



London Borough of Hackney
Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission
Municipal Year 2022/23
Monday 12 December 2022

Minutes of the proceedings of
the Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission held at
Hackney Town Hall, Mare
Street, London E8 1EA

Chair:	Councillor Soraya Adejare
Councillors in Attendance:	Cllr M Can Ozsen, Cllr Clare Joseph (Vice-Chair), Cllr Joseph Ogundemuren, Cllr Sam Pallis, Cllr Ali Sadek, Cllr Sarah Young and Cllr Zoe Garbett
Councillors in Virtual Attendance:	Councillor Ian Rathbone
Apologies:	Cllr Penny Wrout
Officers In Attendance:	Steve Waddington, Strategic Director of Housing Services
Officers in Virtual Attendance:	Rob Miller, Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace and Ronald Springer, Head of Customer Service Operations
Other People in Virtual Attendance:	Councillor Clayeon McKenzie, Cabinet Member for Housing and Resident Participation, Steve Webster, Resident Liaison Group Co-Chair and Helder Da Costa, Resident Liaison Group Co-Chair
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Councillor Soraya Adejare in the Chair

1 Apologies for Absence

1.1 The Chair updated those in attendance on the meeting etiquette and that the meeting was being recorded and livestreamed.

1.2 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Wrout.

1.3 Councillor Rathbone was in virtual attendance.

2 Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 There were no urgent items, and the order of business was as set out in the agenda.

3 Declaration of Interest

3.1 Councillor Ogundemuren declared that he was a London Borough of Hackney resident.

4 Housing Repairs

4.1 The Chair opened the discussion by explaining that the Commission had requested the item as it was keen to hear about the progress the Council had made in clearing the housing repairs backlog built up as a result of the cyber attack and pandemic and returning to business as usual.

4.2 The discussion would feed into the Commission's wider work to understand the experiences of social housing tenants in Hackney.

4.3 Representing London Borough of Hackney

- Councillor Clayeon McKenzie, Cabinet Member for Housing Services and Resident Participation
- Steve Waddington, Strategic Director of Housing Services
- Rob Miller, Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace
- Ronald Springer, Head of Customer Services Operations

4.4 The Chair began by explaining that the Commission had invited residents and ward councillors to share their experiences of the Council's housing repairs service prior to the meeting. It was hoped that presenting the key issues, patterns and trends from these testimonies would further inform Members' questioning and any follow up action to be taken after the meeting. Officers were not expected to respond to case specifics.

4.5 The Chair then presented the key issues, patterns and trends highlighted by the testimonies received. The main points are summarised below.

Issues reporting repairs

4.6 Concerns had been raised regarding those that are unable to attend neighbourhood offices in working hours, and were therefore only able to reach the service via telephone. It was felt by some that there may be a lack of alternative routes to reaching the service, with some routes being removed in recent times, for example the chat function and the online report form.

4.7 Concerns were also raised with the call centre model, with some feeling that it made it difficult to report more complicated issues - some residents had experienced difficulty in explaining issues over the phone and not being able to submit photos/video.

Long wait times for calls to be handled

4.8 Concerns had been raised regarding the length of time residents had to wait before reaching the service via telephone.

Communication with residents waiting for repairs

4.9 Concerns had been raised regarding communication between the Council and residents between initial reporting, action and ultimate resolution.

4.10 It was felt by some that those that experience delays may not understand the reasons for the delay, or were not receiving timely updates on when their issue would be resolved. Some had been chasing repairs themselves but had found difficulty in reaching the contact centre.

Lengthy waits for repairs

4.11 Concerns had been raised regarding long delays between reporting and initial attendance, action and ultimate resolution.

Damp and Mould

4.12 Concerns had been raised over damp and mould issues being attributed to resident lifestyle, rather than focusing on the structural issues that may cause mould/damp.

4.13 There was also some concern that when action is taken, it may not address the underlying issues in an effective or long-term way, meaning further issues arise and repeated repairs may be needed.

Contractor Performance

4.14 Concerns had been raised regarding communication between the Council and its contractors. In some cases communication seemed to be limited and this may lead to delays in repairs being undertaken.

4.15 There were also concerns that contractor repairs may not be of the best standard initially, leading to repeat visits and lengthy delays.

Communal Repairs

4.16 Specific concerns were raised by Stamford Hill Neighbourhood Panel in regard to communal repairs.

4.17 Concerns were raised over a perceived lack of monitoring, communication with residents and a perceived lack of joint-up working between the individual and communal repairs services.

Temporary Accommodation

4.18 Specific concerns were raised by Woodberry Down councillors in regard to temporary tenants experiencing issues with reporting repairs due to potential confusion that may arise between Housing Needs and Housing Repairs.

