

Housing Scrutiny Committee

Themed Review 2022-23

Delivering the best repairs and maintenance service to residents

Chair's Introduction

Housing is something that affects almost every aspect of our lives. Access to good quality housing that we can afford is fundamental to our wellbeing. However, in the course of our everyday lives, issues like the repair and maintenance of our homes can be almost as important as determining our quality of life. For the residents who live in the around 12,500 homes owned and managed by the Council, they rely heavily on the Council for the repair and maintenance of their homes and the upkeep of their buildings.

It is because of how seriously we take this responsibility, that Waltham Forest Housing Scrutiny Committee has undertaken this short themed review of our repairs and maintenance service. It was also timely to focus on this issue, because of a particular set of challenges we have been facing in delivering this service. These include the backlog of non-emergency work which built up during lockdown periods, significant increases in materials costs, and skills shortages in the construction industry. These factors have led to some longer than usual delays in getting repairs and maintenance work completed, and additionally it is clear from our review that there are some elements of our systems and practices that could be improved.

It is for these reasons that one key strand of the Council's Housing Transformation programme is focused on our repairs and maintenance service. In this, the Council's leadership has made clear the priority it places on this work, and therefore it is right that Housing Scrutiny has looked in more detail at the current performance of this service. From the sessions that we held in this review, it is clear that much of work to improve and develop this service is now in train. I believe and very much hope that the work of the themed review, and this report and its recommendations, will help to inform, guide and reinforce the ongoing improvement of this service.

Cllr Andrew Dixon
Chair of Housing Scrutiny Committee

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1:

Dealing with backlog: Priority to be given to reducing the larger volume of Works in Progress (e.g. cases in the system), which is a legacy of the backlog built up during lockdown periods, including, where necessary, putting in place additional temporary capacity.

Recommendation 2:

Contractual KPIs: Services to consider whether some measure of average completion time (measuring the time taken from a repair being reported to a repair being completed) should in future be included in contractual KPIs, rather than just operational KPIs.

Recommendation 3:

Enabling inclusive local recruitment: Contractors to ensure recruitment drives are as inclusive as possible and to link into the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities, by involving young people and care-leavers.

Recommendation 4:

Online platform for reporting: Services to look to introduce an online platform which will allow residents to report repairs work required on their property, to arrange appointments, and to track, and where necessary chase, this work, so that they have a clear understanding of the status of the job and the timescales for resolution.

Recommendation 5:

Implementing STAR scrutiny recommendations: Services to give great weight to any recommendations on the STAR scrutiny group's review of how customer satisfaction is captured and measured.

Recommendation 6:

Referral point for unresolved or complex cases: Services should put in place a referral point within the department with the capacity to focus on resolving complex cases, or cases that appear to have gone unresolved for too long. This referral point - whether a team or a particular role - should have a problem-solving and tenant communications remit and skills, in addition to building works remit and skills.

Recommendation 7:

Resolving access issues – Services to consider what more can be done to resolve issues in securing access to third party properties necessary to undertake repair and maintenance, including having officers within the team with suitable problem-solving skills and remit to solve such issues.

Recommendation 8:

Communal area repairs – Services to consider how day-to-day repairs and maintenance work required in communal areas can be most effectively logged, tracked, and chased by either a resident, a group of residents, or a Place officer. Services to then make any necessary changes in order to ensure that there are clear lines of communication and accountability to residents for any work on communal areas.

Recommendation 9:

Communal area repairs - Services to consider how responsibility for changing lightbulbs in communal areas can be improved, for instance whether estate caretakers could be tasked with regularly checking lights and reporting those not working.

Recommendation 10:

Place and Estate Services teams - Services to continue to improve the effectiveness with which Place and Estate Services teams work with Housing Assets teams, to ensure that all are able to effectively report, track and chase necessary repair and maintenance work. Again, this should include looking at how to optimise the role that caretakers can play in this.

Recommendation 11:

Support for additional needs: Services to review the support available for residents with greater needs, including language and other communication difficulties, in accessing repairs and maintenance services. This to include ensuring that call handlers and operatives know when and how to refer appropriate support services.

Background

The customer service that is provided to residents, particularly in relation to the repair and maintenance of homes and communal areas of estates is crucial to the well-being of residents, the attractiveness of neighbourhoods and the sense of pride in place. Resident engagement surveys indicate that repairs and maintenance are key in terms of residents list of priorities for the Council. In addition to this, many Councillors have

identified this area as a prominent, reoccurring issue in their casework – therefore it is important that the Council review this area and continue to strive for improvement to reach the highest standards.

