

Item No. 8.	Classification: Open	Date: 12 September 2023	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title:		A home to be proud of – the council's plan for improving its housing repairs service to tenants	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
Cabinet Member:		Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Homes, Communities and Finance	

FOREWORD – COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN, CABINET MEMBER FOR HOMES, COMMUNITIES AND FINANCE

As London's largest social landlord, Southwark manages 55,000 homes on behalf of our tenants and leaseholders, about a third of the homes in the borough. As we become even more aware of the direct influence having a good, safe home has on people's life chances, health and wellbeing, it is a huge privilege to support so many of our residents with this fundamental need.

It is also a significant challenge. Southwark's housing stock ranges from Victorian tenement buildings, to 1960s tower blocks, to 19th century terraced houses, through to brand new modern flats. Each has different structures and systems, and needs different types and levels of investment to keep them in good repair.

When something goes wrong in your home like a leaky pipe or broken shower, it can be frustrating whether you own your home, live in a council home or rent from a landlord. We all want things fixed quickly; we want to know who to call whatever the time of day; we want to be kept updated about any issues or delays; we want the people who come to fix it to be friendly and polite; and we don't want it to happen again.

These should be the basic principles of any repairs service: getting things right first time, looking after customers well and listening to them, and ensuring repairs are robust to avoid issues reappearing. Southwark has been on a journey to embed these principles in its own repairs service since it brought the service in-house in 2018. We have had some successes but for a range of important reasons, including the Covid-19 pandemic, we have not made as much progress as we wanted.

We know residents are frustrated by the slow progress, and we are determined to drive things forward quickly now so that they start to see a positive difference right away. Some changes are already happening and some will take longer: in this report and in the booklet we have written for residents, we set out a clear timeline for the improvements we know everyone wants to see.

I am grateful to the residents who have contributed to the development of this plan as part of our new Repairs Improvement Residents' Board, and to all the council officers

who are working tirelessly to improve the experience of our valued tenants and leaseholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That cabinet:

1. Note and welcome the council's plans to improve our repairs service, and the progress over the last 12 months
2. Note the renewed focus on working closely with residents and Trades Unions to ensure the improved service meets the needs of all who depend upon it
3. Delegate responsibility to the Strategic Director for Finance to identify adequate funding to support the improvements detailed in this report, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Communities, Democracy and Finance
4. Recommend that Cabinet receives an annual report on the council's progress in delivering the repairs improvement plans

BACKGROUND

5. In 2018 Southwark signalled its strong intent to improve its housing repairs service by bringing the service in-house. Prior to this, the service received by residents had been delivered by large private companies alongside an in-house team, and residents told us the quality of their repairs was variable, and that contractors often struggled to meet the council's performance targets.
6. Merging in-house and contractor teams, with different working practices and cultures, is not a simple process, but in March 2020 Cabinet approved a new Repairs Improvement Plan, setting out a commitment to improving the service, and residents' experience of it.
7. Unfortunately, just as the plan was agreed, the first Covid lockdown was announced, and the service had to adapt to the new rules. Staff focused on emergency repairs only, and managers had to manage high levels of Covid-related staff sickness. Inevitably a backlog of unresolved repairs built up over the next two years, before lockdown restrictions in London were lifted in February 2022. The impact of those is still being felt, especially where the delays have caused the problem to escalate.
8. Over the last year the repairs service has focused on tackling the repairs backlog, but has also taken forward elements of the 2020 improvement plan. We have seen some positive outcomes and feedback as a result, which gives us confidence we are heading in the right direction.
9. However, we know residents have waited a long time to see the improvements they have asked us for, and an urgent step change is required to transform our repairs service. This report sets out our plans to deliver this change.

Key issues for consideration

Wider context

10. There are a number of factors that have already affected, and will have wider implications for, Southwark's housing repairs service.
11. The Social Housing (Regulation) Bill received Royal Assent in January 2023. The new law has far-reaching implications for social landlords, with the strengthening of the Regulator of Social Housing and new powers to carry out regular inspections of the largest social housing providers and the power to issue unlimited fines to rogue social landlords. It also grants the Housing Ombudsman additional powers to publish best practice guidance to landlords following investigations into tenant complaints, and powers to set strict time limits for social landlords to address hazards such as damp and mould.
12. The sector already had a strong moral imperative to improve its repairs performance following several devastating cases linked to disrepair, such as the tragic death of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale. The new law further strengthens the rationale for a new approach to repairs, and an urgent step-change in how we prioritise and expedite repairs in Southwark.

Progress to date

13. Although Covid created many challenges, there has been a significant investment in improvements to the repairs service over the last few years, including:
 - Made it easier for tenants to report problems and make appointments that suit them
 - Improved our communications to residents
 - Created a new damp and mould team
 - Recruited more staff, including 'all-rounders' who can carry out different aspects of a repairs job
 - Introduced new technology to reduce call waiting times
 - Set up a new Repairs Improvement Residents' Board to influence and oversee our improvement plan
 - Listened to residents and staff so that changes are based on real experience
 - Introduced Repair Action Days on estates, where residents can report their issues and receive support on the day.
14. As a result of these changes we have seen a significant improvement across a range of key performance measures.
15. These include:
 - Customer satisfaction has improved from 82% in April 2022 to 89% in April 2023. This outperforms the London average of 69% by some way.

