

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 14th March, 2024

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Sid Khan (Chair), Councillor Sharon Harvey (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Imran Altaf, Chris Holz, Joanna Kane, Emma Marshall, Jane Spilsbury and Monica Stringfellow

Also Present:

Councillor Craig Warhurst – Portfolio Holder for Housing and Procurement (on Microsoft Teams)

Officers:

Guy Revans and Andrew Rainbow

Democratic Services Officers:

M Sliwinski

90. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ashley.

91. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of party whip.

92. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 19th February 2024 were submitted for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th February 2024 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

93. PUBLIC SPEAKING

There were no public speakers registered on this occasion.

Chair

94. SOCIAL HOUSING REPAIRS - OVERVIEW

The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager provided a comprehensive update on social housing repairs including progress across Repairs and the wider Housing Revenue Account Capital Investment Programme.

The following aspects were covered during the presentation:

- The process for the tenant to report an issue to Repairs and Maintenance Team:

There were various ways the tenant could report a repair including by telephone, email, online, or in person. The Repairs and Maintenance Team was also looking to launch a portal for individual tenants which would enable tenants to report issues as well as view details about their properties etc.

- The waiting times for response to repair queries and undertaking repairs:

It was reported that the Council had established three categories of response times. For Emergency repairs the target was a response within 2 hours. Examples of emergency repairs were loss of power, leaks, and other types of issue which presented danger to the health and safety of the occupants. For Urgent repairs the target response was within 5 working days. Repairs classified as urgent included partial loss of power or water supply or leaking roof. For Routine repairs the target response time was within 20 working days.

- Actions that were being taken within Housing Property Services to improve repair turnaround times:

The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager reported that the Council had improved its telephone response times to repair enquiries by almost 100 per cent. Moreover, recruitment was currently being undertaken which would see a range of roles being recruited into on a permanent basis. This covers trade operatives (e.g. plasterers), supervisors, management and administrative support for the teams. It was noted that around 20 posts had been advertised in the last few weeks, with significant interest expressed in some positions such as for the plasterer post.

It was also reported that a package of training was being developed across Housing Services so that the individual's skills are improved

reducing the need for follow up trades or more than one operative to be booked for a job.

In terms of timetabling systems for repairs, The Council currently operated a diary system for the trade operatives which was labour intensive and had limited flexibility. The Council was working with its partner Total Mobile Solutions to configure their Mobilise and Connect ICT systems. These systems would provide each of the operatives with the ability to work in a more mobile way, receiving their jobs via a mobile device, rather than the current paper-based systems. This functionality would enable real time updates for each job to understand when it was completed, if there is a need for follow up works or there was no access.

It was reported that over the next 12-18 months 1200 Council properties (circa 20 per cent of the Council's stock) would be surveyed to assist with creating planned programmes of capital investment.

Details of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey were given and it was noted that the survey had gone out on the 14th March 2024 (today) to all tenants for whom the Council held telephone details on its database.

- Policy details regarding damage caused to Council properties, including damage caused by tenants, the Repairs and Maintenance Team and the contractors:

It was stated that the Council approved a Rechargeable Repairs Policy which set out the circumstances where repaying for repairs is a tenant's responsibility. Examples of where tenants were responsible for recharges included call out for lost keys to the property or broken glass. It was stated that tenants would always be provided with opportunity and a reasonable amount of time to either undertake the repair themselves to a satisfactory standard to RBC or elect to have RBC complete the repair at the current rate. Repairs would always be recharged in accordance with the current National Schedule of Rates (SOR) plus a fair and reasonable administration charge as agreed in Fees and Charges. The Council acknowledged that some tenants were too vulnerable or not in a financial position to pay in advance in part or in full for rechargeable repairs and would work to take this situation into account.

Where the Council had either undertaken or not undertaken a repair that had been requested, which was Council's responsibility, and there had been an impact on the personal effects of the tenant, then

this would be investigated either through the Complaints process or via the Council's claims team.