Regeneration Estates

4.19 Specific concerns were raised by Woodberry Down councillors in regard to Woodberry Down estate blocks scheduled for demolition.

4.20 It was felt that in some cases, fundamental repair work was not considered value for money as the blocks were scheduled for demolition, and the routes to alternative resolution were not always clear.

4.21 The Chair then invited the Strategic Director of Housing Services to give a short verbal presentation to supplement the written evidence included within the agenda papers. The main points are highlighted below.

4.22 The recovery from the pandemic and cyber attack had posed a number of challenges to the housing repairs service. As of 30th November 2021 there was a repairs backlog of over 7,000, with newly arising cases each month, as there were currently over 700 live disrepair cases.

4.23 Recruitment and retention of external supply chain contractors to back up the direct labour organisation (DLO) had also been an issue, as well as attracting qualified operatives to join the DLO to increase capacity and reduce reliance on sub contractors.

4.24 The Council was also in the process of developing a repairs hub ICT system to reduce paper work and manual workarounds.

4.25 All of the 7088 repairs that made up the backlog on 30th November 2021 had now been completed. However, the number of repairs raised each month continued to rise and the number of due repairs was outweighing the number of repairs completed. This had resulted in there being 2199 overdue repairs at the end of November 2022.

4.26 The average number of days to complete repairs was 9.21 in November 2022. The Council was unable to compare this to pre-cyber attack data as the recovered data did not have completion dates.

4.27 The Council was unable to track repeat visits because each order only held one appointment date and follow-ons and recalls were not linked. Whilst the Council could count the number of repairs completed per property, it could not tell whether the repairs were for the same issue without checking the order descriptions. In November 2022, for the properties attended, on average 1.45 repairs were completed per property.

4.28 Customer services had recently trained staff in link work. The aim of link work was to ensure vulnerable residents were supported early on and prevented from reaching crisis through supporting early referrals.

4.29 Where a resident was over 70 years old and had not contacted the Council to raise a repair for over two years, their details would be flagged as a potential concern to their welfare and an officer would proactively make contact.

4.30 The Council had seen an expected increase in complaints and case work as a result of only providing an emergency repairs service for 15 months. For example, in

2019/20 928 cases were received, compared with 1362 cases received in 2022/23 so far.

4.31 When considering performance in responding, there had been a 73% increase in cases closed per month when comparing September-October 2021 and September-October 2022.

4.32 The complaints process required the Council to respond to all stage 1 building maintenance complaints within 10 working days. Progress had been made in improving the average day response times at stage 1, with the average time reducing from 20.89 in October 2021 to 9.33 in October 2022.

4.33 Repair call demand levels had decreased by 8% in October 2022, although predictions for November 2022 showed volumes had increased again by 15%. Average call volumes were 5,520 per week, and call demand was 15-20% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

4.34 It was felt that whilst contact centre performance was not at the desired level, progress was being made. Between January 2022 and November 2022, an increase of 7867 calls were received. In the same time period there was an increase of 2% in total calls answered and a 9% increase in emergency calls answered.

4.35 In the same period there was a 1 hour 46 minute reduction in wait times for routine calls, and a 4 minute (40%) reduction in wait times for emergency calls. Tenant satisfaction in the contact centre was 71.63% in November 2022, compared to 62.81% in December 2021.

4.36 Tenant satisfaction in the quality of building maintenance work had increased from 59.43% in December 2021 to 66.24% in October 2022. Overall satisfaction in the repairs service had increased from 59.43% to 62.95% in the same period.

4.37 In terms of improvement actions, the Council was developing approaches to tackle high demand repairs challenges. This involved collaborative working, for example with Housing Transformation and IT teams to develop and implement the Repairs Improvement Plan and between Housing Management and legal services to improve disrepair case management and the temporary decant process.

4.38 The Council had increased the number of in-house DLO operatives to 150 in the past year, an increase of 13 from 2021. Recruitment was ongoing to increase the number of operatives by 15, though one of the challenges in doing so was finding suitably qualified operatives.

4.39 Contract management had been a challenge, with the Council's main contractor being overwhelmed with the volume of work raised post cyber attack and during the pandemic and as a result had not been performing as required across multiple work streams.

4.40 The Council had piloted a 24 hour leaks response policy since August with the Leaks Hub Team and this was now being expanded to the Repairs Contact Centre.

4.41 In addition, the Council had changed the way it tackled damp and mould in homes. All cases were now referred to a surveyor and inspected within five days of

customer contact. Residents were also being advised on how to prevent and manage condensation in the home.

