
Select Committee on the Environment – 29th January 2007

Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Review of Zonal Housing Repairs and Service Standards for Repairs

Purpose of Report

1. To report on the reduction of the backlog of non-urgent repairs within Housing Services, provide an overview of how the current Housing Repairs Service operates and advise of performance improvements, within the repairs service, since 2003/04.

Background

2. As at April 2003, Housing Services had a large backlog of non-urgent repairs and improvements to its housing stock of 25,300 properties (as at 1st April 2003). This backlog included some 5,000 jobs, which had already been inspected and scheduled, but were awaiting start on site and a further 12,500 inspection requests made by tenants.
3. The majority of these service requests were reported since January 2001. However, some high value works were originally reported in August 1999. During 2002/03, inspections were completed within 267 days, on average, from the date the tenant made a service request to an officer visiting their home. Depending on the nature and scope of the works, tenants were then often required to wait a further one to two years before the works were undertaken at their property.
4. During 2003, Cabinet approval was obtained to commence an 8-year plan to deliver the Governments Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and to eliminate the repairs backlog, which was then valued at approximately £13million.
5. Throughout 2003 and early 2004, a major initiative to complete the outstanding inspections and promptly respond to newly arising repair requests was undertaken. This provided Housing Services with an accurate forecast of repair and improvement expenditure and provided the Directorate with the ability to batch and group works activity.
6. In April 2004, a programme of Zonal Repairs commenced. These programmes broadly grouped similar activities together, e.g. internal

works, external works, paving, windows. Each 'Zone' was defined as each Local/Estate Area.

7. Predetermined timescales were provided to Housing's Call Centre and Housing Managers to improve communication to tenants who were waiting for previously reported repairs and those who were reporting new requests. Delivering these works on a Zonal basis also provided additional benefits, including more effective works planning, enhanced supervision, improved use of specialist external contractors and significant reductions in works costs.
8. During 2005/06, following the result of the Housing Options Appraisal, reviews of Repairs Policies and Service Standards were also undertaken. These included;
 - Service Standards and timescales for day to day repairs
 - Enhanced Services for those with disabilities and the elderly
 - Empty Homes (Void) Repairs Standard
 - Exterior Paving and Steps Policy
 - Boundary Walls Policy
 - Fencing and Gates Policy
9. These reviews ensured policies and Service Standards were aligned within available financial resources, as well as embracing modern best practice where possible. Detailed consultation was undertaken with tenants, the Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association and Housing Area Panels. The results of these reviews and revised Service Standards were communicated to tenants in the form of a 'Repairs Handbook', which was delivered to every tenant and Leaseholder's home during the spring of 2006.

Inspections

10. When a customer reports a service request, it may be necessary for an officer to undertake an inspection to establish the full scope of the works necessary. During the inspection, the officer will also identify if any preparative work is necessary e.g. asbestos sampling, and where appropriate, will discuss any tenants choice options that may apply to the works, e.g. choice of door, worktop, glazed tiles colours, style and colour of exterior door etc. Since April 2006, all non-urgent pre-works inspections are subject to a maximum of a 28 day Service Standard. Currently, over 99% of inspections are being completed within this service standard.
11. Housing Call Centre operators have received detailed training and have fault diagnostic systems available to them to ensure pre-works inspections are kept to a minimum. This reduces the timescales any customer can expect to have works completed, allows more officers to be assigned to supervisory and quality control duties and ensures

operatives attend site at the earliest opportunity to prevent minor repairs escalating.

12. However, since 2004 Housing Services has experienced a significant and sustained increased demand for pre-works inspections. Although the housing stock has reduced by approximately 2,000 properties, mainly through tenants exercising their Right to Buy, inspection demand has increased from 10,000 per annum (2003/04) to a projected 27,000 inspections for 2006/07. Despite this significant increase in demand and limited availability of personnel, the current average number of calendar days to complete these inspections is 22 days.
13. The current common 'reasons' for inspection requests from customers include;
 - External Works (e.g. paving and fencing) (19.42%)
 - External Doors (15.12%)
 - Plastering (12.71%)

With the exception of garages, an inspection for a new bathroom is currently the least common reason for an inspection request (3.95%).

