



LANCASTER CITY  
COUNCIL HOUSING

# SCRUTINY PANEL

RESPONSIVE REPAIRS FEBRUARY 2024

SCRUTINY OF REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In recent years there has been a much stronger focus on the 'tenant voice' within social housing, to make sure tenants are kept informed and are able to shape and meaningfully influence the decision making of their landlord, and that homes are provided which are warm, safe and secure.
- 1.2 From 1st April 2024, the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) will have new responsibilities and powers and a new focus on proactive consumer regulation. This will include using inspections and the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) to help to monitor social housing landlords are meeting the new Consumer Standards.
- 1.3 The new Consumer Standards reflect the Regulator's revised statutory objectives as set out in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, as amended by the Social Housing Act 2023, and the expectations set out in the Social Housing White Paper in respect of a revised consumer regulation role for the Regulator.
- 1.4 There Are Currently Four Draft Consumer Standards:
- The Safety and Quality Standard
  - The Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard
  - The Neighbourhood and Community Standard
  - The Tenancy Standard
- 1.5 The scrutiny panel will be a major part of the Transparency, Influence and Accountability standard which will require Lancaster City Council to be open with tenants and ensure:
- They are treated with fairness and respect.
  - They can access services, raise complaints, and influence decision making.
  - They can hold Lancaster City Council, as their landlord, to account
- 1.6 Lancaster City Council has made a service commitment in their Service Improvement Plan 2023-2025 to:
- Maximise efficiency and seek to be transparent with the services we deliver.
  - Involve and empower tenants and ensure those who require support receive it.
- 1.7 These commitments are relevant to scrutiny:
- Best Value for Council resources and more tenants benefit from support/ services.
  - Increased opportunities for effective and continual tenant involvement and provide opportunities for tenant scrutiny.
  - Tenants can hold the service to account and have the ability to engage in different ways that meet their needs, and that engagement is meaningful.
- 1.8 In response to this Lancaster City Council in partnership with its tenants developed a framework for tenant scrutiny. This included the establishment of and recruitment to a tenant scrutiny panel. The panel members have received a range of training to prepare them to conduct effective scrutiny exercises and there is a programme of on-going training to enhance skills and knowledge.
- 1.9 The scrutiny panel's role is to explore, examine and test the current services provided by Lancaster City Council Housing on behalf of their tenants. The panel investigate what is currently in place and make recommendations based on the evidence gathered during the scrutiny period.
- The aim of these recommendations should be achievable and set to a workable timescale.

- 1.10 The Panel chose to review the Repairs and Maintenance Service due to feedback received from the tenant's satisfaction measures survey 2022/2023 and complaints received surrounding repairs and maintenance.  
Due to the wide scope of the Repairs and Maintenance Service the Panel decided only to look at the specific area of Responsive Repairs and the tenant journey from reporting the repair to the completion of the job.
- 1.11 At the first meeting on 6th October 2023 the group expressed an early interest in scrutinising the Repairs and Maintenance Service after hearing a lot of complaints from their community members about the service.
- 1.12 At the following meeting on 27th October 2023 the Panel looked at the tenant satisfaction measures survey which took place in July and August 2023. They were torn between Complaints Handling and Repairs and Maintenance Service but due comments in the report around time scales, communication and issues raised to the panel by the wider community they decided to look at the Repairs and Maintenance Service. However, it was felt that scrutinising the entire service would be impractical.  
The panel therefore agreed that the focus of this exercise would be on the end-to-end process from reporting a repair through to completion of the job.
- 1.13 The Panel agreed to assess the Responsive Repairs process against key areas of enquiry as shown below:
- What repairs information is provided by the council and how is it communicated to residents?
  - How easy is it to access the service to report a repair?
  - Delivery of service: performance targets, response times, keeping appointments, customer services.
  - Customer care – how are customers treated, behaviour of operatives?
  - Are service users satisfied with the responsive repairs service- satisfaction levels and complaints, Feedback forms?
- 1.14 This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place between October 2023 and February 2024.

## 2 SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 As part of the investigation, the panel met with Dennis Graham, Repairs and Maintenance Manager, Council Housing Lancaster City Council.