4.42 Surveyors were using damp monitoring equipment and providing residents with comfort monitors that identify and advise on heating and ventilating the home, and a priority phone line had been added for damp and mould in the contact centre.

4.43 A New Alternative Dispute Resolution team had also been piloted within the Customer Relationship Team to improve the way the Council dealt with potential legal disrepair cases in the future. A new system, process and designated team was in the process of being set up for this and would go live in January 2023.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

4.44 *A Commission Member asked what trends/data the Council used to inform its improvement plan and to monitor progress in addressing recurring issues with the housing repairs service.*

4.45 The Strategic Director for Housing Services explained that in cases of damp and mould the Council sought to understand via surveyor inspections the underlying causes and take individual action and where data and intel suggests there may be a wider issue in the property or block.

4.46 On wider issues, the development of the integrated IT platform would help the Council track recurring issues and inform continued collaborative working with Housing Management to develop and implement the repairs improvement plan.

4.47 *The Resident Liaison Group Co-Chair asked whether the Council was considering rolling out alternative ways in which residents could report issues alongside the telephony system.*

4.48 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that the Council was rolling out a 24 hour online repairs reporting service that would go live in early 2023. This would allow residents to report repairs issues conveniently online.

4.49 The Council was introducing weekly housing surgeries across its estates so that residents can raise any issues and concerns with their housing officer face to face, and as part of this officers would be assisting residents to access the online repairs reporting service.

4.50 It had also changed working patterns for some call centre staff to reflect the times in a day in which demand on the service is higher, which had helped improve call centre response times.

4.51 The Head of Customer Operations added that one of the features of the online reporting service would be the option for residents to upload pictures of their repairs issues, which would aid the initial diagnosis of issues.

4.52 The Council was also developing a diagnostic tool for housing repairs staff to help them to diagnose initial reports more accurately and ensure appropriate action was taken.

4.53 *The Resident Liaison Group Co-Chair asked whether the Council was considering implementing a system by which residents could track and monitor their repairs as opposed to chasing repairs through the contact centre.*

4.54 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that enabling residents to track and monitor live repairs remained an issue as operatives had historically used pen and paper to feedback ongoing repairs issues to the Council. The new ICT system would seek to develop a function whereby this could be inputted online, which should make repairs easier to track for both staff and residents.

4.55 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the level of disrepair cases, their cost to the Council and how that compared to previous years*

4.56 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that if a legal disrepair case was still live, that did not necessarily mean that the resident was still awaiting repairs. A case would be classed as live until all legal discussions were concluded, and in some cases repairs were completed many months before that.

4.57 The Strategic Director of Housing Services agreed to share the cost figures for legal disrepair cases, with comparisons across previous years, with Members following the meeting.

4.58 *A Commission Member asked how many disrepair cases had led to legal claims and how alternative disrepair resolution options were communicated to residents.*

4.59 The Strategic Director of Housing Services agreed that residents needed to be informed of their options when it came to disrepair and that this had not always been the case.

4.60 The new Alternative Dispute Resolution Team was in part a response to this, and had already seen some success in avoiding legal litigation and saving the Council money. Its aim was to avoid legal litigation not only for the cost benefits but also to ensure issues were resolved fairly and speedily for residents.

4.61 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the accountability of contractors and whether there were any financial penalties for work that was not of the required standard.*

4.62 The Strategic Director for Housing Services explained that there was no stipulation in the contracts with external contractors that allowed the Council to directly recover the costs associated with compensation paid to residents. However, financial penalties had now been introduced where poor performance had led to delays in completing works within timescales.

4.63 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the communal repairs process and how communal repairs cases were monitored and evaluated.*

4.64 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that the majority of communal repairs were undertaken by contractors. It was recognised that there had been issues in completing communal repairs in a timely manner and to a high standard.

4.65 Where work was associated with the Estates Improvement Fund, the Council proactively worked with residents and Tenant and Resident Associations to identify issues. This included an annual walkaround in estates and any issues coming out of that were included in the next financial year's work programme.

4.66 Any work that was ordered and undertaken was communicated to the relevant Tenant and Resident Associations on a regular basis. The aim was to provide quarterly updates to ensure residents were informed and had an understanding of when work would be completed.

4.67 Communal surveyors were now visiting estates on a regular basis to pick up any wider repairs issues. Where a resident or Tenant and Resident Association identified a communal repair, it should be dealt with in the same way as a repair in the home.

4.68 A Commission Member asked what the Council was doing to encourage tenants to take out contents insurance and, in cases where its response to repairs issues had led to damage of tenant property, how it was providing tenants with support.