- Number of repairs completed right first time has increased from 75% in April 2022 to 87% in April 2023.

16. Despite this progress, further urgent improvements are required to deal with issues as they arise, and reduce the number of complaints the council and local councillors receive from residents.

17. Our promises to residents are set out in Appendix 1 and summarised in paragraph 19. The document will be distributed to tenant representative groups, and will feature in the autumn edition of Southwark Homes magazine, which is distributed to every council–managed home in the borough. It will be the key document that residents can use to hold the council to account, and make sure we are delivering on the promises it sets out.

18. Improving our repairs service – our promises to residents:

- 1) A quality repair, completed right first time
- 2) An exceptional customer experience
- 3) Your voice will be heard
- 4) We will invest in your homes and try to prevent problems happening

19. Below we set out the specific measures we will take to improve our repairs service, and the timescales for when residents should notice a positive difference.

20.

Promise	When will you start to see improvements?	
	2023	2024
A quality repair, completed right first time	Sending the right person, with the right skills, tools and materials for the required amount of time to complete your repair right first time	→
	Making sure our vans have all the right equipment.	→
	Making better use of technology	→
	Training staff so they can complete the whole job	→
An exceptional customer experience	Answering your call within 5 minutes and your email within 48 hours	Introducing new technology to make it easier for you to report and follow up issues
	Making sure the staff you speak to understand repairs	Flagging vulnerable residents on our systems so they are automatically given priority support
Your voice will be heard	Bringing the repairs service to you through Estate Action	Recruiting repairs managers for your neighbourhood, so they

	When will you start to see improvements?	
Promise	2023	2024
	Days, so you can flag any issues	understand the local area, and you know who to speak to
	Making it clear who to speak to on your estate about issues, and report problems in shared areas	Expanding our text feedback offer so you can contact us at every stage of the process, and making sure we reply as quickly as possible
	We will improve our handling of complaints so that you get a response within ten days, or for complex issues you are given a clear timeline for fixing them	→
We will invest in your homes and try to prevent problems happening	Using new technology to get rid of damp and mould before it spreads	
	Reporting all issues we notice when we visit, not just dealing with planned or routine work	
	Improving the shared areas of your estate or block so you feel proud of where you live, not just your home	
		Getting ahead of any issues by visiting every home and carrying out a survey of any potential problems

Community impact statement

21. A large number of the borough's residents live in social housing and the authority is the largest provider of those homes. The decisions made regarding what happens in homes across the borough therefore affects thousands of people. The aim of this plan is to improve both the access to and repairs completed through the repairs service. This has the potential to have a measurable improvement throughout the community. The focus on contacting the council and the customer service elements of our plan highlight our commitment to this.
22. Reduced waiting times and easier access to report issues directly benefits all residents, including individuals with vulnerabilities. The report does not contain any proposals that would directly affect any particular groups or pose a significant impact on any particular community or group beyond an overall improvement in the service received.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

23. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant equalities impact.

Health impact statement

24. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant health impact.

Climate change implications

25. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant impact on climate change.

Financial implications

26. The required resources to deliver this plan will be met from existing budget provision where possible, or with additional funding as agreed by the Strategic Director of Finance in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Homes, Communities and Finance.

Consultation

27. The council has established a repairs improvement residents' board made up of residents from across the borough. The board listen and advise on proposed changes alongside constructive feedback regarding proposed changes and day to day operations. The board have been instrumental in working with officers to develop this plan and the council thank them for their valuable and ongoing contributions.
28. Feedback the repairs service receives from surveys, repairs action days, complaints and compliments from residents directly also influences the decisions and the proposals for change contained in this report. The proposed increase in our text message service and the ways residents' can interact with the service directly show the commitment to this way of working alongside the value placed on the feedback received.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Assistant Chief Executive – Governance and Assurance

29. There are no significant legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report though the Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance and her staff will be able to provide advice to officers on any legal and governance issues arising during implementation of the repairs improvement plan.
30. It should be noted that the Council's duties under the Equality Act 2010 are continuing duties. The council will need to continue to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good

relations between people with protected characteristics and others during implementation of the repairs plan and when monitoring its impact.

Strategic Director of Finance (H&M 23/041)

31. The Strategic Director of Finance notes the report and will work with the Cabinet Member for Homes, Communities and Finance accordingly. At this stage, there is no detail on the financial implications of the delivery plan for achieving the specific measures listed in this report. Given the financial pressure on the HRA, it is important that bringing down the asset management budget overspend is kept at the centre of the repairs improvement plan, and that any identified efficiencies and savings resulting from the improved service are closely monitored to ensure they are achieved. In addition, any additional costs need to be highlighted so that there can be a robust financial plan in place for how these will be funded.

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Improving our repairs service – our promises to residents

AUDIT TRAIL

Cabinet Member	Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Homes, Communities and Finance	
Lead Officer	David Quirke-Thornton, Strategic Director for Children and Adults	
Report Author	Chris Wood, Interim Assistant Director, Repairs	
Version	Final	
Dated	31 August 2023	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive – Governance and Assurance	Yes	Yes
Strategic Director of Finance	Yes	Yes
Cabinet Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team	1 September 2023	