2.2 Den attended a scrutiny panel meeting on 8th December 2023 and gave the panel an overview of the repairs and maintenance service. Den advised the group that complements outweigh the complaints about the service. He explained that there are around 3600 council properties in the district, and they are the most used service within Council Housing. Den explained that there are different categories of repairs:

- Responsive Repairs that are repairs that the service are not aware of and only know when it is reported.
- Planned Repairs are servicing and inspections such as boilers, new kitchens and new roofs.
- Capital Improvements including building new homes.

The team has 82 members including painters, joiners, and plumbers. They also use external contractors. They spend £10 million a year improving stock and this demand will go up as stock gets older. The first point of contact with repairs is usually Council Housing Customer Services and after gaining as much information from the caller as possible they will prioritise the repair into one of four categories. These are:

- Emergency repair – life and death situation dealt within 24 hours.
- Urgent repair dealt with in 7 days.
- Routine repairs are dealt with in 28 days or 20 working days.
- Planned program dealt with in the next 6 months.

The vulnerability of the household can change the priority for the job so it may be completed quicker, which can be open to abuse to get a repair dealt with quicker. Den said there are usually 4 times slots available in the diary. These are:

- All day
- Morning
- Afternoon
- Avoid school run

Depending on the job they may need an inspection to be completed. Den suggested that the panel did not look at repairs that would involve an inspector as this would make the scope too large and would be something to look at as an individual topic.

Emergency repairs take priority over everything else so sometimes other repairs must be cancelled and rescheduled. This is usually done by phoning the person expecting the repair to apologise and re-book. The team receive their jobs on a mobile device. The objective is to get the job right first time, but the vans can only carry a certain number of parts, therefore sometimes parts need to be collected from suppliers or ordered which impacts on the job being completed.

There are also times when tenants aren't in and in these cases a card is left for the tenant to get back in touch to re-book the appointment. This influences other jobs that are booked to that operative for that day. Den explained that he has a draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy that it would be great if the panel looked at as part of the scrutiny topic. Den also said he would supply the KPIs -(Key performance Indicators) for the panel to look at. Den also said they were looking at bringing in a new IT system in the next couple of years which would help with communication with tenants about their repair.

- 2.3 On the 19th December 2023 a member of the Panel went in to the Council Housing Customer Services Officer in Morecambe Town Hall and worked with a Housing Assistant. They looked at how calls are graded and logged on the system. The panel member logged three jobs on her own address to see what this process shows the operative and how jobs are given a certain priority. The panel member listened in on calls from tenants with their consent to understand what questions were asked when people phone up to log a repair and what extra information was requested.
- 2.4 The panel conducted a desktop review of the following information:
- Service Improvement Plan 2023-2025
  - Repairs and Maintenance Draft Policy June 2023
  - Moving In Booklet
  - Tenant Satisfaction Measures Survey
  - KPIs (Key Performance indicators)
  - Repairs and Maintenance Satisfaction Survey
  - Four complaints regarding Repairs and maintenance
  - The calling cards for missed appointments.
  - Spoke to two of the Housing Assistants
- 2.5 In addition to the printed material provided and conversations with the Den Graham and two Housing Assistants the panel reviewed repairs information on the council's website, including attempting to navigate the repairs web pages to report a repair.
- 2.6 The panel also looked at information on the website and in newsletters and social media posts about how to report a repair.

# 3 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 3.1 General Outcomes

Although the process for reporting a repair worked reasonably well the panel felt that some changes needed to be made to improve the service provided to tenants throughout the tenant's repair journey. There seems to be gaps in communication due to the IT systems that are currently being used. Also following on from the report of the repair there does not seem to be any procedure in place to send written confirmation of appointments to tenants.

There seems to be an overall feeling of a lack of communication between the council and the tenants with some tenants ending the call without having been given an appointment and relying on someone from another department phoning them back. The system is very outdated compared to other social housing providers and relies on the tenants being proactive in a lot of situations and contacting customer services to chase up repairs.

## 3.2 What repairs information is provided by the council and how is it communicated to resident?

3.2.1 The panel felt that there was a general lack of availability of printed repairs information for residents. The council is working towards providing a higher proportion of information online and reducing the amount of printed communication. The panel feel that the move to reduce the availability of printed information and advice about housing services does not meet the needs of a large numbers of council residents who are not yet fully online.

