



Housing Select Committee

Lewisham Homes Responsive Repairs

Date: 20 January 2022

Key decision: No

Class: Part 1

Ward(s) affected: All

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Outline and recommendations

The purpose of this report is to provide Housing Select Committee with an overview of Lewisham Homes' Repairs Service and the ongoing work to improve performance.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

- Clienting Meetings between the council and Lewisham Homes (throughout the year)
- Lewisham Homes Annual Performance Outturn Report 2020/21 – Housing Select Committee – 20th January 2022

1. Summary

- 1.1. This paper gives an overview of Lewisham Homes' Repairs Service performance in the year to date, the challenges the service faces and the action being taken to improve the service to residents.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Housing Select Committee:-

- 2.1. note this report.
- 2.2. request an update report on Lewisham Homes Responsive Repairs for scrutiny later this year

3. Policy Context

- 3.1. Lewisham Homes' repairs service is delivered in accordance with the Repairs Policy (September 2021), which supports the delivery of the Lewisham Homes Corporate Plan, 2020-2021, which was developed in collaboration with London Borough of Lewisham (LBL).
- 3.2. The Repairs Policy also supports the aims and objectives of LBL and aligns with key priorities in Lewisham's Corporate Strategy, notably on tackling the housing crisis and providing a decent home.

4. Background

- 4.1. Lewisham Homes, like many other managers of social housing, is seeing an increased demand for repairs. Since the pandemic it has been observed that residents across the social housing sector have been reporting more repairs, possibly due to spending more time within their homes.
- 4.2. Prior to the pandemic Lewisham Homes based its repair budgets on completing around 60,000 reactive repairs per annum. Within the current financial year to date Lewisham Homes have already completed almost 59,000 repairs. With three months of the year remaining, it seems likely Lewisham Homes will complete around 80,000 repairs this financial year. It is unclear if the level of repairs will stabilise or eventually reduce but currently the higher demand for repairs shows no sign of abating.
- 4.3. Expectations of the repairs services in social housing are growing. The Government, the Regulator for Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman have all made it clear they expect managers to go further in delivering a more proactive, high quality and resident focused service.
- 4.4. Following recent press coverage there is heightened awareness of the problem of damp and mould in the homes and across the sector. Lewisham Homes like many other managers of social homes have a rising number of ongoing damp cases being actively managed. The causes of damp can be multifaceted making the problem

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difficult to diagnose and treat, with some cases requiring long-term ongoing engagement with the residents. The stock condition survey completed in 2020 identified around 2,400 homes with potential damp issues. Lewisham Homes have works programmes in place to address those specific issues. However, the problem is not limited to those properties and Lewisham Homes daily identify other properties with damp issues. Over 30% of the responsive repairs are plumbing related – many involving leaks. With over 90% of the stock Lewisham Homes manage being flats, water leaks affecting multiple homes are a major problem.

- 4.5. Following the self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing last year, the Council and Lewisham Homes agreed at the end of last year an action plan to drive improvements across all the areas described in this report. Progress against the Action Plan is being monitored through Operational Clienting meetings with progress reports being made to Strategic Clienting and to the Council's Executive Management Team.
- 4.6. Housing Services welcomes Housing Select Committee input into the work that is taking place to improve our responsive repairs service and to ensure our tenants and leaseholders are living in homes that are safe and secure

