

The Housing Repairs Service

**Report from
Southwark Housing Scrutiny Commission**

February 2020

Introduction

Southwark Housing repairs will always be a council service which attracts attention. Our borough provides more social rented housing than any other in London, and plans are in place build 11,000 new council homes across the borough by 2043. Southwark also manages the freehold for thousands of leasehold properties, purchased from the council under Right to Buy. Repairs to individual properties and communal areas are a crucial service delivery point for the council. When things go right, repairs can make a huge positive impact on the lives of tenants and leaseholders. When it goes wrong, the results can be devastating.

The history of the repairs service in the borough is chequered. In 2011, the housing scrutiny sub-committee produced a report which detailed widespread waste, inefficiency and financial gaming as part of a long-term private sector contract. The service has been the subject of split contracts, privatisation, partial insourcing and, latterly, brought back in-house, in October 2018.

This most recent development, alongside ongoing concerns about standards of service delivery prompted the Housing Scrutiny Commission to, once again, investigate the service.

Notwithstanding the criticism contained in this report, the Housing Scrutiny Commission would like to place on record our thanks for the hard work that staff who deliver the service do for Southwark residents. The challenges the service still faces are largely the result of long-term strategic decisions. We do not doubt the commitment of staff providing the service, whether they are answering phones, providing technical support or carrying out repairs in people's homes. We hope that the recommendations made in this report will make it easier for staff to deliver the high-quality service that we all want to see.

The Commission would also like to thank all the repairs operatives, senior officers, tenants, residents and councillors who provided information to this scrutiny. We hope they will agree this report provides a solid evidence base for our recommendations. This would not have been possible without the positive engagement of so many people.

We want our repairs service to be a beacon of best practice which other councils seek to emulate. The Housing Scrutiny Commission hopes that the Cabinet will consider the recommendations made here in detail and respond positively.

Gavin Edwards
Chair of Southwark Housing Scrutiny Commission
February 2020

Objective

Our objective for this scrutiny process was to investigate service delivery and methods of monitoring in the repairs service to establish how well it is performing since it came back in house, and to make recommendations to improve it. At all times we have prioritised the perspective of tenants and leaseholders who rely on the service.

Methodology

The scrutiny commission used the following methods and sources to gather evidence for this report.

- A written report on the status of the repairs service
- A report on Key performance indicators for the repairs service
- Formal Interview with senior officers
- Formal Interview with the Cabinet Member for Housing
- Councillors Edwards, McCallum and Dixon-Fyle spent a day with Housing Repairs
- Visit to Islington Council (who took Repairs back in-house in 2014)
- Informal interview with officers
- Cllr Bill Williams (member of the commission) attended Tenants Council to request views
- Repairs service user survey distributed via the council's online consultation hub
- Missed appointments statistics
- Complaints stats and member enquiry stats
- Examples from councillors' casework
- Follow up questions to officers

The insourcing and the structure of the relationship with SBS

The repairs service was insourced with effect from 1 October 2018 following the expiry of the contract with Mears for the south of the borough. All building repairs, not chargeable to leaseholders, are now undertaken by Southwark Building Services (SBS). SBS had previously undertaken repairs in the north of the borough only.

A service level agreement (SLA) is in place that includes a range of key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure the performance of SBS. The repairs & maintenance team is being reorganised to incorporate a 'light-touch' client role.

How Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are used to monitor the service

The SLA outlines performance indicators that the service is measured against. These are supplemented by a series of reports that look into the detail of service and are used as part of the monthly meeting undertaken within the service by officers from traded services and asset management.

Targets for the first six months of the new service were reduced for some indicators in recognition of the logistical issues that insourcing would bring, including the induction of more than sixty staff who transferred from Mears, transport requirements, materials and accommodation issues. The targets were revised from April 2019. It was recognised that the satisfaction target was difficult target to achieve for the service in the short term, having been set at 95%. 7.

Three of the indicators are measured by a customer survey of around 800 residents who have had a repair reported

complete by SBS within the month. The survey is conducted either by telephone or by email. The KPIs relating to the survey are overall satisfaction, right first time and appointments kept. Right first time has a few exclusions that recognise jobs that could never be completed first time e.g. water ingress into electrical fittings where disconnection and drying out are required before a full repair can be affected.

