

Housing Repairs

Review of Housing Repairs structure

During 2022 a consultant worked with the Council to help review and improve Housing Repairs. The review of the structure of the service began whilst the team were working in Asset Management and Development and continued when the service moved to Housing. The key findings from the review were:

- The number of employees in Housing Repairs was not sufficient to meet the needs of the service
- The involvement of two teams in the repair booking process was one of the main reasons for increased tenant dissatisfaction and inefficiency
- There was a need for a more senior role with responsibility for compliance matters
- The generic role of Senior Maintenance Officer was not achieving the required results and the structure would benefit from a number of specialist roles

The restructure was completed in two phases.

Restructure – Phase one

In December 2022, phase one of the restructure was approved by Cabinet, this focussed on the former work planning team. This team did not previously take calls directly from tenants. The calls were taken by the Council's Contact Centre, which then could raise the repair job and book an appointment. However, some jobs, such as larger jobs or those requiring two operatives to attend, were not booked by the Contact Centre and were referred to the Work Planning Team.

Under the phase one of the restructure a new larger team was created, which replaced the Assistant Work Planner, Work Planner and Senior Work Planner roles with new Customer Services Officers, Team Leader and Manager roles. The main purpose of the new team was to take all calls regarding repairs.

Restructure – Phase two

In January 2023, phase two was approved by Cabinet for the remaining roles in Housing Repairs. One of the key changes in the structure was the creation of a Compliance Manager role. This moved the responsibility for compliance matters, including gas and electrical under the remit of one manager. Another key change was the creation of two Repairs Inspectors, two Multi-Skilled Team Leaders and a Voids Surveyor. Previously repair and void inspections and the management of operatives had been undertaken by Senior Maintenance Officers on a patch basis.

In regards to the operative roles, the new structure retained the posts of Multi-Skilled and Single Trade operatives rather than each post being trade specific. On approval of the restructure there were 11 vacancies for Multi-Skilled and Single Trade operatives. Prior to recruitment commencing, analysis was completed to look at the

specific skills required to fill the gaps in the current strengths and weaknesses of the current team. This information then informed the practical tests that candidates completed as part of the interview process, to ensure that those with the necessary skill set were employed.

Repairs Contact Centre

The new Repairs Contact Centre deal with all incoming and outgoing calls for repairs matters. They also deal with repairs reported via the repairs inbox and online form. Out of a team of six, five of the Customer Services Officers were new to the Council. A comprehensive training plan was implemented to train all employees to the required level. This particularly focussed on ensuring that the technical knowledge of the team was sufficient to be able to correctly diagnose repairs.

In 2023/24, 11,613 repair appointments were made. Of these only 284 needed to be rearranged. 163 were due to emergency jobs taking priority; 106 were due to operative sickness and 15 were due to weather. On all occasions where a repair needs to be cancelled the tenant is contacted by telephone, an explanation is provided and an alternative appointment is offered.

The new role of Customer Services Team Leader was also created as part of the restructure. This role manages the Repairs Contact Centre on a day to day basis, providing advice and support to the Customer Services Officers to ensure that repairs are correctly diagnosed at first point of contact and that unnecessary inspections and inaccurate logging of jobs is minimised.

More support for operatives on-site

The new Multi-Skilled Team Leader roles provide the operatives with more day to day support. They do not have work routinely booked into their diaries, but are available to cover for emergencies or sickness absence. They spend the majority of their day visiting operatives whilst they are completing work and working with their team to provide solutions to any problems identified whilst the work is completed. They also post-inspect a sample of completed work to ensure that high standards are met. This role has been particularly important over the last year with the induction of new employees and ensuring that probation periods are closely monitored and adequate support is given.

Repairs Inspections

Under the old Housing Repairs structure inspections of tenanted properties was one of the responsibilities of the Senior Maintenance Officers that they had to balance with inspections of empty properties and the management of a team of operatives. This approach often caused delays with inspection notes being completed and work being issued.

The two Repairs Inspectors can now concentrate on the completion, recording and follow-up of inspections. Changes have been made to their diaries so that they complete five inspections each per day, and then complete their notes and raise works at the end of every day. This ensures that repairs can be completed promptly.