Where works had been undertaken by a contractor, working on behalf of the Council, and damage was caused directly or indirectly by the works that they had undertaken then the details of the claim would be passed to them to investigate and determine the outcome.

- Details of specific repairs / upgrades to Council properties which the Council was presently prioritising.

The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager stated that damp and mould works to carry out mould treatment works to affected properties were being prioritised. It was stated that the Government was planning to introduce a legal requirement for social tenants to investigate hazards, such as damp and mould, within 14 days, start fixing within a further 7 days, and make emergency repairs within 24 hours.

It was stated that a £40m Housing Capital Programme over the next four years had set out a range of Budget lines to improve the Council's Social Housing Stock. This £40m programme was composed of a range of projects and contracts. Some of the key projects included:

- £12 million Internal Refurbishment Contract – Two contractors operating in defined geographical areas (East/West). The scope of works were all 4 main internal elements, kitchens, bathrooms, rewires and gas central heating. Works had progressed well with the new contractors having recently passed the 100th kitchen to be replaced.
- Gas boiler replacements – Over the last 3 years the Gas Team had reviewed the boilers in the housing stock and identified many boilers that were over 10 years old, inefficient and with parts hard to acquire. Over this time more than 1,000 boilers had been replaced for more efficient boilers to assist our tenants with their heating bills. The new boilers installed were Bosch with a 7 year warranty.
- Internal Fire Door Replacement Programme – This was a programme of fire prevention upgrades including fire stopping measures and fire door replacements. It was noted that Redditch only had 3- and 2-storey buildings and all were under 11 metres in height.
- Energy Efficiency Measures – To improve the energy efficiency of housing stock, Housing Property Services had been successful in attracting external government funding (Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund - SHDF) of over £1.6m to move property Energy Performance Certificate

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ratings to C or above by undertaking insulation measures including loft, cavity and external wall insulation where applicable.

- Adaptations – Over the last 18 months the Council had worked to ensure that tenants identified through Occupational Therapist assessment have the adaptations to allow them to live independently. It was noted that circa 300 referrals from Occupational Therapists were processed over the last 12-14 months.

It was reported that the Council had also been looking at its stock properties which were in the worst condition in terms of energy efficiency (circa 750 properties) and had allocated significant funding for energy efficiency improvements in those properties. In concluding the presentation, it was highlighted that addressing the waiting lists for Council Housing remained a priority area.

Following the presentation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Procurement was invited to address the Committee. The Portfolio Holder commented that the Council had devoted resources to the tenant survey and that significant efforts were being made to seek feedback from Council Tenants. The Portfolio Holder spoke of the IT solutions that were being implemented to improve repair response times, the reporting accuracy from the Repairs and Maintenance Team and utilise the portal so clients could raise issues with repairs.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted that a lot of contractors had been brought in over the past 12-18 months to help expedite the work and backlogs in some areas. The Portfolio Holder spoke of several thousand stock condition surveys that were carried out two years ago with a further twelve hundred surveys incoming, and of investment in properties including kitchen and bathroom fitting, with around 140 kitchens fitted this municipal year and circa 1000 boilers fitted in the last year. The Portfolio Holder noted that the Housing Revenue Budget and the Capital Programme was looking strong.

The Portfolio Holder noted that where a property was damaged by a contractor or Council staff, there was an expectation that the contractor concerned would go back and repair the damage within appropriate timescales. The Portfolio Holder thanked the officers for their hard work and Overview and Scrutiny for raising the questions on social housing repairs.