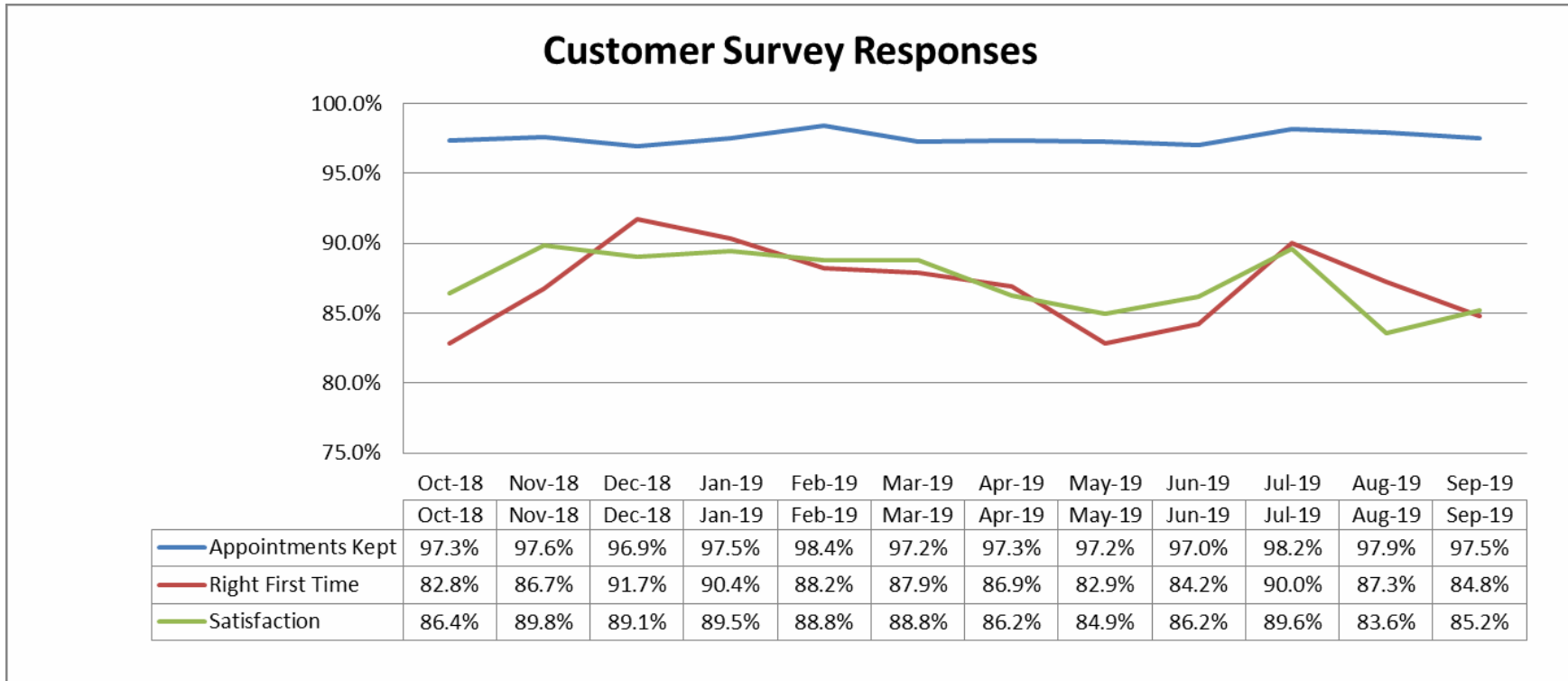
Other indicators are pulled from various IT systems and validated by performance team or quantity surveyors depending on the indicator in question. Officers noted that indicators still need system changes to enable the information to be extracted readily and these will be worked through over the coming year.

The latest KPI statistics are in the tables below.