5. Repairs Performance

- 5.1. Lewisham Homes measures the performance of the repairs service through a number of KPIs. The Board monitors three specific repairs KPIs, which are First Time Fix, Appointments Made and Kept and Last Repair Resident Satisfaction. The targets for these measures were set pre-pandemic and Lewisham Homes haven't reduced the aspirations.
- 5.2. First Time Fix is currently above target year to date at 90% against a target of 80%. This measure indicates that Lewisham Homes are carrying out the works anticipated on the first visit on the majority of occasions. Lewisham Homes are working to make the service more proactive and ensure more works can be done in a single visit.
- 5.3. Appointments made and kept is 93% year to date against a target of 98%. Although the measure is below target, Lewisham Homes keep the majority of appointments and are working to further improve this and miss fewer appointments.
- 5.4. Lewisham Homes' currently measure last repair satisfaction via independently conducted telephone surveys of residents who recently had a repair carried out. Residents are selected randomly which ensures a representative balance of different households and property types to ensure results are reasonably statistically reliable. The last repair satisfaction year to date is 80% against a target of 90%.
- 5.5. Feedback from residents suggests the biggest driver of dissatisfaction is the difficulty of reporting repairs and communicating with us – only 69% were satisfied with ease of reporting a repair. Satisfaction with actual works (91%) and attitude of workers (97%) are much higher than the total score. While Lewisham Homes cannot be complacent about the quality of works, this does suggest the biggest impact of satisfaction will come from improving repairs call handling.

6. Repairs Reporting and Call Handling

- 6.1. Over the past 12 months repair call volumes have been elevated well above their historic pre-pandemic levels. Enquiries in to the Repairs' Service Centre averaged over 1,750 per week over the 3 months to Christmas. Lewisham Homes had hoped that the spike in calls caused by the pandemic would tail off. However, there has been an increase in calls over the same period in 2020/21 when calls were closer to 1,500 per week. The majority of the contacts received, circa 95%, are by telephone.
- 6.2. This has placed considerable strain on the frontline repairs call handlers. Lewisham Homes has increased staffing levels by over 50% in this area from pre-pandemic. Although Lewisham Homes have sought to recruit more staff in to the repairs call

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centre, it has proved difficult to find and retain staff. Lewisham Homes currently have eight full-time and three part-time staff in the call centre and four full time equivalent vacancies. In recent months Lewisham Homes have interviewed over 20 people for the vacant roles but with little success. Lewisham Homes are continuing to advertise the posts and actively seeking to recruit.

- 6.3. Call waiting times and call handling times both went up significantly following the first lock down and have remained high since. This is due to a combination of increasing repair calls, as discussed above, and reduced efficiency in call handling. The average call waiting time is currently 34 minutes, compared to circa 7 minutes this time of year pre-pandemic. Call handling time has risen to 39 minutes in comparison with the historic average of around 7 minutes previously. The increase in handling time is partially due to Covid checks being introduced but more significantly due to the inefficiency of remote working. Call handlers are often kept waiting while trying to contact other teams or contractors on the telephone, who themselves are struggling with elevated call volumes. This can produce long wait times with residents struggling to get through at busy times.
- 6.4. From 4th January staff within the repairs contact centre and DLO scheduling teams both returned to substantive working from Laurence House. This should improve call handling efficiency and remove the need for phone calls between the teams. Discussions are being had about the possibility of co-location with some of the key contractors also within Laurence House to improve coordination and call handling response times.

7. Repairs Service Delivery

- 7.1. Lewisham Homes seeks to deliver as many of the responsive repairs as practicable through the in-house DLO. However the increased workloads and the changing more specialist nature of some repairs, has meant Lewisham Homes have had to sub-contract more works to external suppliers. Some trades Lewisham Homes used to provide have become far more complex and regulated, like scaffolding and roofing, leading to a move to buying in those services from specialists. Lewisham Homes have also seen a big increase in health and safety related works like fire equipment maintenance, fire stopping and fire door repairs, which require specially trained and certified engineers.
- 7.2. Lewisham's housing stock is relatively old, with the majority being over 60 years old with old or original components. Despite a significant investment in planned maintenance by the Council, Lewisham Homes still frequently identify homes in need of urgent major repairs. These homes need large-scale investment like a kitchen or bathroom replacement that Lewisham Homes might otherwise do through the planned works programme. However the urgent nature often means Lewisham Homes have to do the work through the sub-contracted responsive repairs contractors. There has also been a big increase in legal disrepair claims, where the property often needs extensive works completed under the scrutiny of the courts and independent experts. Consequently, major disrepair works are also normally done through sub-contractors.
- 7.3. Currently around 50% of the responsive repairs work is done through external sub-contracted suppliers. Lewisham Homes are working to reduce this but are likely to continue to see a significant proportion of responsive repairs being delivered by external suppliers. Lewisham Homes believe the future of the DLO is in focusing on carrying out smaller repairs within residents' homes and communal areas. These are typically the repairs residents care most about and where Lewisham Homes can get the most added value from well-trained committed directly employed operatives. The vision is for the DLO to provide a high quality customer focussed reactive repairs service mainly within residents' homes.
- 7.4. The change in DLO operatives' terms of employment in October 2020, away from

