

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

10 September 2024

Subject:	Housing Repairs– Addressing the Backlog and Improving the Service
Director:	Executive Director of Place, Alan Lunt
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the actions that are in place to help reduce the backlog of repairs which is resulting in service standards not being met.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 Sandwell MBC (SMBC) has published service standards in relation to targets for completion of different categories of repair. Carrying out a review of the standards in collaboration with tenants will ensure that achievable expectations are being set and will enhance tenant satisfaction with the service.
- 2.2 Changing legislation around fire and building safety has led to additional financial pressures on the service to ensure the regulations are met to provide safe and decent homes for tenants.
- 2.3 We know from feedback from customers, along with the number of complaints and MP enquiries received, that the time taken to complete repairs is a concern for our tenants.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

One Council One team	Engaging with a diverse set of tenants and listening and acting on their feedback will build communities that know the power of their voice. This will hold us to account and allow us to deliver improvements that tenants are passionate about.
Living in Sandwell	<p>By providing a high-quality responsive service ensures we are providing a high-quality home for tenants to live in, reducing the impact of disrepair on tenants' lives.</p> <p>The outcomes of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures Survey will demonstrate what our tenants think about the services we provide and indicate which areas require improvement. This will enable us to deliver a service which meets the needs of our tenants and ensures they are receiving value for money.</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 A restructure within the Asset Management service was initiated in April 2023. This resulted in a Head of Repairs being recruited to improve the productivity and challenges within the repairs service.
- 4.2 The repairs' function consists of.
- a direct labour organisation (DLO) of 220 trade operatives, to carry out the repairs and maintenance function supported by contractors for specialist areas.
 - A voids team to manage the repairs between tenancies.
 - Electrical team delivering electric repairs and cyclical servicing.
 - Gas team delivering gas repairs and cyclical servicing.
 - Stores managing the provision of materials to the trades as well as other parties to generate income.
- 4.3 Previously, these functions were managed in silos and were not working collaboratively, sharing resources, or providing a consistent service for customers and staff. Bringing all of these functions together has created opportunities for efficiencies and improved productivity.
- 4.4 Historically, approximately 80 contracts were in place to support the repairs' function, with no strategic procurement approach. The contracts were weak, and of low value and didn't allow for value for money to be achieved. Furthermore, the contracts were not attractive to the market,

and this resulted in not having the contracts in place to support the DLO when demand increased or for specialist work where the skills were not available in house.

- 4.5 Having carried out a comparison with other councils, the service standards that are set within Sandwell are at a higher standard than in most other authorities, leading to higher customer expectations than the available resources can meet.
- 4.6 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) has been impacted by rent increases being much lower than the inflationary increases that have affected the market to deliver the services. This results in having less money to deliver the service. At the same time there is additional expenditure needed to drive the significant changes in the housing regulatory environment, because of the Grenfell and Awaab Ishaq tragedies. This ultimately, has resulted in the need to be able to deliver more for less.
- 4.7 The Building Safety Act has highlighted areas of investigation that the council must undertake, such as intrusive cladding surveys to give assurance of the safety of the high-risk residential buildings. There is also the requirement from the Safety and Quality Consumer Standard that we know the condition of all our stock, so there is the financial pressure of undertaking a programme of 100% stock condition surveys.
- 4.8 Awaab's Law has resulted in a review of how SMBC manages damp and mould cases and the stringent timeframes to respond to such issues that has resulted in a need to change the priorities and work with customers to appropriately manage expectations.
- 4.9 The lack of available funding, the lack of contractors to support with the volume of repairs as well as the lack of productivity and performance management have all impacted the backlog of repairs and the time taken to complete repairs for customers. An action plan is in place to address the issues identified.

Progress

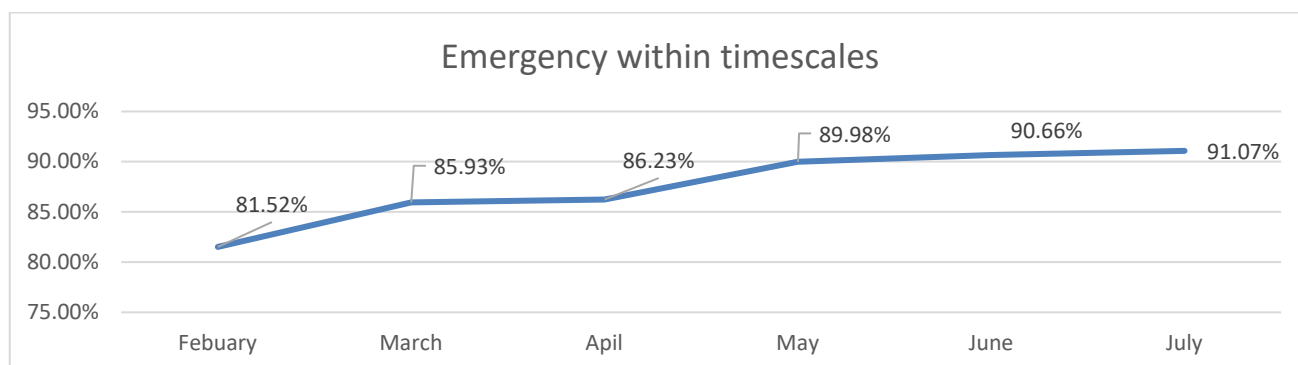
- 4.10 The Head of Repairs has produced an action plan in collaboration with the team to deliver on actions that:
 - improve productivity,
 - address cultural issues,
 - ensure staff are accountable,
 - ensure staff have the right skills and tools to do their job.

