



Mayor and Cabinet

Lewisham Homes Responsive Repairs

Date: 9 March 2022

Key decision: No

Class: Part 1

Ward(s) affected: All

Contributors: Councillor Bell, Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning

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Outline and recommendations

The purpose of this report is to address the referral of the performance of Lewisham Homes' Repairs Service by the Housing Select Committee to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

- Clienting Meetings between LBL and Lewisham Homes (throughout the year)
- Lewisham Homes Repairs Service – Housing Select Committee – 20th January 2022

1. Summary

- 1.1. The report addresses the referral of the performance of the Lewisham Homes repairs Service by the Housing Select Committee to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. The Mayor and Cabinet are asked to consider the report which addresses the Housing Select Committee referral of the Lewisham Homes Repairs' Service performance.

3. Policy Context

- 3.1. The contents of this report are consistent with the Council's policy framework. It supports the achievements of the Corporate Strategy objective:
 - 3.1.1. Tackling the housing crisis – Everyone has a decent home that is secure and affordable.
- 3.2. The contents of this report support the achievement of the following Housing Strategy 2020-26 objective:
 - 3.2.1. Improving the quality, standard and safety of housing
 - 3.2.2. Supporting our residents to live safe, independent and active lives

4. Background

- 4.1. The Housing Select Committee considered a report on Lewisham Homes Repairs Service on 20th January 2022. Following which, the Committee voted to make a referral to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning due to the impact of the service on residents.
- 4.2. The referral stated:
 - 4.2.1. The committee expresses considerable concern about the current high level of demand on the Lewisham Homes repairs service and the challenges that the service continues to face to meet this demand. The committee requests that the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning investigates the issue and reports back to the committee about what needs to be done to address these challenges and meet demand.
- 4.3. Lewisham Homes' Repairs Service faces a number of challenges, relating to stock condition and Lewisham Homes DLO, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and societal changes being experienced by many housing providers. This report discusses those challenges, the causes and the agreed actions Lewisham Homes are taking to improve the service under the scrutiny of the Clienting Framework.

5. The Challenges Facing the Service

- 5.1. 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

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time within their homes. Lewisham Homes has experienced around a 30% increase in the number of responsive repairs over pre-pandemic levels. 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.

- 5.2. 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. Residents are also rightly demanding better services and Lewisham Homes, along with others in the sector, has seen a general drop in resident satisfaction and with the repairs service.
- 5.3. The scale of the works being undertaken on a typical repair by Lewisham Homes, and thus the typical cost, has also grown substantially. This is in part due to a more proactive approach by Lewisham Homes of trying to do all necessary repair works while at a property but also a reflection of the relatively poor condition of many residents' homes.
- 5.4. Following recent press coverage there is heightened awareness of the problem of damp and mould in our homes and across the sector. The stock condition survey Lewisham Homes completed in 2020 identified around 2,400 homes with potential damp issues. Although Lewisham Homes put in place works programmes to address those specific issues, the problem is not limited to only those properties and Lewisham Homes' staff daily identify other properties with damp issues. Over 30% of responsive repairs are plumbing related – many involving leaks. With over 90% of the housing stock being flats, water leaks affecting multiple homes are a major problem.
- 5.5. As part of its Repairs modernisation programme, Lewisham Homes changed its DLO operatives' terms of employment in October 2020 and moved away from piecework to fixed salaries. This caused some disruption to the Repairs service due to greatly elevated levels of sickness and lower productivity from operatives. This reduced capacity to deliver coincided with the escalation in demand for the Repairs service.
- 5.6. Over the past 12 months repair call volumes to Lewisham Homes have been significantly elevated well above their historic pre-pandemic levels. The majority (circa 95%) of repair reports, and any follows up, are made by telephone. Along with the difficulties of remote working, this placed considerable strain on frontline repairs call handlers and call waiting times rose significantly. The average call waiting time in recent months has been around 34 minutes, compared to circa 7 minutes pre-pandemic.
- 5.7. Meeting the increased demand against the backdrop of Covid and the changes to the DLO has been a challenge for Lewisham Homes. The pressure on the service and challenges in meeting expectations has led to an escalation in the number of complaints made to Lewisham Homes. It has also led to more enquiries and complaints to Councillors, and consequently more casework.

6. Key Performance Indicators

- 6.1. Lewisham Homes measure the performance of the repairs service through a number of KPIs. Lewisham Homes Board and LBL clienting meetings monitor 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 haven't reduced.
- 6.2. 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.

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- 6.3. Appointments made and kept is 93% year to date against a target of 98%. Although the measure is below target, Lewisham Homes and its contractors do keep the majority of appointments but are working to further improve.
- 6.4. Lewisham Homes' currently measures last repair satisfaction via independently conducted telephone surveys of residents who recently had a repair carried out. Last repair satisfaction year to date is 80% against a target of 90%.
- 6.5. Analysis of the feedback from residents suggests the biggest driver of dissatisfaction is the difficulty of reporting repairs and communicating with Lewisham Homes – only 69% of respondents were satisfied with ease of reporting a repair. Satisfaction with actual works (91%) and attitude of workers (97%) are much higher than the overall satisfaction score. This suggests the biggest impact on satisfaction would come from improving repairs call handling.