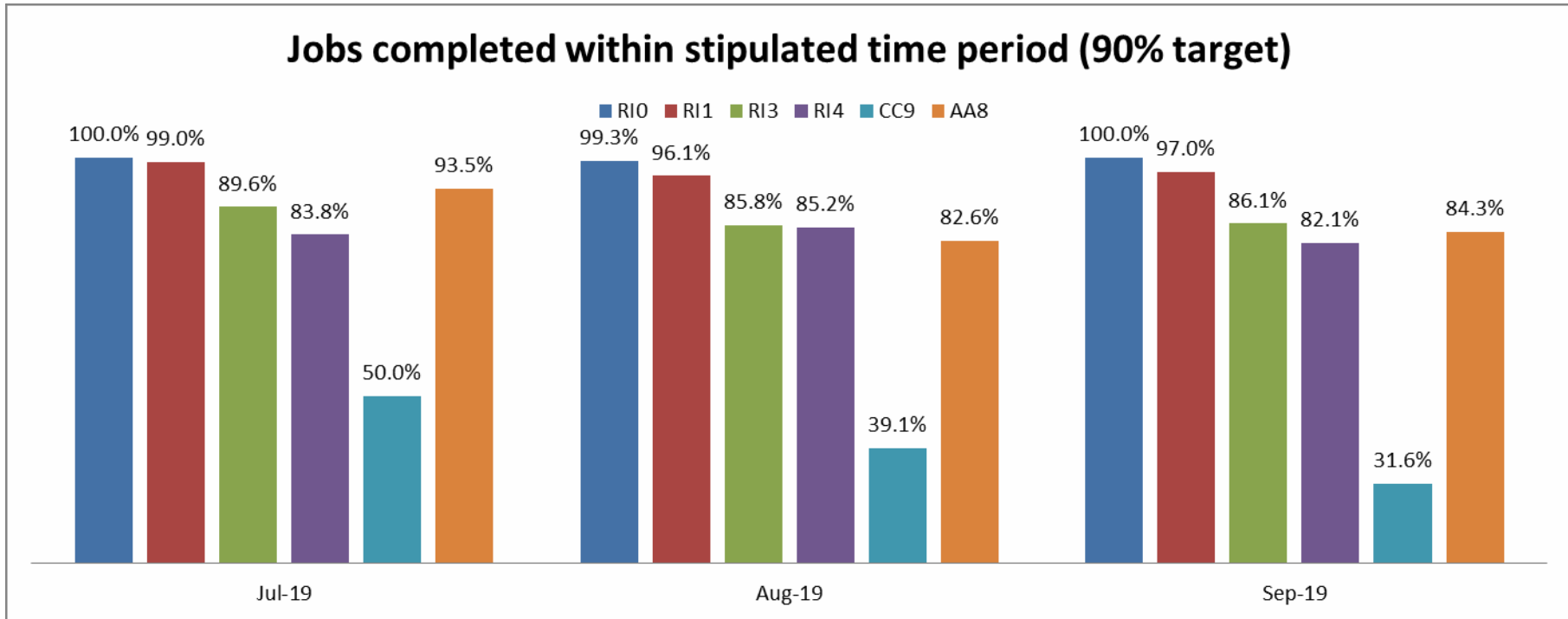
KPI Summary Table

KPI No.	KPI	Source	Target	July-19	Aug-19	Sept-19	YTD from October	Latest trend
1	Resident Satisfaction	Customer survey	95%	89.6%	83.6%	85.2%	87.2%	↑
1a	Resident Satisfaction - North	Customer survey	95%	90.2%	82.1%	86.8%	-	↑
1b	Resident Satisfaction - South	Customer survey	95%	89.1%	85.2%	83.9%	-	↓
2	Percentage of orders commenced and completed within stipulated time periods	System generated	95%	88.3%	87.7%	86.3%	87%	↓
3	Appointments Kept	Customer survey	98%	98.2%	97.9%	97.5%	97.5%	↓
4	Number of orders for which a default notice has been issued*	System generated	<30	0	15	17	-	↓
5	Average time to complete responsive repairs	System generated	9 calendar days	10.2	9.9	10.5	10.1	↓
6	Repairs completed Right First Time	Customer survey	90%	89.9%	87.3%	84.8%	86.8%	↓
7	Completion of quality control inspections per month and reports issued to contractor	System generated	90% pass	94.1%	93.4%	90.5%	92.5%	↓
8	Percentage of orders for non-specialist works completed by a subcontractor each month	System generated	<20% by volume	3.7%	9.8%	5.3%	7.2%	↑
9	Percentage of orders where further appointment made whilst on site	Customer survey	95%	27.5%	20.5%	7.5%	17.7%	↓

Customer Survey graphs (sample c.800pm from October 2018)