As the Council continues to recover from the pandemic, it is evident that this area was severely impacted during this period. A backlog of repairs work accumulated over the pandemic and contractors have struggled to clear the works. This, combined with skills and labour shortages and financial pressures such as material costs have affected the contractor's ability to fulfil their contractual obligations and meet KPIs. This has led to frustrations for many tenants.

Additionally, as the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill¹ continues its course through parliament, it is clear that this will fundamentally change the relationship of all housing providers to the Regulator of Social Housing. The Regulator will now be required to proactively monitor and drive landlords' compliance with improved customer standards, with changes such as a lower threshold for intervention and publishable tenant satisfaction measures. In light of this, in combination with the issues identified around repairs and maintenance, it is vital to review the Council's service to drive necessary improvement, ensure we are prepared for the new regulatory regime and most importantly provide tenants with the highest standard of service.

Methodology

The Committee used the final two meetings of the cycle to receive reports from officers, invite key witnesses and ask questions of both officers and witnesses. The first report was on the performance of contractors, Morgan Sindall and Aston, including an update for day-to-day maintenance and capital works for the period April – December 2022. A representative from each organisation was invited to attend the meeting. Jackie Bowditch, Operations Director for Aston Group and Ian Webb, Partnership Director for Morgan Sindall were in attendance.

The second report was around resident led scrutiny at Waltham Forest and their current review being undertaken on tenant experience of repairs and maintenance. Two members of the STAR (Strategic Tenant and Resident) Panel were in attendance, Bert Morris, the Chair of the STAR Panel and William Wood, a member of the panel. Also in attendance was Richard Tomkinson, an independent facilitator that supports the STAR panel. The residents were able to share their experiences of repairs and maintenance with the Committee and outline some initial findings from the resident led scrutiny review.

A summary of the discussions had at both sessions can be found in Annex 1.

¹ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3177/publications>

Key Findings

The Committee recognised several ways that tenant experience of repairs and maintenance could be improved. Three key areas were identified, and recommendations have been made for each area.

Contractor performance

The Committee recommends:

- **Dealing with backlog:** Priority to be given to reducing the larger volume of Works in Progress (e.g. cases in the system), which is a legacy of the backlog built up during lockdown periods, including, where necessary, putting in place additional temporary capacity.
- **Contractual KPIs:** Services to consider whether some measure of average completion time (measuring the time taken from a repair being reported to a repair being completed) should in future be included in contractual KPIs, rather than just operational KPIs.
- **Enabling inclusive local recruitment:** Contractors to ensure recruitment drives are as inclusive as possible and to link into the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities, by involving young people and care-leavers.

It was clear to the Committee that the priority for contractors should be to reduce the accumulation of works as soon as possible, and that the Council should support them to do so. Both officers and Morgan Sindall mentioned that an action plan was being devised, and the Committee are keen for this to be implemented successfully. The Committee heard that one challenge contractors faced was staff and skills shortages, and therefore, to mitigate this were exploring options to future proof recruitment. The Committee suggested that these should reach a wide range of people, to ensure inclusivity and additionally, to involve the boroughs care leavers and young people to provide them with good employment opportunities. The Committee were given an explanation around how the contractual and operational KPIs work in practice and from discussion have suggested that time sensitive KPIs could be incorporated into contractual negotiations.

Resident experience

The Committee recommends:

- **Online platform for reporting:** Services to look to introduce an online platform which will allow residents to report repairs work required on their property, to arrange appointments, and to track, and where necessary chase, this work, so that they have a clear understanding of the status of the job and the timescales for resolution.

- **Implementing STAR scrutiny recommendations:** Services to give great weight to any recommendations on the STAR scrutiny group's review of how customer satisfaction is captured and measured.

The Committee recognised that it was crucial that resident experience of repairs and maintenance was a positive experience. The Committee identified that the process of reporting repairs could be made easier for residents and that communication around the status and progress of works could be enhanced. The Council could look into providing an online platform to bring these aspects together in one place, in a way that could make the process smoother for residents and also reduces the pressure on housing teams. The Committee also offered support to the STAR Panel's resident led scrutiny review and encouraged the Council to consider the recommendations that will result from the review.

System management and communication

The Committee recommends:

- **Referral point for unresolved or complex cases:** Services should put in place a referral point within the department with the capacity to focus on resolving complex cases, or cases that appear to have gone unresolved for too long. This referral point - whether a team or a particular role - should have a problem-solving and tenant communications remit and skills, in addition to building works remit and skills.
- **Resolving access issues** – Services to consider what more can be done to resolve issues in securing access to third party properties necessary to undertake repair and maintenance, including having officers within the team with suitable problem-solving skills and remit to solve such issues.