### Recommendation:

- The panel felt that the Moving In booklet given to new tenants did not cover the necessary information needed to report a repair and that a separate booklet for reporting repairs including diagrams like those on the website would be good to put in the pack for new tenants. There is a reporting your repairs handbook on the internet which would need updating but could be used for this purpose. They also felt these booklets should be made available to all tenants.
- The panel felt that once a repair had been reported that confirmation of the appointment should be sent by the tenants preferred method of communication such as text, email or letter.
- The panel felt that in situations where an appointment cannot be booked on the first call to customer services, such as a plastering job, that confirmation in writing by the tenants preferred method should be sent to the tenant advising that someone will be in touch within a specified period of time. The panel felt that 3 working days would be a reasonable time frame for this.

3.2.2 The panel felt that information about repairs on social media was informative and useful for tenants that use our social media platforms, but a lot of tenants still do not access these so are missing information.

### Recommendation:

- The panel felt that it would be good to use the screen in schemes to show regular information about how to report repairs.
- The panel felt that the Repairs and Maintenance Service were working hard to get information out to people via these methods and that it was a Council Housing wide issue to try and get more tenants engaged in these methods of communication. They were unsure how the council will improve take up without looking at training courses for tenants and giving tenants access to free WiFi and computers in various buildings.

- The panel felt having a regular newsletter with information in every edition was a good way of keeping people informed about how to report repairs.
- The panel felt that having a steering group around repairs and maintenance would help with communication between the council and tenants on a regular basis.

### 3.3

#### How easy is it to access the service to report a repair?

#### 3.3.1

The panel felt that reporting a repair by the phone was very straightforward. They thought that the Housing Assistants were extremely helpful and polite but realised after a member of the panel had shadowed a member of the team for an afternoon that some things were out of their control and required further conversations with other officers or outside agencies before things could be booked.

The panel did not realise that this was the case before the panel member feedback to them regarding this. They felt that the service needed to be more streamlined and members of the team answering the phones should be given access to numerous diaries including contractors.

#### 3.3.2

The panel felt that it was very easy to report a repair online. The website was easy to find and navigate but they were disappointed to find you could not book an appointment yourself via this method so had to wait for someone to contact you back with an appointment.

They felt it would be much easier for tenants to be able to book a slot to suit their needs without having to be contacted again with an appointment. When this was discussed with a Housing Assistant, they confirmed they do try and email the person back rather than phone as email seemed to be the chosen form of communication, with an appointment but sometimes this does lead to numerous emails to try and get a convenient appointment for the tenant.

#### **Recommendation:**

- To find a way to ensure that all tenants are given an appointment on the first contact or a specific time frame is given to the tenant for when someone with contact them with an appointment. The panel felt 3 working days for less urgent repairs would be appropriate.
- To update the website so that people can book an appointment slot when reporting their repair online.
- To look at the possibility of having numerous dairies including for contractors so appointments for all jobs can be booked immediately.
- To look at increasing the number of slots available to book and have two hour time slots rather than morning afternoon and avoiding school run.

The panel also felt that some calls to Customer Services regarding repairs could be avoided by promoting a clearly signposted route for some enquiries including more information about EMCOR and United Utilities and their roles in certain repairs such as drains and boilers.

They felt more information about the services they provide and who has responsibility for the various maintenance issues which occur in the home would reduce frustration and help the tenant feel like they were not being passed about from one place to another.

The panel felt that the service needs to be more streamline which would probably mean looking at a new IT system to bring everything into one place. They felt the money spent to provide this would be recouped quickly in saving officer time dealing with chasing up appointments, rescheduling appointments and speaking directly to contractors and outside agencies to get repairs done.

### 3.4 **Delivery of service - performance targets, response times, keeping appointments, and customer services**

3.4.1 The panel felt that the service worked well but there were issues with communication throughout the process which made it difficult for tenants and staff at some points.

The panel looked at complaints received which were usually about repairs that had been reported but not completed rather than the standard of work carried out. The panel felt this seemed to be a theme of repeat reporting and what looked like a lack of action from the Councils side.

3.4.2 The key performance indicators do show that the repairs and maintenance service is improving across the board in completing repairs in the target time as compared with last year which is great news and no recommendations were made by the panel.

3.4.3 As part of the scrutiny process the panel have gone through the draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy supplied by Den Graham and have made suggestions for amendments which will be forwarded to Den and other managers as part of this process.