Completions within stipulated time periods



Total orders raised/completed on time

	RI0: out of hours complete in 4 hours: emergencies		RI1: in hours complete in 4 hours: emergencies		RI3: urgent up to 3 working days		RI4: routine up to 20 working days		CC9: Complaints and Casework		AA8: Aids and Adaptations	
	Raised	Completed	Raised	Completed	Raised	Completed	Raised	Completed	Raised	Completed	Raised	Completed
July-19	448	448	409	405	1330	1192	2378	1992	30	15	77	72
Aug-19	444	441	511	491	1180	1012	2261	1927	23	9	86	71
Sept-19	415	415	465	451	1303	1122	2209	1814	19	6	140	118
Q1	1307	1304	1385	1347	3813	3326	6848	5733	72	30	303	261

Formal Interview with senior officers

On the 8th July 2019, the Scrutiny Commission formally interviewed the following senior officers: The Head of repairs and maintenance, Acting Director of Environment, Acting Head of traded services, Director of Asset Management. Members of the commission had the opportunity to question officers on various aspects of the repairs service and to interrogate further a written report which was provided prior to the meeting. Questioning at this meeting identified the following issues:

- 1. Resident verification of completion of repairs is not in place:** One core recommendation of the 2011 scrutiny report was that residents should have a central role in verifying that their repair was complete. This followed an admission by the contractors that some operatives were systematically reporting completion of repairs, when they were not complete, or even without even attending the property. The question was asked: “. . . who decides that a job is complete? Who gets to verify that on Southwark's systems?

The officer said: *“So the contractor SBS says it's complete. One of the things that we do find where people are dissatisfied, that quite often the reason that they're dissatisfied, is that the job actually hasn't been completed. It's not as big a number as it previously was but it's still a number.”*

- 2. We are not surveying residents with overdue repairs:** Another recommendation from the 2011 scrutiny report was that the council should not only survey people who have had their repair reported as complete, but also those where the repair is overdue. The point was to ensure that the council wasn't simply patting itself on the back for completing repairs, but also seeking feedback from that group of residents who had not had their repair completed. Satisfaction levels will be disproportionately high among residents with newly completed repairs. It is important that others are included in the surveying process. At the time, the Cabinet undertook to implement this recommendation.

On questioning, it became apparent that this practice had been introduced but had since been dropped. *“We used to do a survey of people whose repair was overdue and not completed. We got very few people that would actually answer that service. And we've got exactly the same response every time, which was, we need to know what's happening, we don't know what's happening. So that was one thing we did. And that sort of fell away. And I think it might be something that we maybe should resurrect. I think things fell away for a while when we were demobilising the Mears contract.”*

- 3. Southwark invests a large amount of time and effort surveying. We may not be getting the balance right.** Officers explained that the council monitors satisfaction, completion and a number of other KPIs via a telephone/online survey of residents who have had repairs completed. Each month they collect 800 responses to this survey. A large amount of effort goes into compiling this information. The committee raised a question mark over the extent of this work. For example, would it be better to do 400 surveys, and then use the newly freed up resource to focus on resolving problem repairs which have been identified via other means (such as complaints or Councillor casework).
- 4. More complex jobs can be notified as complete, when they are not complete:** Officers acknowledged a point made in the committee meeting that complex jobs seem to be an issue.

Anecdotally, a committee member stated that it is the more complicated jobs which seem to take disproportionately longer to complete.

One officer stated: "The other point is actually when there's two parts to the job. I think you made the point earlier about actually someone going away thinking it's completed. Well, actually sometimes that's just a misunderstanding on the operative's part, because he's actually the carpenter who's done the carpentry work and he thinks is completed, but actually it needs to be painted or something needs to be done around it. So it's managing the communications around that as well and making sure that we've got all of our planning and resourcing right. So if you do take a day off work, actually the carpenter comes in with the tiler."

Informal conversations with officers

The Chair of the committee spoke informally with officers during the scrutiny process to get a broader picture of the repairs service and to identify some issues that may have been more difficult to address in a public forum. Outlined below are the issues which came out of those conversations. There are some direct quotes used but these are not attributed.

Strategic and Cultural Changes in SBS: It was suggested that SBS have grown and expanded in a number of areas since taking on the work of Mears' in October 2018, but there has not been a strategic review of how they should operate, nor of the cultural changes which need to take place in order to make the service more tailored to residents. One officer stated: "If I've got a criticism of SBS, it's that it doesn't focus enough on the customer."