Void processes for empty properties

Another role that was created as part of the restructure, is the role of Voids Surveyor. Like tenanted repair inspections this was previously a part of the Senior Maintenance Officer role. As tenanted properties were usually prioritised, due to the impact on the person living in the property, inspection of empty properties were sometimes delayed. By summer 2022 a backlog of void properties had built up. At the peak, there was over 130 empty Council properties awaiting works.

Following the recruitment of a new Voids Surveyor the process for dealing with empty properties was reviewed and improved. Pre-termination inspections are now completed by the Voids Surveyor prior to the tenant leaving the property. These visits identify any damage to the property that it is the responsibility of the outgoing tenant, and also gives an indication of the level of work that will be required once the property is empty. New weekly voids meetings have also been introduced, with all teams involved in the process, to discuss priority properties, for example, a property that is required for a homeless family, and progress on all voids.

There are typically around 20-25 empty properties at any one time, which is the usual level you would expect from a stock of approximately 4,300.

Improvements to system use

Prior to the review, the full capability of the housing management system was not being utilised. Previously notes were not always detailed enough, and photographs were not routinely uploaded onto the property records. This has improved significantly. The quality of notes now provides a full audit trail of the actions taken since a repair was reported. Operatives are now asked to take photographs of repairs required and completed work, to supplement the notes made. These are very useful if a complaint is received or further repair reports are made.

There are further improvements to the system which are currently in progress. A full review of all of the codes within the system is being undertaken. Once new codes are implemented this will provide more detailed information regarding the cost of a job and the expected time taken. This will improve diary management and accurate job costing. Following these system improvements, changes will be made to way that tenants are recharged for works and how leaseholder service charges are produced.

Tenant Satisfaction

This year new tenant satisfaction measures were introduced for all social landlords. These provide specific indicators that must be recorded and reported to the Regulator of Social Housing. The Council completed the first Tenant Satisfaction Survey to meet the new requirements of the regulator in late 2023/early 2024. The satisfaction with Repairs was 71%. The comments made in the survey highlighted concerns about outstanding and forgotten repairs, and the time taken for repairs to be completed. It was expected that some complaints like these would be received due to the historic backlog of repairs from when the team was not fully staffed. It is

expected that there will be an improvement in responses to this when the survey is repeated in 2024/25.

All tenants are sent a survey following a repair being completed in their home. During 2023/24 quarter 4, which is the last set of complete data, 140 surveys were returned. If tenants raise any concerns, either the Repairs Customer Services Manager or a Multi-Skilled Team Leader, depending on the issue, will contact the tenant to discuss further.

As part of the restructure, the Senior Work Planner role was replaced with the role of Customer Services Manager. In addition to having overall responsibility for the Repairs Contact Centre, this role investigates and responds to all complaints regarding the repairs service. The number of complaints received has reduced in the last year as improvements have been made to the service.

Housing Improvement Board

In November 2023, a new Housing Improvement Board was created to monitor the progress in improvements required to Housing Repairs and Asset Management. The board meets monthly, and is attended by all members of the General Management Team and the Heads of Service responsible for these areas. This group ensures that actions are progressed and any barriers to achieving improvements are identified and resolved.

Disrepair

In addition to making the improvements that have previously been identified, Housing Repairs also need to respond to new challenges. The Housing Repairs and Legal teams typically had a caseload of 20-25 disrepair cases at any one time. However, at the end of 2023 the number of cases increased dramatically, due to the pro-active work of two solicitors. These companies were door knocking and telephoning Council properties to actively encourage tenants to make a disrepair claim. This led to an increase of over 100 active cases. To address this in January 2024 Cabinet approved two new roles of Disrepair Inspector and Disrepair Assistant. These roles have recently been appointed, and the Council is ensuring that cases are progressed and legal deadlines are met.

Change Delivery Manager

Whilst there has been substantial improvement to Housing Repairs and the service offered to tenants there are further improvements that can be made to ensure that a high quality service is provided and that policies and procedures follow good practice. To support this work a new Change Delivery Manager started in July 2024. This new Officer will be reporting to the Head of Asset Management and Development, but will be working with Housing Repairs to review and update policies, procedures and process maps.