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piecework to fixed salaries, continues to reverberate with staff. Although a positive and necessary move to modernise the service, Lewisham Homes are still addressing issues of greatly elevated levels of sickness, low productivity and a lack of motivation. Lewisham Homes are gradually engendering a performance culture to improve the quality of repairs and operative productivity. Although Lewisham Homes are seeing improvements, it is acknowledged there is some way to go before the service represents the excellent value for money to which all aspire.

- 7.5. With a much higher rate of sub-contracted repairs, Lewisham Homes have had to develop the capacity to effectively manage those external suppliers. Lewisham Homes have now formed a client side Repairs Team to manage the Repairs service. This team provides strong management of external suppliers and acts as a client to the DLO, with the aim of improving overall repairs performance.

8. Damp and Disrepair

- 8.1. Lewisham Homes has seen an exponential growth in damp and damp related legal disrepair cases. Legal disrepair cases are growing right across the sector. This is mainly driven by aggressive marketing by no win no fee solicitors. Lewisham Homes receive around 150 new legal disrepair claims per annum and currently have 224 live cases. Disrepair claims are often costly and time-consuming to resolve due to legal process.
- 8.2. A recent disrepair case highlighted potential shortcomings within the systems and processes for dealing with urgent decants, disrepair, damp and mould, and persistent complex water leak cases. Around 90% of the disrepair cases relate to damp or water leaks. Last year Lewisham Homes and LBL spent c£1m on disrepair, almost 75% of which went on legal fees and compensation. On top of the legal disrepair cases, Lewisham Homes have a further circa 150 properties on the damp and leaks register.
- 8.3. Following investigations in to the above case, Lewisham Homes produced a lessons learned report and a formal action plan to improve the handling of damp and disrepair cases. Delivery of this action plan is being monitored by Lewisham Homes' Board and through the Client meetings with council officers. Lewisham Homes are making solid progress and aim to have completed the initial plan actions by the end of March 2022.
- 8.4. As per the action plan, Lewisham Homes have recruited, and continue to seek to recruit, additional staff to form a professional surveying team to allow better management of complex repair cases. Lewisham Homes has now appointed a specialist leak detection firm and has a new inter-property water leak protocol. A programme of training and awareness for frontline staff on disrepair and fit for habitation standards has been initiated. Lewisham Homes have reviewed all known damp and disrepair cases and Lewisham Homes have appointed a new Property Analyst to help identify other properties that may be suffering damp from the property records. Alongside this Lewisham Homes have reviewed the decant policy and the disrepair policy to reflect lessons learned.
- 8.5. Many damp cases involve a leak or building defect but equally many relate to condensation problems. Some of the properties are more susceptible to this problem than others due to their poor thermal performance, older designs, poor ventilation or ineffective heating. The use of the property can also play a large part in condensation. Where properties are overcrowded, cluttered, poorly heated and/or poorly ventilated, condensation is more likely to form and lead to mould. It is quite difficult to prevent condensation in an overcrowded home, as normal living e.g. bathing, cooking, drying clothes and even breathing all create excessive levels of moisture beyond that removed by normal air ventilation rates. Where Lewisham Homes believe damp is due to condensation Lewisham Homes look at ways to improve the property (if possible) but also seek to engage with residents about use of their home. Increasingly Lewisham Homes proactively monitor these properties after initial works are completed. To aid

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with this Lewisham Homes are fitting smart thermostats that can remotely monitor humidity levels.