Pay systems in SBS: One of the reasons given for this is the way repairs operatives are paid, which encourages faster and sometimes short-term solutions, instead of focusing on longer-term holistic approach. One officer was asked "Are there incentives in the pay system which cause perverse outcomes?" In response they said:

"In some ways yes, but the solution is to not incentivise people, because in the industry, it's normal to be incentivised. The incentive to do a job quickly means that the most skilled people at SBS can do a job quickly, but they won't necessarily do a complete job, . . . for an emergency repair, they will get paid just as much to stop the immediate problem, as they will for replacing the whole thing."

For example, there's a leak in a property, they only want to spend 15 minutes in that property, it's an emergency. 'Oh, I'll put some tape round it,' whereas you could actually change the waste. 'But oh, I haven't got that one on my van, so I'll do that and someone else can come back.'"

On missed appointments: Another example given related to missed appointments: An officer said:

"One of our managers is currently having a debate with them [SBS] about appointments, because although the survey is showing most of the appointments are kept, 98%, we are paying out much more for missed appointments to SBS than any of the other contractors.

There is often no negotiation with the tenant over appointment time.

“There is a misunderstanding of what an appointment is . . . They believe that if they’ve not made an appointment at first contact, that they decide when they’re coming and they just tell the customer, that’s when they are coming.”

On the survey sample: With regard to the point made in the formal interview about surveying residents with overdue repairs, some of the reasons why this stopped were further explained:

“The stats on that were satisfaction levels and were not even measurable. What came out of that was that we were annoying people in that we were phoning them about a job that wasn’t done. Most people said, I don’t know what’s happening.”

What happens next cards: So, in response to this, a solution was put in place:

“That’s why we introduced the ‘what happens next card’ which is routinely not used. The idea came from core group

– The operative is supposed to phone back to their planner, say ‘I can’t do this now, but can you get the next appointment for me or this trade has now got to come’, and the card is then left with the resident which says, these are the things that will now happen, this is when . . . That process has been in place for a long time, but it is routinely not used.

Specialisation in the call centre: The level of specialisation in the call centres, levels of training and the fact that it does not sit with the repairs team were also issues raised.

One officer said “If there is a call centre, I like a specialist call centre. We can give the contact centre all the specialist diagnostic tools in the world, but we can’t give people that experience. It’s changed from being specialist before. It should be seamless between call centre and repair.”

One officer went and spent time in the call centre. They said: “The agent I sat next to, the first call she took was a housing application, and I was surprised. And I questioned that and she said, ‘Oh, yes, I’m going to take myself out of that que now’. That’s when I learned, it was no longer specialist in repairs.”

Turnover and training in the call centre: In relation to training and staff turnover, the following points were raised: “It’s the churn in call centres, that’s the problem, low paid. When they first took on apprenticeships, they had six weeks training, they went out with repairs operatives, they were trained. That’s not happening anymore. They come in ... and I might be over-egging it . . .and it seems to me, they are on the phones . . .The ethos at the minute in the contact centre is to train them to answer everything . . .You do need some people with that expertise. Not following a script and pressing a button.”

One officer suggested that embedding a call centre with the repairs service, building up expertise among call centre operatives may be the solution. It was said that this could also enable the call centre staff to be more pro-active in regard to problem repairs.

Verification of complete repairs: On resident verification of the completion of repairs, the following was observed: “Mears used to let residents verify via text system. But SBS are trying to introduce this on appointments in advance. Multi-trade jobs and real completion is a problem So jobs can get closed down

when they haven't actually been done."

The light client model: One officer was asked about the "light client" relationship with SBS and whether or not senior officers held accountable for the service actually had the ability to make changes needed.

"I think the answer is no . . . as the people running the service, as the person who comes to scrutiny, who has to come to SMT, CMH and say I'm responsible . . . I'll make it better, I've got to do it through other people, but I'm responsible. I'm not sure I'm in that position anymore."

The chair came away from these conversations that SBS is, to some extent, bureaucratically insulated and not accountable enough for the service it is delivering. This seems to be directly related to the "light client" model.

Committee members' day spent with Housing Repairs

Cllrs Edwards, Dixon-Fyle and McCallum all spent one day, going around the borough with repair operatives, finding out about how the repairs system works. We would like to place on record our thanks to those officers and operatives who helped to make this happen. It provided invaluable insight for this scrutiny report. The following issues were identified as a result.