4.69 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that the Council regularly promotes the takeup of contents insurance to tenants. It was important to note that contents insurance was not the only route whereby residents could receive compensation for damage to their property, and there had been cases where the Council had directly reimbursed tenants for damage caused by disrepair.

4.70 A Commission Member asked whether the Council was looking to develop and monitor a system that could track and monitor repeat visits.

4.71 The Strategic Director of Housing Services confirmed that this would be something that would be built into the new ICT system, although it was difficult to give timescales on when this may be introduced due to the difficulties caused by the cyber attack and recovering lost data.

4.72 A Commission Member asked whether performance management data in relation to repeat visits would be tracked and monitored to evaluate how long it takes to resolve individual repairs issues.

4.73 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that the Council collated customer satisfaction data in relation to repeat repairs and whether repairs were completed to the required standard at the first time of asking.

4.74 The Council did not currently have the capability to track repeat visits but it was acknowledged that this was needed to ensure improved performance.

4.75 A Commission Member asked whether the Council surveyed surrounding properties in cases of damp and mould to ascertain whether it was a more widespread issue in a block.

4.76 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that there was no process currently in place for surveying surrounding properties in cases of damp and mould. However, the Council was reviewing damp and mould as part of its stock conditions survey in the new year and developing targeted MOT style inspections where data and intel suggested there may be a wider issue in a block.

4.77 The Council was also looking at retrofitting as a means of dealing with damp and mould issues, for example by insulating buildings not only to ensure they were more energy efficient but also to reduce the potential for condensation.

4.78 A Commission Member asked for more information on the process for identifying the urgency of a repairs request.

4.79 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that there was a policy in place to determine the timescales for repairs and the urgency with which they were dealt with. In instances of high demand it was not always possible to meet these targets.

4.80 The Head of Customer Services Operations added that call centre staff were trained to enable them to ensure that they were able to prioritise repairs requests appropriately. As mentioned previously, the implementation of a diagnostic tool would further aid staff in prioritising repairs requests going forward.

4.81 A Commission Member asked for more information on the callback function in the call centre when residents were unable to get through to a member of staff.

4.82 The Strategic Director of Housing Services explained that residents received a call back from a member of the call centre team as soon as there was capacity in the team to do so.

4.83 The Head of Customer Services Operations added that the callback function was an automated service which kept a resident's place within a queue. Priority calls would always be answered or called back first, and other calls would be called back in the order of the queue.

4.84 The average time taken for residents to receive a callback was factored into the average wait time for routine calls, which was 21 minutes in November 2022. Residents would usually receive a call back between 1 hour and an hour and half later, but this may vary at peak times.

4.84 Callbacks are made between 10am-2pm to ensure all residents receive a callback before the contact centre closes. The efficiency of these hours were constantly being reviewed, and may change if deemed necessary.

4.85 A Commission Member asked whether the callback function was able to tell residents their place in the queue and an estimated wait time for a callback.

4.86 The Head of Customer Services Operations explained that the callback function did not currently tell residents their place in the queue or an estimated wait for a callback, but it was something that was being looked into. The challenge with giving an estimated wait time was that it often depended on the level of demand on the call centre at any given time, and so if there was a sudden influx of urgent calls the estimated wait time may not be accurate.

4.87 A Commission Member asked whether the Council felt that the current call centre performance was satisfactory, and what it was doing to improve performance in this area.

4.88 The Head of Customer Services Operations explained that the call centre was not currently reaching the level at which it wanted to operate, with repair calls answered needing to be higher and wait times needing to be lower. However, it was working to rectify this.

4.89 For example, it had crossed trained officers across a number of service areas so that they could meet demand where needed, and it would be promoting the online reporting system once implemented to reduce demand on the call centre.

4.90 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace added that bringing together various teams across the contact centre had allowed the service to take a more holistic approach to responding to customer contact and ensure they were appropriately placed to meet demand.

4.91 The Strategic Director of Housing Services also added that only 50% of calls into the contact centre resulted in a repair. As such, if the service could reduce the number of calls received that do not result in a repair, the service would be better placed to respond to those that need a repair in a timely manner.

4.92 It was felt that it was also important to note that 69.62% of customers were satisfied with their call centre experience in October 2022 and whilst work was to be done to get this higher it was an improvement on the previous year.

4.93 *A Commission Member asked how tenant satisfaction was measured and evaluated.*

4.94 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that after each repair was completed the resident would be sent out a customer satisfaction survey to complete. This included speed of repair, quality of repair and overall satisfaction. The overall figures were inclusive only of those of residents who had returned the survey.

4.95 If a resident responds and signals that they were dissatisfied with an aspect of the service, an officer would ring that resident to understand why that was the case and learn from their experience.

