

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 final version of the Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy for approval following consultation with tenants and leaseholders.
- 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 Cabinet note the outcomes from the consultation with tenants and leaseholders on the Repairs and Maintenance Policy and how this is reflected in the final version.
- 2.2 That Cabinet approve the inclusion of a recharge policy for missed appointments by tenants which aligns with the compensation payable to tenants for missed appointments by the Council.
- 2.3 Subject to recommendation 2.2 above that Cabinet approve the Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy attached at Appendix A.

- 2.4 That Cabinet note that the Policy will become effective from 1 January 2025 and that this will be publicised on the Council's website.

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 and the overall level of satisfaction with their landlord.
- 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 in 2023 the Council commissioned an external consultancy to review its Repairs and Maintenance service. The outcome of the independent review led to an improvement plan which is currently being implemented. This includes the need to have a 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 in 2023/24 and 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 which are included on the Forward Plan for Cabinet approval later 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 replacement work during 2024/25. The Repairs and Maintenance team have also completed the backlog of repair only type jobs through sourcing contractor support as well as using in-house Operatives.

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. Development of a 'Booking Hub', a new online service which will allow customers to select their own repair appointment times for certain types of repairs, which is still being tested prior to being launched to tenants later in 2024/25.

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 recommendations were approved on 8 January 2024. The progress against each of the agreed recommendations is set out in the table below:

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
1	Development of a suite of Policies and Procedures for Housing Property Services		
	Develop a suite of policies, procedures and processes so that issues like quantifying the level of a repair	The improvement plans for the Repairs service includes the development of relevant policies, procedures, processes and service standards to which customers can hold SBC accountable as their landlord.	Green

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
	into an agreed standard can be established which should help the authority manage repairs in a more planned way.	Update: Repairs and Maintenance Policy being presented to Cabinet for approval at this meeting.	
2	Improved Communications (internal and external)		
	<p>(i) To ensure that staff communicate effectively with tenants and with colleagues to get repairs resolved quickly and efficiently;</p> <p>(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.</p>	<p>(i) Engage with customers more effectively when dealing with repair requests, keeping them updated on progress and provide opportunities to help shape services including consultation on relevant policies and standards.</p> <p>Progress to date – consultation with residents carried out as part of the development of the Repairs and Maintenance Policy.</p> <p>Fewer complaints being received relating to the Repairs service whilst learning is being identified and used to improve the service.</p> <p>To improve communications and collaboration between teams to ensure that customers receive a seamless repairs service.</p> <p>(ii) As part of the implementation of the Repairs and Maintenance Policy charges for missed appointments by customers will be made where appropriate. To raise awareness a range of communication methods will be used.</p>	Green

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
3	<p>Make better use of technology</p> <p>This could include:</p> <p>(i) encouraging tenants to send in digital photos and videos of the repair;</p> <p>(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 of housing stock;</p> <p>(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.</p>	<p>(i) To enable more customers to use digital technology to report repairs, including submission of photos and/or video evidence to help improve the % of repairs which can be diagnosed accurately at first point of contact which in turn should improve first time fix rates and maximise productivity.</p> <p>Update: this remains a work in progress and requires development of key housing business systems and processes which is dependent on implementation of the NEC upgrade and migration roadmap.</p> <p>(ii) Improving data quality and making better use of data to understand trends, inform service improvements and investment needs of the stock is a key workstream within the Repairs improvement plans.</p> <p>Update: repairs data is being used to inform the refresh of the asset review and for budget-setting purposes.</p> <p>(iii) The use of remote diagnostic tools such as Aico devices is being made in a targeted way in a small number of properties, for example to monitor environmental conditions and exposure to risk of condensation and mould. The expansion of their use in more of our housing stock will be explored subject to a business case being agreed and being affordable within the HRA Business Plan.</p> <p>Update: monitoring data from the pilot properties needs to be analysed over a period to inform future plans so still too early to look at wider business case.</p>	Amber