Codes not matching the actual time spent – One repairs operative spoke about how the job codes allocated to each type of job do not accurately represent the amount of time needed to do these jobs. He spoke of the workforce describing some jobs as "golden codes", because they could be done very quickly but might have half a day of work allocated to them. Another example given was that a repairs operative would get double the money for removing and refixing a toilet pan, rather than fully fixing the toilet, but the work is the same. Also, the code for a booster pump or gulper pump is completely wrong. They can be only a one hour job, but it is paid for 8 hours.

Appointment kept is not verified - Arrival for an appointment was confirmed by the repairs operative simply tapping a button on his phone app

Confirming completion: No role for the resident in confirming a repair is complete – completion was also confirmed by clicking on the App. There appeared to be no role for the resident in confirming it was complete.

Call centre information often a problem: One repairs operative stated that the information given to them via the call centre was often inadequate, meaning they might not have the right parts with them. He believed that training at call centre needs to be more intensive and specialist.

Quality of materials: One repairs operative spoke about the variable quality of materials used. It was his belief that Southwark had been put on stop by some suppliers because of non-payment, and this meant the council had to keep changing suppliers.

Visit to Islington Council

On the 18th September 2018, the Chair of the Commission visited Islington Council and spoke with Cllr Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development and Simon Kwong, Service Director. The reason for requesting the meeting is that Islington had brought their Housing Repairs Service back in house in 2014. The Chair asked them a number of questions about their experience and how some of these lessons might apply to Southwark .

Both Councillor Ward and Simon Kwong confirmed that, with lots of hard work, the service in Islington was performing well since it came back in house. KPIS are being met and resident feedback is good.

They also said that there was no financial incentive scheme in place for repairs operatives. All staff have been moved onto LGPS terms and conditions.

‘Housing Direct’ take their repairs calls and these are operated by experienced officers who are expert in housing repairs. Their entire focus is to get the right people there, with the right equipment at the right time. No new operator is left on a phone by themselves for at least six weeks.

They said that the cultural shift in the organisation has been very important. It has taken years of “hard slog” but they are really seeing the results now. They said that on taking over the service they had to confront and change some “bizarre practices” which they had inherited from the old service. Staff now go direct to their first job, instead of coming to the office first.

They also referred to “Multi-skilling training” which is a programme introduced to build up the general skill levels across trades.

The Chair would like to formally thank Cllr Ward and Mr Kwong for taking time to meet with him and speak about their repairs service.

Tenants and Leaseholder Survey

The Housing Scrutiny Commission has carried out a housing repairs service survey. This was developed in consultation with council officers and published using the new Southwark Consultation Hub. The survey can be viewed at this address: <https://consultations.southwark.gov.uk/housing-community-services-department-community-engagement-team/housing-repairs-tenants-and-leaseholder-survey>

The survey has two main objectives. Firstly, to test the data the council is gathering via its own survey methods and also to collect individual examples of problematic repairs which may be indicative of wider problems with the way the service is being provided. In truth, the survey has been more successful in achieving the latter than the former. Overall, the response rate has been poor. There were only 99 responses to the survey and the committee had hoped to gather more data. This level of response is not high enough for us to have statistical reliability for the quantitative results.

However, among the 99 responses, important themes did emerge in the anecdotal responses provided. Below is a summary of some of the comments received organised into themes.

The Call Centre

“There is a demeaning way they tell you something isn’t an emergency. So quick to tell you what they don’t deal with than how they can help.

They are friendly enough but getting them to raise a job (particularly if it’s an urgent one) is virtually impossible. They employ gatekeeping tactics and it’s very frustrating. I don’t feel like they genuinely care about people’s stressful situations. They often speak very abruptly and give wrong information about legal right to repair, assuming that tenants don’t know their rights. The call centre needs remote monitoring - like random listening samples of calls. Then you might get a taste of what really goes on. If you turn up to monitor them, or if they know or suspect they are being monitored then they’ll be on their best behaviour. This is why it’s important for your to monitor the calls when the staff are not aware that it’s happening. I think you might be shocked at the way they speak to people.

I had to argue with the contact centre about the repair. The door entry system was not working and we couldn’t get in the block, but it was felt this wasn’t an emergency. After some arguing it was accepted that any inability to access our flats was probably an emergency.

The operator seems to have something I would call a 'crib sheet' whereby the incoming call must fit into one of the categories listed and judged by the operators understanding. Quite often the information input is incorrect and therefore the wrong repair person turns up - has to go away - another time of waiting and frustration until the correct repair person turns up. This is mostly the information given by quite a few tenants in my block.