Members held a detailed discussion, and the following points were raised:

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- A Member complimented the Repairs and Maintenance Team on dealing with cases of domestic violence with a lot of damage to the properties. It was noted that the Team was very sensitive in those cases, and the property issues were fixed promptly and with discretion where people in vulnerable situations requested repairs.
- Recording of customer calls – It was stated that calls were not yet being recorded. The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager stated that he would like to see this implemented as it would protect both the customers and staff and help resolve issues or complaints.
- Inspection of properties to identify issues at an early stage – It was stated that the Neighbourhood and Tenancy Team undertakes annual inspections of council stock properties. The Repairs and Maintenance Team was responsible for highlighting issues as and when they visit properties so that repair issues can be identified at an early stage.
- Online Portal for Repairs – It was stated that elected members would be able to log in and use the system once the Portal had been launched.
- The number of team members in Housing Property Services Team – It was stated that once fully recruited there would be circa 80 staff in the team. The full team was expected to be in place by July 2024 and would be integrated fully into working arrangements by January 2025 when the service delivery improvements were due to be launched. It was hoped that this would reduce reliance on agency contractors.
- Proportion of works currently undertaken by contractors – It was stated that there were several contractors in place. Some contractors did specific jobs such as major voids. On day-to-day basis there were several contractors carrying out circa 30 per cent of total work at present.
- Targets on responding to emergency, urgent and routine repairs – It was stated that the targets provided in the report at paragraph 3.2 were firm targets. It was acknowledged that the Council did not meet those targets in all cases, however, going forward there was a duty to deliver those targets. It was requested by Members as an action that Officers provide data on the proportion of repairs that were meeting target times.

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- Apprenticeships in the Housing Property Services and the Repairs and Maintenance Team – The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager stated that in the first place recruitment had to be undertaken to the main trades to deliver a good level of service. Once this was done, it was hoped there would be an opportunity to establish 3-4 apprenticeship posts. There was also a potential to establish an apprenticeship scheme in partnership with the college once a new structure was embedded. The Officer highlighted that it was imperative that the Service Area was first in a position to design an apprenticeship scheme so that the Council was able to retain apprentices within the Council following the apprenticeship period.
- Provision of multi-skilled tradesmen – It was stated that going forward all of the Council's tradesmen would be multi-trade. Currently, there were a large number of employees who were able to do multiple jobs. This was with the exception of earthing, where qualification requirements were in place, however, the Council could provide in house training programme for this and other areas.
- How many Council stock properties does the Council hold? – Just short of 5900.
- Home Adaptations – It was clarified that disabled facilities grant (DFG) was only available to private-sector, rather than Council housing properties. There was a separate fund for disabled facility improvements to Council stock properties through Council's own HRA budget.
- Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) – Funding of £1.6 million was acquired for 280 properties in Redditch which was match-funded by the Council. The Capital Programmes and Contract Manager explained that due to the Housing Capital team being under-resourced it was felt that this was an appropriate amount of funding at present and the Council would not be able to manage the workload if it received greater funding in this area. In-house resources were needed to manage grant funding in the future.
- Energy efficiency of Council properties – It was explained that out of circa 5900 properties that Redditch Borough Council held there were circa 1800 Council stock properties that had energy efficiency rating of C or above. The remainder properties were mostly at band D with very few properties on E and F. It was noted that due to the volume of

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work and updates to IT systems used by the team over the last couple of years not all records on property efficiency were up-to-date. With the implementation of the Asset Management Database there a more up-to-date picture of the current energy efficiency state of all Council properties would be acquired.

- It was stated that as part of the recruitment a retrofit manager and retrofit surveyor posts were being advertised. Once appointed these posts would assist the Council in delivering energy efficiency work and applying for funding schemes.
- Housing Services Transformation – The current Capital Programmes and Contract Manager had been in post since November 2021. During that time backlog in repairs had been almost eliminated and significant investment had been made in social housing properties. The Officers explained that in 2018 major issues were discovered in the Housing Department, at which point the current Interim Executive Director and the current Head of Community and Housing Services were asked to take over the management of the service. Since then, the failures identified were being redressed including through recruitment of a new Housing Services team. A technology and culture change had taken place in the Housing Services and it was hoped the Service changes could be fully embedded by January 2025 when the new IT solutions were due to be launched.
- Progress in delivery of changes – The Chair expressed a concern that much of the report covered future plans and changes that were still being implemented with not many examples of actual delivery noted in the report.
- Performance Data – The Officers stated that data was available with regard to customer calls to the Housing Service. This included calls taken by the Service, calls response rate, calls ratings, answer rates etc. It was stated that current waiting time for customers on the telephone was on average around 3 minutes, with circa 150 calls a day being received by the Service. It was stated that little data was currently available with respect to other performance areas of the Service. It was noted that as part of reporting requirements to the social housing regulator from 2024, the Council was required to report on a suite of measures and this would provide a baseline of the Council's Housing Service performance.