7. Improving Repairs Service Delivery

- 7.1. Improving access to the Repairs service has been a priority for Lewisham Homes and the Council. The call wait times were of particular concern to Housing Select Committee members.
- 7.2. From 4th January Lewisham Homes brought the contact centre and DLO scheduling teams back to substantive working within Laurence House. Remote working brought about a degree of inefficiency, which had compounded the problems. The move back to the office has begun to improve call handling efficiency due to more collaborative working and closer monitoring of calls.
- 7.3. Lewisham Homes has increased staffing levels by over 50% in the call centre from pre-pandemic levels and continues to seek to recruit more staff. However, Lewisham Homes has struggled to find suitable candidates and currently has four fulltime equivalent vacancies to fill.
- 7.4. Lewisham Homes seeks to deliver as many responsive repairs as practicable through the in-house DLO. However the increased workloads and the increasingly specialist nature of some repairs like fire safety works, has led to sub-contracting around 50% of responsive repairs work to external suppliers. This is taking pressure off the DLO and ensuring repairs can be completed quickly by appropriately skilled staff.
- 7.5. Lewisham Homes' managed housing stock is relatively old, with the majority being over 60 years old. Despite significant recent investment in planned maintenance by the Council, Lewisham Homes frequently identify homes in need of urgent major repairs that they might otherwise complete through our planned works programme. There has also been a big increase in legal disrepair claims, where the properties often need extensive works. This work is being passed to external suppliers to allow the DLO to focus on smaller works.
- 7.6. The DLO is now focused mainly on repairs within residents' homes and communal areas. These are typically the repairs residents care most about and directly employed operatives can add the most added value. Lewisham Homes' intention is that the DLO provide a high quality customer focussed reactive repairs service mainly within residents' homes.
- 7.7. With a much higher rate of sub-contracted repairs, Lewisham Homes has had to develop the capacity to effectively manage repairs by using external suppliers. Consequently, Lewisham Homes has now formed a client side Repairs Team to manage the repairs service. This team seeks to provide strong management of external suppliers and acts as a client to the DLO, with the aim of improving the overall repairs performance.
- 7.8. Lewisham Homes has increased frontline repairs staffing to improve the management of the service. This includes not just call centre staff but also additional staff to form a

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professional surveying team, a property analyst and a para-legal to manage disrepair cases.

8. Damp and Disrepair

- 8.1. Lewisham Homes has seen an almost exponential growth in damp and damp related legal disrepair cases. Legal disrepair cases are growing right across the sector due to a combination of greater awareness and marketing by no win no fee solicitors. Lewisham Homes receives around 150 new legal disrepair claims per annum and currently has 224 live cases. Disrepair claims are often costly and time-consuming to resolve due to legal process.
- 8.2. Following the recent disrepair case, which highlighted potential shortcomings within Lewisham Homes' systems, Lewisham Homes produced a lessons learned report and a formal action plan to improve handling of damp and disrepair cases. Delivery of this action plan is being monitored by Lewisham Homes' Board and by LBL through the clienting meetings. Lewisham Homes is making good progress against the plan and aim to have completed the initial plan actions by the end of March 2022.
- 8.3. The Housing Select Committee was concerned by the expenditure on legal Disrepair. Last year Lewisham Homes and LBL spent c£1m on disrepair, almost 75% of which went on legal fees and compensation. Lewisham Homes is seeking to reduce expenditure through better management of the cases by employing a dedicated Para-legal to manage legal disrepair. Lewisham Homes also acknowledges the need to resolve these cases at the earliest opportunity. As around 90% of disrepair cases relate to damp or water leaks, Lewisham Homes has set up a plumbing task force within the DLO, appointed an external specialist leak detection firm for complex cases and has a new inter-property water leak protocol.
- 8.4. The causes of damp can be multifaceted making the problem difficult to diagnose and treat, with some cases requiring long-term ongoing engagement with the residents. Lewisham Homes has initiated a programme of training and awareness for frontline staff on disrepair and fit for habitation standards. Alongside this Lewisham Homes has also put in place a damp register to proactively manage ongoing cases, and reviewed the Decants and Disrepair policies to reflect lessons learned.

9. Property MOTs

- 9.1. As part of agreed action plan, Lewisham Homes undertook to carry out Property MOTs to 2,000 of the most at risk homes. Carrying out proactive inspections and repair visits is very much in line with the changing expectations of the Government and Regulator for Social Housing for a proactive repairs service.
- 9.2. The concept of the MOT is that trained staff visit homes and proactively complete necessary repairs ensuring that properties remain in a good condition and avoiding the need for future repair visits. Over time this should reduce repair reporting and lower overall repair costs. The current MOT programme commenced in October by contracting Gilmartins to do the work. They initially focused on a list of 850 properties identified as being at risk of damp or being in poor condition.
- 9.3. Lewisham Homes and Gilmartins only managed to complete around 300 surveys and follow up repairs up to Christmas. In part this was due to access problems, with many residents being difficult to contact or refusing the MOT. Where MOT visits have been completed, Lewisham Homes has typically identified a high number of repairs and/or major repairs. This has slowed the number of visits possible but also meant the contractor had to allocate a team of operatives to follow up repairs. The initial MOTs have typically resulted in over £500 of repairs per property.
- 9.4. Lewisham Homes has now engaged a second contractor, Masher Bros, to bring extra capacity and accelerate the programme. The focus remains on completing MOTs to

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the 2,000 worst properties and all households will be contacted and offered an MOT by the end of March 2022. Lewisham Homes plan to eventually carry out property MOTs through the DLO but for the time being has to use external contractors.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1. The Mayor and Cabinet are asked to consider the report which addresses the Housing Select Committee referral of Lewisham Homes Repairs' Service performance, 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 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:

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Term	Definition
DLO	Direct Labour Organisation
Property MOT	A proactive pre-appointed check on the condition of a resident's home to identify repairs.
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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