It's always a struggle to get the job raised correctly, workmen turn up to do the job with the wrong information about the issue.

“The system just doesn't work. Call centre ill-equipped, contractor is not monitored to check works, reporting and compensation scheme never materialises.”

“The problem is that they can't send emails or copy you in the emails, they can't provide telephone numbers of people supposed to come and it can take 30min+ to get them on the phone. Also, if bell doesn't work, the contractor can't get to you as there is no communication. Things would be more efficient if there was a direct connection with contractors and possibility to communicate in case of no show, or delay or anything else.”

Emergencies not being treated as emergencies

“Full electricity outage - We were without power for nearly 2 days and nights. It was a nightmare to raise the job . . . We had to involve the Cabinet member for Housing to get them to act. The repair team had to attend three times as the problem was so difficult to diagnose and kept being passed to and from U.K. power networks.”

“I am not happy with the repairs team at all. 2019 we had a leak, because of the response it turned into a full-scale flood which damaged my flat. When a call is made to the repairs team you can be holding on for half an hour trying to get through and then you get cut off. When you do get through the person on the

other side can often be very rude chewing gum, yawning, asking silly questions e.g. what size is the bucket the colour. Once somebody calls with a leak or a flood problem it should be a quick response. When I don't have a problem, I email unless it's a real emergency. The department could do with a lot more improvement."

Jobs being marked as complete, when they are not/no follow up.

"In Nov 2019, I had a leak from the guttering across my living room ceiling and down the wall. I reported it, long story short, the job was marked as complete. I requested a Technical Officer attend to check the work was completed to a satisfactory standard. I have chased this repeatedly but heard nothing back. In the meantime, leaks started coming through again the week before Christmas. Again, I rang the call centre. I was told that an email would be sent and I would hear back in due course. Up to this point, I have not heard back. I have informed my housing officer and local Cllr as well."

"Despite several emails regarding a dangerous and loud vibrating pump above my property, it has never been replaced or relocated, meaning I have to try to live and sleep with the vibrations and noise. This despite numerous emails including one from my housing officer."

"The first appointment was kept but no other appointments were made. Again the repair online account showed this also was cancelled. Southwark Council and their contractors do not follow up on initial callouts or notify the customer of any further"

"The contractors who attended were very shocked at how long it had taken to sort out the repair. They told me it would usually have been done in 2 working days. As someone with mobility difficulties (the reason why I have a wet room) I felt abandoned on this occasion."

"There has been an ongoing leak from the roof of my property. Rain water coming through to my daughter's room. It's been going on for about two years, scaffolds has gone up twice at an inconvenience to my neighbour below. Scaffolds came down on the second occasion without a visit to view the work. Soon after, it rained and water came through. I have made repeated contact since the summer 2019 to Southwark and the contractors, they are waiting for Southwark to give the go ahead. Last winter I put in another request via the repairs page online but I haven't had any contact back."

Customers claiming pictures of front doors are being used as proof of arrival for an appointment, when in fact the appointment has not been kept

"Council don't pay compensation as contractor claims they have turned-up and used an old picture of front door as proof, but having fallen prey to this before, I left front door open and when challenged to show picture of front door open, the communication goes cold no matter how much you chase."

"Contractors OCO misleading council staff by taking pictures of front doors but not actually entering premises to inspect faults during busy times."

Not having the right parts

"Engineer came to repair my shower did not have shower head or hose said he would be back in two weeks no contact after eight weeks despite phone calls. I would not class this a good service."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The light client model is not working

The light client model has serious weaknesses for a service which needs cultural, root and branch changes. The Commission has gathered substantial evidence that the contract/commissioner style relationship which has been preserved beyond insourcing is problematic. One of the major advantages of insourcing is supposed to be the direct management control it gives the council over a service. But the light-client model forces senior council managers to ask for changes to be made, instead of mandating them. This is holding back the rate of improvement in the repairs service. Islington Council, for example, has direct control over its service and appears to have made significant improvements since 2014 as a result.

Recommendation 1: The commission recommends that, following appropriate consultation with staff and stakeholders, the light client model is dismantled so that Southwark takes direct management control over the repairs service.

Resident verification of completion of repairs

It is clear from the evidence gathered in the report that there is no role for residents in verifying if a repair has been completed or not. Indeed, there is some suggestion that repair operatives see “completion” of a repair in terms of completing their part of a wider problem, or even simply attending a repair appointment. At other local authorities, residents sign off on the completion of a repair. This is also a change which tenants council has been requesting for a considerable period.