Request Type	% of inspections
External Works (paths etc)	19.42%
External Doors	15.12%
Plastering	12.71%
Facades (gutters, roofing)	11.17%
Windows	9.79%
Reports of Damp	9.45%
Kitchens	9.28%
Internal Carpentry & Floors	7.56%
Bathroom Works	3.95%
Garages	1.55%

13. In order to reduce the demand for these inspections, Housing Services is further reviewing its internal processes and training to ensure accurate details and scope of any works can be obtained at the first point of contact, where possible. Craft operatives are also being trained to reduce the necessity for officers to undertake 'follow-up' inspections. These are often necessary where the repair is larger or more complicated than first expected. Further guidance and promotion of the Councils repairs responsibilities and Service Standards are planned during 2007, within the Home Affairs magazine. Topics to be highlighted will include the differences between damp and condensation, clarify the Decent Homes Standard and publicise future planned programmes e.g. external painting.

Reactive Repairs

14. Housing Services undertakes approximately 80,000 reactive repairs per annum. These are undertaken by teams of multiskilled Quick Response operatives, electricians and our gas partner CHN Ltd.
15. Reactive repairs are grouped into three main bands:
 - Emergency Repairs - within 24 hours (some repairs will receive a 2 hour response, e.g. out of hours, tenants locked out, etc)
 - Urgent Repairs – within 7 calendar days
 - Non-urgent Repairs – within 28 calendar days
16. To improve operational efficiency and customer service, since the summer of 2005, tenants have been offered appointments for urgent and non-urgent repairs. In 2005/06 Housing Services kept over 96% of the appointments it made with tenants and overall customer satisfaction with the Reactive Repairs service remains high.
17. Since 2006, detailed training programmes have been undertaken to enhance the skills of the Quick Response workforce. This ‘upskilling’ not only ensures that the quality of works continually improves, but also increases rates of completion on first visit and increases operational flexibility to assign operatives to a wider range of larger duration works.
18. The Quick Response teams primarily focus on all works that have not been pre-inspected by an officer and typically undertake all works that require less than one working day to complete. Where works are expected to take more than one day to complete depot based craft teams or specialist contractors are generally utilised.
19. The major initiative to eliminate the repairs backlog was effectively completed by the Autumn of 2006. The zonal delivery approach contributed to the success of clearing these repairs in a little over 2 years and at a reduced cost. However, as the necessary volume of repairs are no longer available to batch or group repairs, to achieve the necessary efficiencies of operating a zonal approach, repairs are no longer delivered on a Zonal basis. From the 1st April 2006, all repairs are delivered within time bound service standards. Depending on the nature and type of the work, customers are advised of the appropriate service standard that applies to their fault, as published in the Repairs Handbook, and where necessary a mutually convenient appointment is agreed.

20. Reactive Repairs Performance;

	Completion against target 2003/04	Completion against target 2005/06
Out Of Hours Emergency	100%	100%
In Hours Emergency	99.2%	100%
Urgent 7 Day	60.0%	90.76%
Non-urgent 28 day	97.4% #	95.7%
	(# 42 day service standard then applied)	

21. Reactive Repairs Expenditure;

- Out of Hours £ 398,000
- In Hours Emergency £ 919,000
- Urgent – 7 Day response £1,641,000
- Non-urgent – 28 day response £6,946,000

Decent Homes Standard Improvement Programmes

22. Capital Improvement programmes are continuing to be used as the primary mechanism to ensure the Council achieves the Governments Decent Homes Standard (DHS) by 2010.

23. Two main DHS work programmes are currently in progress and are expected to continue through to 2010;

- Internal Works e.g. Kitchens, bathrooms, extensive plastering
- External Works e.g. Roofing, gutters, fascias

24. These improvement works are grouped within each Local Estate/Area and delivered in a concentrated manner using a combination of direct labour operatives and specialist contractors. Where applicable, a wide range of Tenants Choice options are available and high levels of communication is maintained by regular meetings between Housing Managers and works managers.

25. Housings Repairs Management Centre has access to improvement programmes and schedules, currently through to April 2008, to provide tenants with accurate forecasts on completion timescales.

26. Currently most improvements carried out through these programmes have originated through tenant service requests and subsequent inspections. Typical timescales for Capital improvement works to be completed, e.g. complete kitchen replacement, from a tenant request is 9 to 12 months.

