

<b>Item No.</b> 20.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 13 June 2023	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Cabinet
<b>Report title:</b>		Report of the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission: Housing Repairs Service, Council Leaseholders and Empty Homes	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission	

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That cabinet note the recommendations from the housing and community safety scrutiny commission arising from the scrutiny review of housing repairs service, council leaseholders and empty homes in the Borough of Southwark, paragraphs 6 to 15.
2. That cabinet request that the relevant cabinet member reports back to cabinet on the recommendations within eight weeks.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. At its first meeting on 12 July 2022, the housing and community safety scrutiny commission agreed to investigate the current performance of the repairs service, and particular the issue of repeat calls to the call centre. During the course of the year, the charges paid by council leaseholders, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, also emerged as an area of common interest. These two themes have been the main focus of our work this year.
4. The commission went on to receive the following evidence relating to its housing remit:
  - At the same meeting, a report from the director of exchequer, finance and governance department on housing repairs service focusing on call waiting times, staff capacity, impact of the pandemic and the main repair issues.
  - At its meeting on 3 October 2022, evidence from the Leaseholders Association Southwark 2000 (LAS2000), a leaseholder who is also a co-opted member of the commission, and head of homeownership services, finance and governance on leaseholder charges and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on leaseholders with regards to rising

energy bills and repair costs.

- At the same meeting, a report from the strategy and business support manager, housing and modernisation on empty homes.
  - At its meeting on the 21 November 2022, an interview with the cabinet member for council homes and homelessness and head of repairs and maintenance, on the housing repairs service especially the contact centre service, repeat calls and multiple failures, contractors and the new overall strategy.
  - At the same meeting, a presentation on Leaseholder charges, value for money for charges and transparency of accounts.
  - At its meeting on 13 April 2023, a report from the director of asset management, head of customer services and customer journey lead on the housing repairs service overall strategy review, with a focus on the repairs improvement plan, contact centre repeat calls and multiple failures, and the Asset Management Strategy.
5. The commission considered and agreed the set of recommendations at its meeting on 13 April 2023. The rationale and commission recommendations are set out in paragraphs 6 to 13.

## **KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

Set out below are the recommendations of the housing and community engagement scrutiny commission.

6. The commission was concerned to hear that, 50% of all calls to the contact centre relate to repairs, including residents chasing existing repair works that have yet to be completed. The commission believes there is a need for the council to track these issues, the causes and recurring themes by collecting data on repeat calls and multiple failures.

Recommendation 1 - That the Cabinet set a clear target for the housing repairs contact centre to reduce multiple failures which lead to repeat calls by the end of the year 2023-2024 and collect data on causes and recurring themes.

7. The commission was encouraged to learn that Asset Management was committed to working with the Repairs service in developing a pro-active and preventive approach to repairs by bringing the service, engagement and feedback mechanisms to residents, Tenants and Residents Association (TRAs) in the community. It also noted that the teams are using data led approaches to analyse the needs of housing estates, such as housing stock condition surveys, and that in the future Area Repairs Managers will work directly with local TRAs. However, the commission wishes to see a commitment in the Repairs Improvement Plan to undertake proactive and preventative maintenance, which should be

reflected in the new Asset Management Strategy too. The repairs improvement targets should also be reviewed quarterly in order to maintain their accuracy.

Recommendation 2 - That the cabinet update the Repairs Improvement Plan to include a commitment to pro-active maintenance as a part of its new Asset Management Strategy and also that repairs improvement targets are reviewed quarterly.

8. It was clear that recent improvements in call waiting times is a result of more resources being made available to the contact centre. The commission also heard about the importance of customising the delivery of services to the customer with help of an “Omni-channel” approach i.e. including face to face, online, telephone Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) Systems and web chat. The aspiration of the new Asset Management Strategy working with the Repairs Improvement Plan cannot be realised unless there is there is a fit-for-purpose integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform and IT systems to support this endeavour.

Recommendation 3 - That the cabinet review the funding for resources in the repairs service to ensure the right levels of staffing and also endeavour to provide fit for purpose IT systems such as the integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform to fulfil the aspirations in the new Asset Management Strategy and the Repairs Improvement Plan.

9. It was apparent from addresses to the commission by the representative of the LAS2000 that the council must improve communications with leaseholders on the scheduling of repairs and charges for which they are liable. This includes explaining why certain major works are seen as providing better value for money in the long run as compared to some quicker minor repairs. In addition, it includes transparency about how to challenge estimations: although complaints may be made answered on an individual basis, there should be a clear complaints and escalation process which is communicated to residents through all channels.