Recommendation 2: Taking advantage of new systems being introduced, Southwark should introduce a system which requires a resident to confirm if a repair is complete, and the repair should not be marked as complete until the resident has done this.

Feedback on problem repairs

One issue which has been identified with the survey used to monitor satisfaction with repairs is that we are only surveying those people whose repairs are marked as complete. The outcome of this is that people who have longer-term issues which SBS has not resolved, are not being surveyed. This leads to a skewing of the statistics towards higher satisfaction. The Commission accepts the evidence given by officers that trying to survey this group was very difficult, because residents could not understand why they were being asked about an incomplete repair. However, the council needs to find a way of getting feedback from people who are “stuck in the system”, residents who have ongoing complicated repairs which have not been resolved.

Recommendation 3: A new Key Performance Indicator should be introduced defining the number of unresolved, incomplete repairs which are beyond their target completion time. Driving down this number should become a key priority of the service.

Resource allocation and the residents survey

The council carries out 800 surveys per month to monitor performance. There is a feeling among commission members that we may be putting too much resource into these surveys and some could be redirected towards problem solving more difficult and complicated repairs.

Recommendation 4: The council should halve the number of surveys done to 400 and then use the newly freed up resource to focus on resolving problem repairs which have been identified via other means (such

as complaints or Councillor casework).

Pay incentives

The Commission recognises that it is not within our remit to make specific recommendations in regard to staff pay and terms and conditions. That should always be done through negotiation with recognised staff trade unions. Nonetheless, the evidence gathered here does support the conclusion that currently some SBS pay incentives are promoting perverse outcomes in some cases, which are not focussed on completing repairs quickly, to a high standard at a reasonable cost. The evidence on “golden” job codes is particularly relevant to this. It is noticeable that Islington has benefitted greatly from having a stable, equality proofed pay scheme which contains no perverse incentives.

Recommendation 5: Changes should be made to staff pay incentives in the repairs service, via negotiation with recognised trade unions, which ensure speedy, high quality repairs and remove perverse incentives to prioritise inappropriately.

“What happens next” cards

There will be times when operatives cannot complete a repair, but it is important that residents know what is going to happen next and when. For this reason, the council introduced a system whereby operatives would phone their planner and arrange for a new appointment (or next step) whilst they are still at the resident’s home. The information agreed would then be shared with residents on a ‘what happens next card’. In the words of one manager “That process has been in place for a long time, but it is routinely not used.” (This a good example of lack of direct management control referred to in recommendation 1.)

Recommendation 6: “What happens next cards” should be re-introduced and properly implemented by managers so that they are used in all cases of incomplete repairs.

Specialisation in the call centre

Both repairs operatives and senior managers noted that problems were arising because of a lack of specialisation and training. We heard clear evidence that telephone operators handling repairs were switching between this work and handing other calls. One repairs operative stated that the information given to them via the call centre was often inadequate, meaning they might not have the right parts with them. He believed that the training at call centre needs to be more intensive and specialist.

Recommendation 7: Consideration should be given to separating a specialist repairs call centre from the wider call centre operation and basing this team with a newly integrated repairs service. In addition, a review of training requirements for these roles should be carried out, to ensure staff responding to repairs requests have the skills and knowledge they need.

Multi-skilling training

During the visit to Islington Council, the Cabinet member and Director referred to the success of the introduction of “Multi-skilling training” which is a programme introduced to build up the general skill levels across trades. The Commission believes such a programme is not in place in Southwark and that our repairs service could operate in a more flexible way if it were introduced. It would reduce the number of call-backs and multiple appointments needed to complete repairs.

Recommendation 8: Working in partnership with staff trade unions and taking advice from councils such as

Islington, Southwark should introduce a comprehensive multi-skilling training programme for repairs operatives

Linking up of separated repairs services

Evidence from the survey and anecdotal evidence noted by members of the committee suggests that the delivery arm of the repairs service too often operated in a fragmented way. For example, the “Leaks from Above” Team will successfully complete the repair to a leak, but the follow up repairs in properties beneath the leak often take much longer to carry out.

Recommendation 9

Any future changes to the repairs service should pay particular attention to unifying the service and making its different elements operate in a more joined up fashion.