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- Negative tenant feedback on social media – It was highlighted that in some instances, there were negative comments and complaints posted on social media about the Housing Team and repairs, but where no complaints had been submitted to the Council – it was reiterated that the Council could only respond when individual complaints had been submitted to the Council via official channels (email, post etc). In response to a question as to whether Officers could respond to tenants on social media, it was noted that individual Officers were not allowed to respond directly to tenants on social media. Messaging of general nature (relating to issues affecting wider group of tenants for example) could be posted on social media by the Council's Communications Team.
- Contracts management process and negative feedback with respect to contractors' workmanship and behaviour – Officers reported that if it is brought to the Council's attention that a contractor had not undertaken the work properly or was being rude to a tenant, a discussion would be carried out with the tenant to understand the complaint. If found that a contracted worker was at fault, the Council would either direct the contractor to redo the work or raise an issue with the contractor's management. If further issues with the behaviour or workmanship were found, the Council could refuse to use the specific operative and request that another operative was used.
- Improvements in Housing Services – The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Procurement was invited to comment and in doing so stated that significant improvements in Housing Services had been made since restructure of the Service began in 2018. He noted significant improvements in terms of gas and electrical safety test compliance. Gas compliance was quoted as improving from the lowest level of 20 per cent to full compliance. It was highlighted that a new management of the Housing Services Team had been brought in after 2018, in addition most of the team structure being replaced. In addition, the Portfolio Holder brought to Members' attention improvements in the Team's responsiveness to calls from tenants. He also noted that the Housing Management IT system (CX) had also contributed to more detailed levels of reporting which was hoped to improve further over the coming year with further software integration. He commented that the Council worked hard to improve the service and placed on record his thanks to the Housing

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Services Team for their efforts in driving improvements over the last few years.

- The Portfolio Holder added that he was not complacent and pointed out that further improvements were needed, and faster improvements in areas such as combatting mould and damp in properties.
- Annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey – Officers reported that since September 2022 a requirement was set by the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) for social housing landlords in England to undertake an annual survey with social housing tenants. There was an additional requirement that the Council needed to have at least a 10 per cent response rate to the survey. As Council was not able to achieve the required response rate with its in house resources, external company had been used to undertake this year's survey on Council's behalf. IT was reported that the 2024 survey was launched on 14th March (today) and was two last for two months. Following the conclusion of the survey, data would be analysed and the results shared in Members later in 2024-25 municipal year.
- The Chairman reported that he had conducted his own survey of tenants of social housing tenants in Redditch in the week preceding the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The feedback that the Chairman collated from the discussions he had with Council tenants was outlined in detail. The Chairman reported that there was some positive feedback received in respect of the repairs. The majority of feedback from tenants was negative and highlighted long waiting times for repairs to be undertaken and issues with repairs not being undertaken to the required standard. Some examples were also outlined by the Chairman of long waiting times for response to mould and damp issues. An example was cited of a repair classed as urgent not being carried out for over 12 months.
- Officers present asked the Chairman to share the list of properties where the Chairman had been made aware of problems with repairs so that Officers could investigate all complaints raised at tonight's meeting. It was noted that in order to investigate and undertake repairs, Council Officers had to be allowed access to the property. Officers asked that should Members become aware of repair problems in a property, they ask the tenant to report those to the Council so that they were logged on the system.