The Committee heard that sometimes complex cases became stuck in the system, with no effective mechanism for solving them. The Council should identify a referral point within the department to focus on unresolved cases. The Committee also heard that the team dealing with such cases sometimes lack customer service experience, therefore the Council should introduce members of the team with problem-solving, customer service and communication skills to liaise with tenants. This will boost tenant experience of this service as well as positively reflecting on the Council.

The Committee recommends:

- **Communal area repairs** – Services to consider how day-to-day repairs and maintenance work required in communal areas can be most effectively logged, tracked, and chased by either a resident, a group of residents, or a Place officer. Services to then make any necessary changes in order to ensure that there are clear lines of communication and accountability to residents for any work on communal areas.

- **Communal area repairs** - Services to consider how responsibility for changing lightbulbs in communal areas can be improved, for instance whether estate caretakers could be tasked with regularly checking lights and reporting those not working.
- **Place and Estate Services teams** - Services to continue to improve the effectiveness with which Place and Estate Services teams work with Housing Assets teams, to ensure that all are able to effectively report, track and chase necessary repair and maintenance work. Again, this should include looking at how to optimise the role that caretakers can play in this.

The Committee heard that repairs in communal areas was an area that residents often felt perplexed by, particularly around not being sure who the responsibility to report any issues sat with. It was also identified that communication on the progress of communal area repairs could be improved. The Council should identify a clear mechanism for the logging, tracking, and chasing of communal repairs for residents, to simplify this process. The Committee also heard that repairs and maintenance in communal areas was not a contractual KPI for contractors. Therefore, it is vital the Council look to build measures on communal repairs into contractual KPIs to communal areas are completed as quickly as possible.

The Committee recommends:

- **Support for additional needs:** Services to review the support available for residents with greater needs, including language and other communication difficulties, in accessing repairs and maintenance services. This to include ensuring that call handlers and operatives know when and how to refer appropriate support services.

The Committee heard that officers did have a system to log details of those with additional needs, however there was no mechanism in place to ensure this was up-to-date and the data was incomplete. The Council could devise a mechanism to ensure this data is captured and available to ensure those with greater needs receive additional support if required.

Conclusion

Despite this being a relatively short review, the Committee were able to recognise many opportunities for improvement. Three main areas were identified across the two sessions: contractor performance and management, resident experience and system management and communication. The first, contractor performance and management, recognises that it is key that the Council supports its contractors with their challenges, as delays to repairs not only risks contract failings, but this also has an impact on the resident experience of repairs and maintenance. This was the second

key area found, and arguably the most important. The Council must ensure the highest standards of service for its tenants, with dissatisfaction not only reflecting negatively on the Council but also impacting residents' well-being. The third area is system management and communication, this is a key area not only to increase efficiency for housing officers, but it will also impact on resident experience. If processes are simplified and communication improved, this will instantly boost the resident experience of repairs and maintenance.

The Committee are extremely grateful for the witnesses that attended these sessions. The representatives from contractors Morgan Sindall and Aston, who enabled an open and honest conversation around performance. As well as the two members of the STAR Panel, whose insight and experience are always invaluable. The Committee would also like to offer their support for the STAR Panel's review, and encourage the Council to implement their recommendations, and look forward to hearing their findings at a future Housing Scrutiny meeting.

Annex 1 – Summary of Meetings

19 October 2022²

The Committee agreed to focus this year's thematic review on the Council's approach to repairs and maintenance and residents' experiences of this process. The Committee discussed how this issue was relevant as issues were persistently appearing in Councillor Casework. The Committee were also aware of a significant backlog of cases emerging from the pandemic and were keen to address how this was being tackled.

28 February 2023³

The Committee received a report from Robert Mathison, Assistant Director of Housing Assets, this provided an update of the performance for day-to-day maintenance and capital works through the contractors Morgan Sindall Property Services and Aston, for the period April – December 2022. A representative from each organisation was present – Jackie Bowditch, Operations Director for Aston Group and Ian Webb, Partnership Director for Morgan Sindall. Mr Mathison explained that contractors Morgan Sindall had entered into a contract with the Council in 2019 for an eight-year initial term, ending in 2027. Morgan Sindall are contracted to provide a repairs and maintenance service. He explained that Aston have been with the Council slightly longer and had entered into a contract with the Council in 2012 with an initial term of seven years with options to extend. After the end of the first term, negotiations took place for an extension running until 2027. Aston provide mechanical and electrical services.

