 As part of the policy review, work is being undertaken to identify possible recharges to be applied in relation to missed appointments. This will be incorporated in the recommendations for the final version of the policy which will be presented to Cabinet for approval during Quarter 3 2024/2025.
- 4.9 The Policy is supported by a new Reasonable Adjustment Policy, which sets out how the Council will adjust the provision of services to meet the needs of vulnerable residents to ensure fair access to services.
- 4.10 The draft Policy has been shared with the Housing Ombudsman for comment.
- 4.11 It is recommended that the draft policy should be put out for further consultation to seek views of tenants and leaseholders, for no less than 6 weeks. A range of consultation methods such as face-to-face focus group(s) and an online engagement platform, will be used to ensure people have the opportunity to engage with the Council in a way that suits them.
- 4.12 The Executive Housing Working Group considered the draft policy on the 26 June 2024 and has endorsed the proposed approach to consultation.
- 4.13 It is recommended that the final version of the policy should be presented to the Executive Housing Working Group in September 2024 for endorsement, and then be reported to the Cabinet for approval during Quarter 3 2024/25.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 Additional resources to help implement the Repairs and Maintenance Policy has been outlined within the Q4 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report, which is being considered by the Cabinet alongside this report.
- 5.2 The policy will be used to inform the development of the HRA Medium Term Financial Strategy and the 2025/26 budget and is being reviewed in context with other required legislative changes and service-related pressures.
- 5.3 The policy will help reduce future disrepair claims and repairs complaint related compensation awards that result from outstanding repairs within Council owned properties.
- 5.4 It is envisioned that the policy would incorporate a reasonable recharge in relation to missed appointments by customers, which will be included in the final updated policy, after the consultation exercise is completed.

Legal Implications

- 5.5 The legal obligations are listed within the policy. The policy has been developed in line with the legal and regulatory requirements.

Risk Implications

- 5.6 The adoption of the policy will help mitigate risks around tenant safety in the homes that the Council manages. However, to further mitigate the risks associated with outstanding repairs and maintenance, it is essential to ensure the policy is appropriately embedded in working practices. To ensure effective implementation the policy will need to be underpinned by supporting procedures and associated training for staff.
- 5.7 The risks are mitigated by the tracking of performance against key performance indicators and ensuring compliance with the Consumer Standards in relation to Quality and Safety.

Equality and Diversity Implications

- 5.8 Equality and Diversity implications are monitored and evaluated within the delivery of the service. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been produced and will be updated in line with the review process for this policy.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- BD1 Fencing Policy – Benchmarking
- BD2 Equality Impact Assessment

APPENDICES

- A Proposed Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy
- B Proposed Fencing Policy