4.11 Some of the key achievements over the last 12 months include:

- realignment of staff to improve efficiency and have the ability to move staff around where there is demand,
- reviewing job descriptions (in collaboration with the trade unions) to ensure staff have clear expectations as to their role,
- introduction of performance measures such as 'right first time' – ensuring that repairs are satisfactorily completed during one appointment - is significant for the customer to reduce the time for a job to be completed without the need for multiple visits,
- expand the use of DRS (Dynamic Resource Scheduler) to ensure the productivity of trades is maximised,
- removing the existing split of the service between the north and south of the borough to provide a consistent service across Sandwell.
- contracts have been amalgamated to support the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) which are more attractive to the market which result in delivering value for money for SMBC,
- the review of Job Descriptions has enabled 15 vacancies to be advertised to attract 10 multi-trade operatives and 5 painters to work within the DLO, it has also identified where we can offer apprenticeships within the trades that we are working with the councils learning and development team on recruiting.
- Staff have been trained on firestopping and the importance of carrying out compliant works in relation to fire safety utilising specialist materials etc.

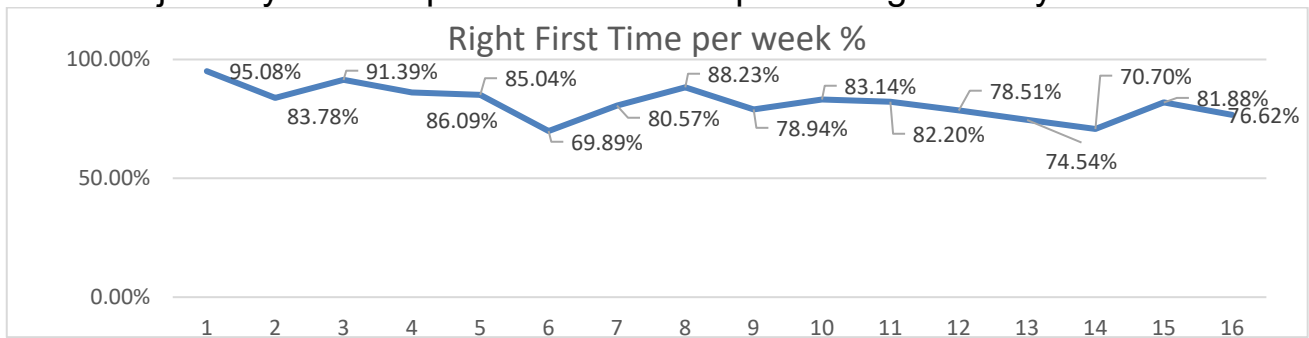
4.12 The actions that have taken place have delivered demonstrable improvements, evidenced by the performance outturns:

- Priority has been given to emergency and urgent jobs to clear the backlog of the priority jobs. The below chart shows the improvement over the last six months.



- Right First Time Process has been piloted, where the operative attends an emergency and aims to fix the whole issue; previously the job would be sent back for another operative to visit. The operative

always makes safe before leaving the property. This resulted in multiple visits for the customer and the 'right first time' performance was below 50%. The change in process improves the customer journey and the performance as improved significantly.



- Productivity has increased significantly within the DLO. The number of jobs per trade per day was between 2 and 2.5 and within 12 months this has increased to 4.1.

4.13 A Housing Resolution Team has been set up to transform the approach to complaint handling. Having independence from existing teams centres the voice of the customer and ensures services can both be held to account and make improvements to prevent future occurrences of service failure. This will ensure that there is clear communication between the service and the customer.

Next Steps

- 4.14 Work is starting to develop a Repairs Policy, which will include a review of:
- Service standards including target timeframes and priority categories. This needs to be reviewed to take into account the legislative requirements, such as Awaab's law to ensure we are compliant with new timeframes.
 - Tenancy handbook including what works are SMBC responsibility and what works are tenants' responsibility.
 - Lettable standard to ensure that there is a consistent standard of repairs expected when a property is let and the standard to what it will be maintained during the life of the tenancy.
- 4.15 Small working groups will be set up to ensure we involve customers to shape what the Policy needs to look like and after consultation we would look for Cabinet sign off to adopt.

5 Implications

Resources:	The cost of delivering a compliant repairs service is a significant consideration as we are restricted to the income from tenants' rents. The details in the plan are all prioritising efficiency, providing value for money and looking at the asset management service holistically, not just delivering repairs in isolation.
Legal and Governance:	The Social Housing Regulation Act 2023 strengthened the role of the Regulator of Social Housing. The Building Safety Act 2022 also has an impact on how we deliver repairs. Contract spend is reviewed monthly and a dashboard showing the performance of the DLO is being developed to monitor to success of the changes.
Risk:	By not being able to deliver the standards expected and consistently not achieve targets, there is a reputational risk to SMBC. There is also the impact of the information being published by the RSH through the Tenant Satisfaction Measures. Therefore, the opportunity to review a Repairs Policy will reset the expectations of repairs for the customers of SMBC.
Equality:	The Repairs Policy will need to provided consistency across all customers, however, will be implemented along the Housings Reasonable Adjustment Policy to ensure we treat all customers equally and fairly.
Health and Wellbeing:	If we do not have an achievable repairs policy, the disrepair can have an impact of customers health and wellbeing.
Social Value:	There are no specific social value implications arising from this report.
Climate Change:	There are no specific climate change implications arising from this report.
Corporate Parenting:	There are no specific Corporate Parenting implications arising from this report.

6 Appendices

None.

7 Background Papers

None.