Mr Mathison explained that the pandemic had a significant impact on the ability to conduct repairs, particularly on general repair. However, essential and emergency works continued, and much of Aston's work was considered as essential or deliverable through safe systems, and so was able to continue as normal. He said that non-emergency repairs were suspended in this period, work which would have been delivered by Morgan Sindall. Mr Mathison explained that this resulted in a significant backlog that accumulated over the pandemic, and despite some effort to reduce this, cases had continued to accumulate, and it became evident an alternative approach was required. Mr Mathison said that the Council were working very closely with Morgan Sindall currently to implement a targeted approach with a view to clearing the backlog within a defined timescale. Mr Mathison noted the significant additional

² <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MId=5537&Ver=4>

³ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MId=5534&Ver=4>

challenges now being posed by increases in cost and skills shortages. Mr Mathison explained the report sets out the performances of both contractors, including KPIs⁴. He reflected that the delays to works had caused dissatisfaction among many residents, and that part of the work ongoing around reducing the backlog and reducing the average time of work was around improving tenant satisfaction.

Ms Bowditch explained that Aston Group were tasked with the planned, preventative maintenance and compliance for Waltham Forest Housing, together with reactive repairs for mechanical and electrical – except for day-to-day electrical which sat with Morgan Sindall. She stated that most of these repairs continued throughout the pandemic and the main challenge they faced was gaining access to homes, as many people were reluctant to allow entry. Ms Bowditch said that this continues to one of the main challenges to date, however Aston have established a clear process with the Council to try and work around this. She stated that Aston have achieved consistently high compliance rates throughout the contract. Ms Bowditch said that another challenge they are facing are skills shortages and the retention of staff. She explained that Aston are trying to encourage their skilled staff to stay and the key to this was not just about money but maintaining a good relationship.

Mr Webb explained that Morgan Sindall was responsible for general repairs and maintenance services. Despite the majority of works being suspended over the pandemic, they continued to log repairs and collect data on repairs. They are working through this accumulation of work but the number of works in progress (WIP) have remained at a higher rate than previously, and some KPIs have not been met. The written report to the Committee by Mr Mathison showed some key KPIs being missed in 2022, and these included responsive repairs completed in target time, average completion times, and calls abandoned by residents. Mr Webb stated that one reason for these shortfalls was the issue of staff retention within the customer service team, however this was now back to full capacity. He hoped that with this and the action plan being devised, that the number of WIP would reduce and KPIs could be met.

The Committee asked if the contractors had developed a relationship with local colleges as a solution to potential future staff shortages. Ms Bowditch responded that Aston had a close relationship with Waltham Forest College, and they ran a number of workshops there and apprenticeship schemes. She explained that they always advertised jobs in the borough first before advertising more widely. Ms Bowditch commented that one challenge they faced was engagement from local residents. Mr Webb responded that Morgan Sindall were in a similar position to Aston and that they also worked closely with social value teams to ensure they were attracting local talent. He said that they also proactively looked at unemployed people to encourage them

⁴ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/documents/s88523/4%20-%20Performance%20of%20MS%20and%20Aston%20-%20Housing%20Scrutiny%20Report%20Feb%202023.pdf>

into work. Mr Webb stated that a challenge they often experience is lack of uptake that they were looking at more ways to boost this.

The Committee asked if skills shortages were more persistent in any particular area. Ms Bowditch responded that from Aston's perspective the shortages were in skilled labour, and she was not sure if the industry was as desirable as it has been in the past. She said Aston were seeking to address this by diversifying, including introducing renewables and retrofitting to attract new skills into the business. Mr Webb responded that they initially had issues recruiting within trades however they were now seeing more people applying for these roles. He said that they then experienced shortages in call centre, but this was also now resolving itself. Mr Webb commented that the biggest issue they face now is recruiting in the commercial element, but they have now taken on two apprentices in Waltham Forest as quantity surveyors to ensure they are equipped for the future.

The Committee asked if there was additional support or capacity the Council could enable to clear the accumulation of works and what the plan was to address this. Mr Mathison explained that it was crucial to work with contractors to identify any challenges they faced and work together to ensure the contracts ran efficiently. Joe Garrod, the Corporate Director of Housing, explained that clearing the backlog was a priority for the housing leadership team, and there was a real focus to improve the Councils client side. Mr Garrod stated that the team were working with Morgan Sindall to develop an appropriate action plan and would provide support to implement it.

The Committee asked a question around voids completion, and if there were any figures around this. Mr Mathison clarified (in writing after the meeting), that many voids being received required substantially more work and as a result have agreed some additional KPIs to ensure progress of works can be accurately measured.