#### **Recommendation:**

- The panel felt that the draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy was well written and understandable. There were a few recommendations about wording and plain English, but they felt the response times were appropriate.
- The panel did feel more communication was needed to be embedded in the policy to make sure tenants were kept informed in a timely manner and they felt a paper trail was needed so that tenants were more able to hold the council more accountable for not responding appropriately.
- The panel also felt that tenants should be given a report of the works carried out for their own records just as anyone else would who has an operative to their home to carry out work.
- They also felt that if the job could not be completed first time that they should receive something in writing by their preferred method of communication to confirm why it could not be completed, when it is going to be completed and the works required.
- The panel felt that a steering group around repairs and maintenance would help to ensure the service continued to move in the right direction with regarding to communication.

### 3.5 **Customer Care: How are customers treated, and how do operatives behave?**

3.5.1 Overall, from the information provided to the panel tenants are very satisfied with the customer care they receive on an individual basis. The panel feels that tenants find the Housing Assistants, which are their usual first point of contact very helpful and polite. The panel did feel that now they understand the process a bit more they understand the reason a lot of questions are asked when they phone up to report a repair.

3.5.2 The panel felt that there was little evidence of how the operatives behave towards tenants from the information provided. They did however feel that from their own experiences and those of members of their community that generally operatives attending tenants' homes were polite and helpful. The panel did notice that one of the compliments stated that an operative had gone above and beyond to assist a tenant, which is lovely to hear.

3.5.3 The panel felt that the calling cards left if a tenant was not at home when an operative called were not very polite or informative and basically made them feel like they would be reluctant to try and re-book the repairs that were missed.

**Recommendation:**

- The panel felt that the feedback survey should be replaced and further questions around the tenants' experience of the operative should be added so the behaviour of operatives can be judged in accordance with this information. The panel felt this could be something else for a steering group to look at an implement.
- The panel felt that the calling cards should be replaced by something more friendly making tenants feel able to respond to them without feeling at fault for the missed appointment. The panel felt this would be a good exercise for tenants and officers to work on together.

3.6 **Are tenants satisfied with the responsive repairs service - what do satisfaction levels, complaints, and feedback forms reveal?**

3.6.1 The panel looked at the results of the Repairs and Maintenance Customer Care Survey which covers 15th June 2021 to 6 February 2024.

[https://keepconnected.lancaster.gov.uk/rms/survey\\_tools/survey1](https://keepconnected.lancaster.gov.uk/rms/survey_tools/survey1)

This is the form that Housing Assistants go through with tenants on a call back to ask them about the service they have received. The panel were concerned that despite the amount of repairs the service complete in a year there were only 458 responses recorded during a two-and-a-half-year period.

The survey shows that most of this number are satisfied with the service they received but the panel felt the people who were not satisfied did not have anywhere to record why this was the case. The survey was not really serving any purpose as it was not helping to identify trends of dissatisfaction. This means the service cannot improve on the mistakes made.

3.6.2 The panel felt that the complaints they had access to were mainly about repeat reporting and a lack of conclusion with the repair. They felt this was deeply worrying when dealing with vulnerable households who may be do not have the support to continue to contact about repairs raised and still unresolved.

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3.6.4 The panel felt there was a break in communication if the repairs were reported to other officers rather than directly to customer services and repeat requests for the repair had to be made.

**Recommendation:**

- The panel felt the feedback form needed to be replaced by a more relevant form and be something that the operative could get completed at the end of their visit. They felt this would be a good exercise for a steering group.
- The panel felt that although the Repairs and Maintenance Service fair well in the Tenants Satisfaction Measures Survey it would be helpful to see how many complaints were around the Repairs and Maintenance Service. Is this something that can be looked at as a specific exercise to see if complaints are increasing in this area and if they are around the same themes. This could then be a specific piece of work for a smaller group to look at in the future.

# 4

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Panel are pleased to report that most staff responded positively to the review, were open and candid in their replies and appeared willing to consider ways to improve the way the Responsive Repairs Service is delivered to its tenants.

It is the intention of the Panel that this report and its recommendations contained within it be presented to senior managers and the Councillor with responsibility for housing prior to a final Action Plan being developed, detailing the actions agreed for implementation in the future.

The implementation of the action plan will be monitored and reported back to the Tenants' Voice Group.

This is the Panels first scrutiny exercise, and they have found it hard work at some stages but have enjoyed the process.