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
		<p>(iv) There are plans to reintroduce an on-line 'repairs finder' tool to help customers when reporting their repairs and the CSC will also be able to use this when speaking with customers reporting repairs by telephone to help accurately diagnose repairs at first point of contact. The Repairs service will work closely with the CSC to update the Knowledge Base which will help maximise the number of calls about repairs that can be dealt with at first point of contact. Other tools that may be available on the market which could help improve the customer experience when reporting and keeping track of their repairs will also be explored. The enhancement of on-line housing accounts to enable updates to be provided on the status of reported repairs will be considered where this would help customers to self-serve at a time that suits them.</p> <p>Update: Due to the prioritisation of the migration of the NEC housing system to the Cloud, this project has been deferred and will be reprioritised for delivery during 2025/26.</p>	
4	Work with the Customer Service Centre regarding training	<p>Reintroducing 'Repairs Finder' and working with the CSC to ensure that the Knowledge Base is up to date and sufficiently comprehensive should enable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) customer enquiries about repairs (and/or investment) to be dealt with appropriately at first point of contact and, (ii) accurate repairs diagnosis enabling the right Operative or contractor to be assigned to carry out the work improving first time fix rates and customer satisfaction. 	Amber

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
		Update: The Repairs team have been working with CSC to ensure scripts and associated processes are up to date and work effectively and this is an ongoing process. This will help to inform the configuration and implementation of a Repairs Finder Tool.	
5	Review of the booking system (DRS)	<p>Review the workflow process to include a checking mechanism to ensure the right resource is allocated to a job based on the information available. However, we are reliant on information provided by customers and even with the utilisation of tools such as Repairs Finder this risk cannot be fully eliminated as given the high volume of repairs reported each year these cannot all be checked prior to attending site.</p> <p>Update: the first-time fix repairs KPI for 2024/25 as reported to Cabinet as part of the quarterly performance monitoring report shows a high percentage of jobs are being completed on the first visit but where this is not the case the root causes are being picked up through customer and Operative feedback and addressed as part of learning.</p>	Green
6	Streamline working between Housing Asset Management and Repairs teams	<p>The Repairs improvement plan incorporates actions around improving communication and ways of working across teams to ensure a seamless service for customers and promoting a customer care culture. This will be supported by development of policies, processes and procedures to ensure clarity on and consistent ways of working.</p> <p>Some positive progress has been made on how teams work together for example in managing the fencing repairs backlog and working on protocols for determining when a replacement is required rather than a repair for key components in a home such as windows, doors, kitchens and bathrooms. But more work is required to get written procedures in place and</p>	Green

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
		embedded within the teams and build and sustain an SBC values-based culture. This will be one of the priorities for the new Head of Repairs and Voids once appointed.	
7	Development of an audit trail via a tracker for each repair/enquiry	<p>This requires making better use of existing systems to enable the data to be held by and/or accessible within NEC, for example via the integrated scheduling software (DRS).</p> <p>Update: Whilst some progress has been made in adopting a case management approach further development of this approach is dependent on delivery of the housing systems roadmap which in turn is dependent on migration of the NEC system into the Cloud as this will enable the system to be upgraded and wider functionality accessed.</p>	Amber
8	<p>Development of Customer Self-serve App</p> <p>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 system. While there are improvements in use of technology, it will remain the case that there will be residents who cannot access on-line services and officers will need to offer a customer facing approach.</p>	<p>Whilst developing a Booking Hub to promote reporting repairs on-line other methods will continue to be offered to ensure the service is accessible to all customers.</p> <p>The system will shortly move into the testing phase. Subject to the outcome of the testing a soft launch date for the Booking Hub will be set and it anticipated that this will be within Q4 2024/25.</p>	Amber

	Recommendation	Actions agreed and progress to date	RAG status
9	Collecting feedback from all stakeholders	<p>Officers will collect and respond to feedback from all relevant stakeholders including customers, staff and elected members on how the service is performing. This will be reflected in service specific and corporate KPI's and reported to the Executive Housing Working Group and Cabinet.</p> <p>Update: performance reporting is included on the agenda for EHWG and also Cabinet as part of the quarterly performance report. Feedback from customers is received via the TSM's, transactional surveys and complaints and member enquiries are responded to with themes identified used to inform service improvements as reported to the fortnightly complaints handling clinics chaired by the Housing and Housing Development Portfolio Holder.</p>	Green

- 3.8 The outcomes from the scrutiny carried out by the Committee have been used to help inform the Repairs and Maintenance Policy and the wider Repairs improvement plan.
- 3.9 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.
- 3.10 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.
- 3.11 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.