Recommendation 4 - That the cabinet ensure there is clear and transparent communication with council leaseholders on decisions to undertake repair works, including value for money, and a clear process for council leaseholders to challenge estimations and requirements of major works through complaint and escalation procedures; and also ensure that this process is widely understood and publicised through all resident communication channels.

10. In addition, the breakdown of the leaseholder charges is often not presented in clear language that non-experts can understand.

Recommendation 5 - That the cabinet commit to ensuring that all service charges statements and specifications of works will be written in plain English by the end of the year 2023-24, and that appropriate training of officers is in place to support this.

11. It is important for the council not only to maintain transparency with leaseholders, but to enhance its own oversight of leaseholder charges from inception to the completion of the repair work. This can be achieved by undertaking quarterly reviews and assessments of major works, and providing these both to ward councillors and residents' associations. In addition, the council needs to conduct extensive market research on costs and compare these costs to other London councils' contracts before repair contracts are out for tender. Value for money should be established by looking at specific elements of improvement work in the homeowners' improvement plan. The commission appreciates the existing efforts to involve residents and resident associations during procurement of major repair works, but believes that it is also important to involve residents in conversations with major work contractors and the council in order to build trust in the community.

Recommendation 6 - That the cabinet ensure that quarterly reviews and assessments of major repair works are carried out, especially with regards to competency, quality, value for money, timely completion and resident feedback, and make this information available to ward councillors and residents' associations.

12. The commission heard from leaseholder representatives that average major works estimates received by leaseholders are £1000-£1100 higher when compared to actual costs and that the difference is only paid back to leaseholders over a 3-year period. The commission understands that the money paid by leaseholders does not stay with the council as income; the expenditure figures have to match the Housing Revenue Account. The commission also recognises that the real-time recalculations of monthly payments in payment plans for leaseholders would require more staffing resources. However, to maintain transparency, it is appropriate that the council allow resident organisations to audit major repair works and that this be included as a key component of the repairs work review process.

Recommendation 7 - That the cabinet ensure that appropriate residents' organisations have the access to audit major repair works and that this is a key component of the repairs review processes

13. The commission understands that private sector empty homes are decreasing and that two contractors have been hired to put the council back on target to reduce minor council voids by the end of 2022. However it would be beneficial for the council to involve housing associations in discussions pertaining to empty homes, in order to identify and further reduce the number of voids.

Recommendation 8 - That the cabinet include empty homes on the agendas for meetings held with housing associations with more than 1000 units from the start of the year 2023-24.

14. It is for the cabinet to decide whether or not to accept the scrutiny commission's recommendations.
15. Overview and scrutiny procedure rule 15.3 requires the cabinet to consider and provide a written response to the report within two months.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission agenda and minutes- 12 July 2022	Southwark Council Website	Amit Alva <a href="mailto:Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk">Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk</a>
<b>Link (please copy and paste into browser):</b> <a href="https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7431&amp;Ver=4">https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7431&amp;Ver=4</a> (see item 5)		
Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission agenda and minutes - 3 October 2022	Southwark Council Website	Amit Alva <a href="mailto:Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk">Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk</a>
<b>Link (please copy and paste into browser):</b> <a href="https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7433&amp;Ver=4">https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7433&amp;Ver=4</a> (see item 5 & 6)		
Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission agenda and minutes - 21 November 2022	Southwark Council Website	Amit Alva <a href="mailto:Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk">Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk</a>
<b>Link (please copy and paste into browser):</b> <a href="https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7434&amp;Ver=4">https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7434&amp;Ver=4</a> (see item 6)		
Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission agenda and minutes - 13 April 2023	Southwark Council Website	Amit Alva <a href="mailto:Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk">Amit.alva@southwark.gov.uk</a>
<b>Link (please copy and paste into browser):</b> <a href="https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7436&amp;Ver=4">https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=605&amp;MId=7436&amp;Ver=4</a> (see item 6)		

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Member</b>	Councillor Ellie Cumbo, Chair, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission	
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Everton Roberts, Head of Scrutiny	
<b>Report Author</b>	Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer	
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<b>CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER</b>		
<b>Officer Title</b>	<b>Comments Sought</b>	<b>Comments Included</b>
Assistant Chief Executive - Governance and Assurance	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance	No	No
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	No	No
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