4.96 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the process for repairs on regeneration estates, particularly for those properties earmarked for demolition.*

4.97 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the process for those regeneration estate properties that were earmarked for demolition would be the same as those for any other property.

4.98 *A Commission Member asked how the Council engaged with estates that did not have a Tenant or Resident Association, and where turn out for weekly surgeries may be low.*

4.99 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace recognised that estates without Tenant or Resident Associations should not receive a lower level of service because it lacked organised representation. The Council was keen to ensure all estates were treated equally, and that residents were at the heart of the service provided to them.

4.100 *A Commission Member asked whether housing officers responsible for estates without Tenant or Resident Association representation should have more knowledge of the repairs and maintenance issues on the estate.*

4.101 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that housing officers were not responsible for the repairs undertaken on an estate. They were not expected to know what was happening as far as individual and communal repair cases were concerned. However, if there were repairs identified as part of the Estate Improvement Fund then they would be expected to be aware of those.

4.102 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace agreed to provide Members with a summary of the roles and responsibilities of those officers who support housing estates, building maintenance and repairs.

4.103 *A Commission Member asked whether the Council tracked health related issues that arise as a result of disrepair and repair issues, particularly in relation to damp and mould.*

4.104 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the Council had not historically asked residents whether they had experienced any health issues related to damp and mould cases. However, this was now something that surveyors asked residents when carrying out inspections and works.

4.105 When prioritising works, the Council looked at household composition, age and health issues amongst other things to understand the urgency of a case. It was also looking at how it works appropriately with other council services and partners to ensure information was shared sensitively and appropriately to ensure support was provided when needed, but there were challenges with GDPR in relation to this.

4.106 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the lines of responsibility between the Council and tenant management organisations (TMOs) when it comes to repairs and building maintenance.*

4.107 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that every TMO provided a different level of service. TMOs did share information on their lines of responsibility with residents at the beginning of their tenancies so that they would be clear on where they need to go for support.

4.108 The Cabinet Member for Housing and Resident Participation added that when it came to triaging issues there needed to be better communication and collaboration between the local authority and the TMO. There was a shared responsibility between the two to provide an efficient support service for all residents regardless of lines of responsibilities.

4.109 *A Commission Member asked for more information on the amount of contracted work that the Council was seeking to bring in-house to the DLO, and whether it was seeking to bring more of the capital improvement work programme in-house.*

4.110 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the DLO currently undertook around 50% of responsive repairs. The Council was seeking to bring more of the responsive repair work in-house, rather than capital improvement works, as that was what the DLO was best equipped to do.

Chair's Summary

4.111 In summing up, the Chair proposed that the Commission holds a follow up discussion at a meeting in the next municipal year to review progress against the housing repairs improvement plan.

5 Housing Support for Care Leavers

5.1 The Chair explained that the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission and Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission held a joint scrutiny session on housing support for care leavers as part of the 2021/22 work programme.

5.2 The Commissions agreed and finalised their recommendations over summer of 2022 for presentation at Cabinet for a response.

5.3 Members noted the agreed letter to the Executive.

6 Child Q Safeguarding Practice Review

6.1 The Chair explained that the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission and Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission had held a joint scrutiny session on the outcome of the Child Q Safeguarding Practice Review.

6.2 The Commissions had agreed and finalised their response to local partners highlighting the key outcomes from the session and its preliminary recommendations.

6.3 It was noted that local partners had been granted an extension to the response deadline until 27th January 2023 to ensure a coordinated response across the local partnership.

6.4 Members noted the agreed letter to local partners and the extended deadline for response.

7 Minutes of the Meeting

7.1 The draft minutes of the previous meeting held on 7th November 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

8 Living in Hackney Work Programme 2022/23

8.1 The Chair referred to the Commission's work programme and highlighted the discussion items planned for the remainder of the municipal year.

8.2 A Commission Member asked whether the Commission planned to look at affordable housing as part of this year's work programme, which had been highlighted as part of the administration's manifesto commitments.

8.3 It was explained that conversations were ongoing between the Chair, relevant Cabinet Members and officers to agree whether this would be undertaken by the Commission itself in the next municipal year or commissioned independently by the Executive.

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8.4 A Commission Member raised an issue regarding pan London protection of residents who had been subjected to gang violence and threats.

8.5 The Chair explained that the Commission would keep a watching brief over any developments in this area, and that it planned to touch upon the specific area of housing provision for those subjected to gang violence and threats at its meeting on 22nd March 2023.

9 Any Other Business

There was no other business.

Duration of the meeting: 7.00 - 9.15 pm