9. Property MOTs

- 9.1. An important part of the action plan is to carry out property MOTs to 2,000 of the most vulnerable properties. Carrying out proactive inspections and repair visits is very much in line with the changing expectations of the Government and Regulator for Social Housing.
- 9.2. The concept of the MOT is that a multi-skilled operative visits the resident's home and checks the property over. While there they complete any necessary minor repairs thus ensuring the home is in good condition and avoiding the need for future repair visits. Over time this should reduce repair reporting and lower overall repair costs, as it should cut the number of repair visits per property. Lewisham Homes currently carry out 5/6 visits per property per annum on average, which is very high.
- 9.3. The current MOT programme commenced in October through external contractor, Gilmartins. Lewisham Homes initially focused on a list of 850 properties identified as being at risk of damp or being in poor condition based on their previous history.
- 9.4. To date, Gilmartins have only managed to complete around 300 surveys and follow up repairs. In part this is due to access problems, with many residents being difficult to contact or refusing the MOT. Where MOT visits have been completed, Lewisham Homes have typically identified a high number of repairs and/or major repairs. This has slowed the number of visits possible but also meant the contractor has had to allocate a team of operatives to follow up repairs. The initial MOTs have typically resulted in over £500 of repairs per property.
- 9.5. Lewisham Homes has now engaged a second contractor, Masher Bros, to bring extra capacity and accelerate the programme. Lewisham Homes are also capturing lessons learned and working on developing a new protocol for the MOT process. Lewisham Homes eventually hope to carry out property MOTs through the DLO but for the time being Lewisham Homes intend to carry on with external contractors to deliver at least the initial circa 2,000 MOTs.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1. Housing Select Committee are asked to note the contents of this update report, as such there are no direct financial implications.
- 10.2. Repairs to the Council's social housing stock is chargeable to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which provides annual resources to undertake both planned and responsive repairs. However, sustained increases in repair volumes and initiating new work streams like property MOTs may not be covered by the existing resources and may have financial implications for the Housing Revenue Account.
- 10.3. Once the results of the MOT's/surveys are known, repairs and follow-up actions will be taken to resolve issues identified. This may require the allocation of additional resources which are not currently forecast within the current HRA budget allocations. Discussions are on-going with Lewisham Homes on how to fund work.

11. Legal implications

- 11.1 The report sets out how Lewisham Homes is seeking to meet the statutory, regulatory and contractual repair requirements of a social landlord on behalf of the Council.
- 11.2 There are no direct legal implications beyond this.

12. Equalities implications

- 12.1 The repairs service is delivered in line with Lewisham Homes Equalities, Diversity and

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Inclusion (EDI) strategy.

13. Climate change and environmental implications

13.1. There are considerable benefits to both residents and the environment through homes which are properly insulated, efficiently heated and free from drafts and other issues. The repairs service seek to improve the performance of properties through timely repairs and correction of issues which hinder this. As noted in this report, the housing stock is mostly older, and thus less efficient, however, outside the scope of this report, measures are being taken to apply for funding to assist Lewisham Homes with making improvements to their stock.

14. Crime and disorder implications

14.1 During the year there has been an increase in reports of anti-social behaviour and abusive and aggressive behaviour to staff. Some of this undoubtedly arises out of frustrations over repairs. Improving the repairs service should have a positive impact.

15. Health and wellbeing implications

15.1. The condition of a person's home has a major impact on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Ensuring residents can easily access the repairs service and that the homes are maintained in a good condition will have a positive impact on the residents' health and well-being.

16. Glossary

16.1 The following terms are used in this report:

Term	Definition
Property MOT	A proactive pre-appointed check on the condition of a resident's home to proactively identify any repairs. The concept is based on repairs generally being completed at the time of the MOT.
KPI	'Key Performance Indicator'. A measurement taken of a specific element of business performance. A KPI usually has a target that performance can be tracked against.
LBL	'London Borough of Lewisham'

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