The Committee then asked a question around how KPIs for contractors worked. Mr Webb clarified that the target time for responsive repairs was 14 days, which was measured from the first visit to assess the work to completion of the work. The KPI for average completion times measures the time from the repair work being reported and logged to completion, and this is an operational but not contractual KPI.

10 April 2023⁵

The Committee received a report on resident led scrutiny at Waltham Forest and how their current review was on tenant experience of repairs and maintenance. At this meeting were two residents from the STAR (Strategic Tenant and Resident) Panel, to

⁵ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MId=5535&Ver=4>

speak of their experience of repairs and maintenance in the borough, and Richard Tomkinson who is an independent facilitator working with the STAR panel introduced the report. He explained that the current review being undertaken by the panel was focused on how the data around tenant satisfaction was gathered and then used for service improvement and contract management. Mr Tomkinson explained that they had undertaken a range of interviews and focus groups with the two main contractors and the asset team at the Council. He offered some of the panel's initial findings, this included:

- The suggestion of independent validation of contractor data
- The suggestion of transactional research to give the asset team the opportunity to intervene in a timely manner if necessary
- The recognition of strengths in terms of contractor social value and for the Council to work with contractors to promote this further
- The suggestion that Morgan Sindall undertakes tenant satisfaction surveys at various stages of the repairs journey, to capture the beginning to end journey

Mr Tomkinson noted that there was no industry of governance around using tenant satisfaction data as an actionable insight or being able to map service improvements and changes as a result of tenant feedback.

The Committee heard evidence from Bert Morris, Chair of the STAR Panel. He stated that one of the issues discussed with residents was how problems gaining access to properties caused a delay with repairs which led to dissatisfaction from residents on the time it took to complete repairs.

The Committee asked a question around repairs to communal areas - if this was logged in the same way as an individual property and if this counted towards contractors KPI data, and could we enable better lines of communication when it came to reporting repairs in communal areas. Mr Wood shared an experience of issues with communal lighting, and the difficulties for tenants knowing whose job it was to report the repair. Jane Martin, Divisional Director for Housing Operations, responded that the place team are responsible for visiting estates and conducting inspections and that they prioritise bigger estates and those where there were reports of anti-social behaviour. Ms Martin explained that the team had been working with Morgan Sindall on communal repairs and recognised this was an area for improvement. Ms Martin stated that they were looking at streamlining this process and improving communications to residents on the progress of repairs. Ms Martin explained that the Council were looking to pilot a handy person as part of the work they were conducting on repairs and maintenance, so this role could be introduced to each estate. She also mentioned that often in other Councils, the caretaker was responsible for checking lights and other areas as part of their role, and this was something that could be looked into.

Mr Mathison responded that repairs in communal areas was an aspect that needed work with contractors to improve on and in the current contract with Morgan Sindall, there was not a clearly defined KPI relating to communal works. He stated that contractors did receive payment directly for carrying out communal works, so there is incentive to complete them. Mr Mathison explained there were currently discussions around what KPIs would be appropriate to ensure a timely and good standard of repair in communal areas. He said they were looking to have discussions to introduce these into the contract as a variation.

The Committee asked a question around the more complex cases, and how that often, these cases appeared to get stuck in the system, and whether the Council could look at mechanisms to solve these. Ms Martin responded that the Council were currently looking at their target operating model, which involved reviewing structures and the intention was to put additional resource into the team. She explained that when complex cases occur, they are relying on a small number of surveyors whose expertise do not lie in customer service, so they were looking to introduce more roles into the team.

The Committee asked if there was a system in place for residents to track the progress of their repairs, and the ability to self-report. Ms Martin responded that this was an area that had been identified as part of the housing transformation programme, and work was currently going into a project around a system to facilitate this for tenants.

The Committee asked a question around providing extra support to residents that may require this, such as those with English as a second language, those experiencing communication barriers or other types of specialist needs. Ms Martin responded that the housing management system currently allows the team to log data to be able identify the residents that have additional needs, however there is an issue that the data is not complete for all residents, and it is reliant on the team logging the data when it is given. She said there is no mechanism currently for ensuring it is up to date. Ms Martin explained that it was something the team was looking at and they wanted to introduce different ways to communicate to residents, and other opportunities to capture the data. Ms Martin also said that they have access to interpretation and translation services, and also members of the team speak multiple languages. Mr Wood commented that caretakers are key to estates, as well as being able to identify repairs they also know the local residents, and what their needs or vulnerabilities may be.