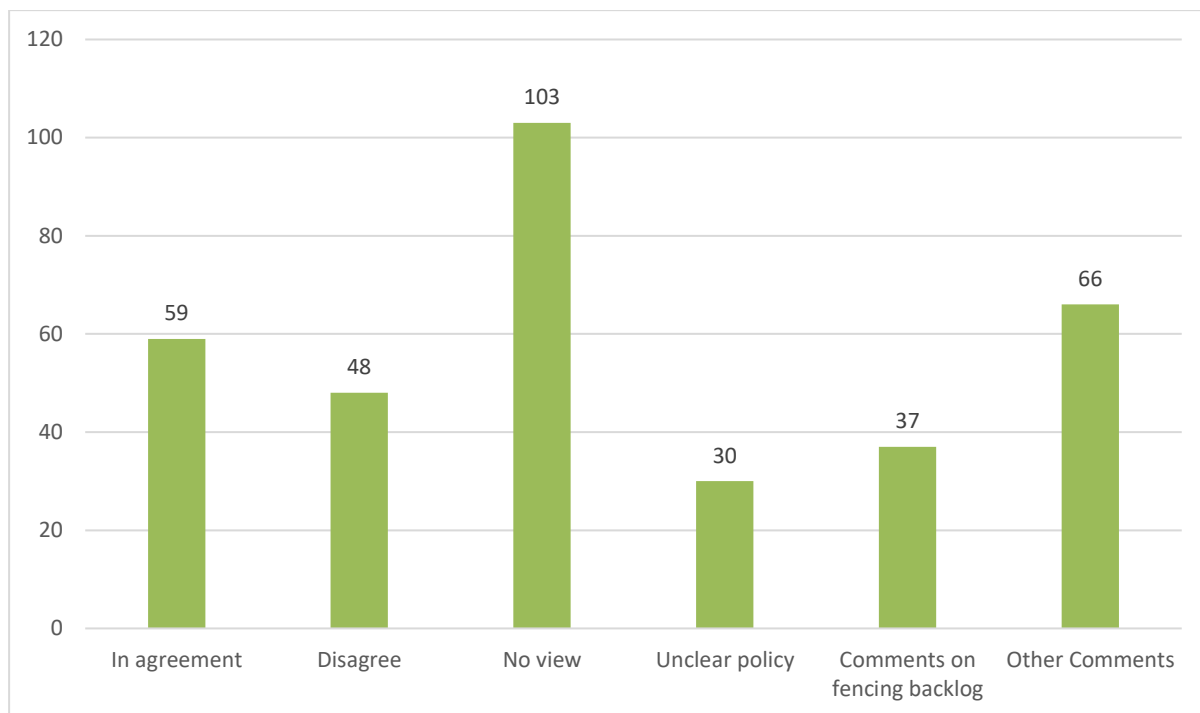
- 3.12 The Council is currently procuring new support contractors for the Repairs and Voids service to help deliver this policy successfully. A report on the proposed contract award will be presented to Cabinet in Quarter 4 2024/25.
- 3.13 Work is also underway to develop an internal agreement between Housing Asset Management (client) and Repairs and Maintenance (internal contractor) teams to establish effective monitoring of the implementation of this policy.
- 3.14 A pre-consultation draft of the Policy was presented in Cabinet in July 2024, the recommendation to carry out further consultation between August-September 2024 on the Policy was approved.
- 3.15 The Fencing Policy was agreed to be included as an appendix to the main Repairs and Maintenance Policy, this approach is to enable future policies such as planned & cyclical maintenance to be included as appendices to the main overarching Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 The final version of the Repairs and Maintenance Policy is attached at Appendix A.
- 4.2 Appendix B sets out the draft 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.
- 4.3 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*.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 The Fencing Policy has been shaped using benchmarking information and the approach is in line with that taken by many other local authorities.
- 4.6 As part of the policy review, work has been being undertaken to identify possible recharges to be applied in relation to missed appointments by tenants. This has been incorporated in the recommendations. The recharge would be subject to manager discretion to ensure that any genuine reasons

for missed appointments can be taken into account making a decision on a recharge. The level of recharge is aligned with the compensation payable to tenants for missed appointments by the Council. The current Compensation Policy allows tenants to claim for any appointments the Council or contractors working on behalf of do not attend.

- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 The draft Policy has been shared for information with the Housing Ombudsman.
- 4.9 The Executive Housing Working Group (EHWG) considered the draft policy on the 26 June 2024 and endorsed the proposed approach to consultation.
- 4.10 The draft policy was shared for further consultation to seek views of tenants and leaseholders, this took place between August and September 2024. A range of consultation methods such as face-to-face focus group(s) and an online engagement platform, was used to ensure residents had the opportunity to engage with the Council in a way that suits them.
- 4.11 From the consultation 343 responses were received. Some of the feedback from the consultation includes:
 - Responsibilities for tenant's, leaseholders, and the Council: majority of respondents (80%) stated that responsibilities are clear.
 - Views on a charge being implemented for missed appointments: once again the majority of respondents were in agreement that it is implemented, the responses however come with a caveat that the Council should also pay compensation to residents for appointments that are not upheld. For information, there is provision in the Compensation Policy for missed appointments by the Council.
 - Residents who use the Housing Online account and how easy it is to report a repair: the majority find reporting a repair 'somewhat easy', however there are a number of respondents that said that they find it 'neither easy nor difficult' and 'difficult to report a repair'.
 - Reasonable adjustments that may need to be factored into the policy: the majority, 62% responded 'No'. The respondents that answered 'Yes' to this question, some of the common themes include the ability to have flexible appointments and disability support needs to be accounted for within the policy.
 - Views on the Fencing Policy: the majority of respondents did not have a view on the proposed policy with the split of responses shown below:



4.12 From the consultation feedback received alterations have been made to the policies, these include:

- Easy read versions have been created.
- Wording has been amended within the policy particularly clarification on repairs to windows and the elements that can be repaired i.e., replacement hinges, handles, blown units.
- A change within the 'responsive repairs responsibilities' chart, 'Glazing accidentally broken caused by Council or contractors' changed from tenant responsibility to SBC - this was due to an error with the chart and has been rectified.

4.13 The final version of the Repairs and Maintenance Policy was considered by the Executive Housing Working Group on 7 November 2024 who endorsed the Policy as attached as Appendix A and B and supported the recommendations set out in this report.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

5.1 Additional resources which will support the implementation of the Repairs and Maintenance Policy has been outlined within the Q4 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report which was considered at the Cabinet meeting in July and subsequently an additional budget request was approved by Full Council on 31 July 2024.

5.2 The policy will be used to inform the 2025/26 budget-setting process along with other required legislative changes and service-related pressures.

- 5.3 The policy should mitigate against future disrepair claims and repairs complaint related compensation awards that result from outstanding repairs within Council owned properties.
- 5.4 The policy incorporates a reasonable recharge in relation to missed appointments by customers, which aligns with the compensation payable to tenants for missed appointments by the Council in accordance with the Compensation Policy.

Legal Implications

- 5.5 The policy has been developed in line with the legal and regulatory requirements as set out in the Policy.

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, a copy of which is included at Appendix B. This will be updated in line with the review process for this policy and/or when there are any changes in relevant legislation whichever is sooner.
- 5.9 The Policy recognises that some tenants or members of their household may require additional considerations to facilitate the completion of their responsive repairs and can request that the council make reasonable adjustments in multiple ways including in person, in writing for example by email or post or by telephone.
- 5.10 To ensure accessibility of the Policy to all members of the community an easy read version of the Policy is available and will be published on the website and copies of the Policy can also be provided in suitable alternative formats upon request.
- 5.11 The EqiA will be updated alongside Policy reviews to ensure that in practice tenants and leaseholders are considered fairly and consistently, that the service is accessible to all, individual needs are recognised and reasonable adjustments are made in line with the Reasonable Adjustments Policy.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- BD1 Fencing Policy – Benchmarking
- BD2 Consultation Data Analysis

APPENDICES

- A Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy (incorporating a Fencing Policy)

- B Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)