27. From April 2007, Decent Homes Standard (DHS) Improvements will also be completed following programmed stock condition surveys undertaken by Housing officers and our external partners. Data from these surveys and works requested by tenants will be co-ordinated by each District Repairs Manager, at the depots, to ensure consistency of approach and a central point of contact.
28. A rewiring programme will commence during the summer of 2007, for properties that require upgrading to modern electrical safety standards.
29. Although not directly contributing to meeting the DHS, additional programmes operate to ensure maintenance and improvements are delivered in the most effective and economical manner, examples include, the installation of replacement uPVC windows and doors, structural and environmental works and external painting.
30. Typical annual improvement spend;
 - Internal DHS (kitchens etc) £2.7million
 - External DHS (roofing etc) £1.9million
 - UPVC Windows and Doors £1.9million
 - Structural and Environmental Works £1.7million

Further Service Enhancements

31. A number of quality control and customer satisfaction data collection methods are employed across the repairs service. These include both random and targeted post inspections, quality audits, postal and telephone customer satisfaction surveys following works, regardless of size or scope. Officers also regularly receive feedback from customers and their representatives, which form an integral part of Building Services performance management regime and ensure service improvements are inline with tenant's expectations and, where possible, meet their needs. Resulting from this approach a number of further service enhancements are scheduled to be implemented during 2007.
32. Written Confirmation - From January 2007, when an officer has undertaken a pre-works inspection at a tenant's home, written documentation will be left. This 'receipt' will confirm to the tenant the result of inspection, including what works will be undertaken, the timescales associated to completing the works, the name of the officer who undertook the inspection, unique reference number and contact details. Tenants often comment that they were not fully informed of the scope of works to be undertaken or when it would be completed. We believe this receipt will clarify what will occur and also reduce inbound calls to the Repairs Management Centre querying works progress.

33. Appointments for inspections - Appointments have been offered for reactive repairs since the summer of 2005. This facility is to be extended to provide tenants with a convenient appointment for pre-works inspections to take place. Subject to ICT systems being available appointments for inspections are expected to be available in the spring of 2007.
34. Extended Hours of the Service - Since April 2003, tenants have had the option of having their gas appliances serviced between 8am and 8pm Monday to Saturday. During 2007, the number of appointments available after traditional office hours will be reviewed with the intention of increasing access to our repairs service, for working families or their carers.
35. Tenant Information Sheets – From April 2007, tenants will be provided with information sheets for larger, disruptive types of improvement works. Officers will leave these information sheets when the property is inspected. They will advise tenants and their families of what to expect before and during the works. It also provides them with Health and Safety advice and how to maintain and clean any new fixtures and fittings after completion.
36. Mobile Working – From spring 2007, the reactive repairs teams will be issued with small mobile computers. These devices will eliminate the current paper based job ticket system and will allow jobs to be issued to operatives based on their location and skill. This system will also allow jobs to be easily re-allocated to other operatives, provide the works schedulers with accurate information on how long operatives will be onsite and eliminate the manual data entry processes within the depots.
37. Appointment Reminder and Call Backs – Linked with the implementation of Mobile Working will be the introduction of Appointment Reminders by telephone message or text, depending on the tenant's preference. Tenants will also be advised when the operative is on route to their home. This facility is regarded as a useful service enhancement and nationwide evidence has demonstrated that access rates are also improved. Telephone 'Call Backs' or satisfaction surveys will also be carried out, at random, within minutes of the operative leaving the property. This will ensure the customers rating of their experience with the service is fresh and will provide a speedy resolution to any concerns they may have.
38. Scaffolding – A common area of dissatisfaction with the service has been the opinion that scaffold has been left erected too long. Previous contracts with our Scaffolders have not tightly controlled the time it has taken for them to remove the scaffolding from site. Although this has not cost the Council money, tenants often complain that the scaffold is unsightly, attracts anti-social behaviour and increases their fear of being burgled.

From January 2007, new performance related contracts are being employed with our Scaffold Contractors. These provide the contractor with a financial incentive for erecting and dismantling scaffolds within strict timescales, typically 2 working days, and also provide the Council with the facility of penalising them if they fail to meet their performance targets.

Finance

39. This report has no direct financial implications or considerations. All activities discussed within this report have been subject to previous Cabinet approvals. Service enhancements and amendments are funded within existing Housing Revenue Account resources and self-financing efficiency gains.

Law

40. The Council may do anything incidental to, conducive to or which facilitates the discharge of its functions under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. This would include anything incidental to the Council's housing powers and duties under the various Housing Acts.

Equality Impact

41. This report has no direct Equality implications. The repairs service and its planned service improvements comply with the Council's policy on Equality and Diversity.

Recommendation

- 42 It is recommended that the Select Committee note the contents of this report and support the principles of the new service initiatives detailed within paragraphs 31 through to 38.



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