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- Social housing disrepair claims – It was noted that there was a large market of law firms offering social housing disrepair services whereby claims could be submitted against social landlords for disrepair. It was highlighted that in such cases tenants were often advised to refuse access to Council Officers / contractors for a length of time in order to maximise the chances of a successful claim for disrepair. It was noted that this could be a factor in some cases where Council repairs team / contractors had been denied access to properties.
- Repair jobs output in the Team – It was stated by Officers that since 2021 the Repairs and Maintenance Team had improved the number of repairs they undertook per day from one on average to five jobs a day. Members asked that future reports set out performance measures on housing repairs and that a traffic light rating be used to indicate the trend in performance.

Following the discussion, it was proposed that the report on social housing repairs together with minutes record of tonight's meeting be submitted to the Executive Committee for their consideration. This recommendation was seconded and on being put to the vote it was carried.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee consider the report on social housing repairs (as presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 14th March 2024), together with the minutes record of that meeting, in the new municipal year.

[Following the conclusion of this item, the meeting was adjourned at 8.40pm. The meeting reconvened at 8.45pm.]

95. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME - SELECTING ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY

The Executive Committee Work Programme was submitted for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

the contents of the Executive Committee's Work Programme be noted.

96. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was submitted for Members' consideration.

A question was raised with regard to the proposed scrutiny task group review of Health Inequalities in BAME communities. It was agreed that the Committee Officer would investigate whether this was removed from the work programme, and if this was not previously agreed, reinstate the item to the work programme.

RESOLVED that

Subject to the pre-ambles above, the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme be noted.

97. TASK GROUPS, SHORT SHARP REVIEWS AND WORKING GROUPS - UPDATE REPORTS

Updates on Task Groups and Working Groups were provided as follows:

a) Budget Scrutiny Working Group – Chair, Councillor Kane

Councillor Kane reported that the last meeting of Budget Scrutiny Working Group took place on 11th March 2024. At the meeting Members scrutinised the Quarter 3 Finance and Performance Monitoring Report. It was reported that topics discussed included the capital programme and budget, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and the forecast revenue overspend for 2023/24, which was in the region of £950,000, before the application of £557,000 from the Utilities Reserve as approved at Quarter 1 2023/24. It was explained that this currently left a forecast overspend at Quarter 3 of approximately £383,000.

Councillor Kane reported that a recommendation was made at the 11th March 2024 meeting in respect of the increased cost of temporary housing accommodation being added to the Council's Risk Register. Councillor Kane explained that it was subsequently identified that this risk already appeared on the Departmental Risk Register as risk HOU7 - 'Fail to manage impact of increasing homelessness cases and recruitment challenges' – which was linked to Corporate Risk 19. It was marked as an amber risk at the moment. The recommendation was, therefore, no longer deemed necessary.

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- b) Performance Scrutiny Working Group – Chair, Councillor Holz

Councillor Holz reported that two meetings of the Working Group had taken place since the last meeting of Overview and Scrutiny, on 5th and 12th March respectively.

At the first meeting, on 5th March, which was chaired by Councillor Marshall as apologies were provided by Councillor Holz, Temporary Accommodation and update on social housing voids and allocations was provided to Members of the Working Group.

The meeting on 12th March was devoted to discussion concerning tree maintenance and the Council's Place Teams.

- c) Fly Tipping and Bulky Waste Task Group – Chair, Councillor Khan

It was reported by Councillor Khan that the next meeting of the Task Group was due to take place on 19th March 2024.

RESOLVED that

the Task Groups, Short Sharp Reviews and Working Groups Update Reports be noted.

98. EXTERNAL SCRUTINY BODIES - UPDATE REPORTS

The Council's Representative on external scrutiny bodies, Councillor Marshall, reported that there were no updates since the last meeting of the Committee. The next meeting of Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) would be taking place on Friday 15th March.

RESOLVED that

the External Scrutiny Bodies updates be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.51 pm