Customer Services and Repairs Review

Summary of Findings

1. Background

In 2022, the Housing Division appointed Pennington Choices to carry out a review of customer service functions across Housing and Repairs within the Department of Community and Children's Services. Their work included seeking the views of residents, staff and Members.

This document summarises the outcome of the workshops held in late 2022 and the findings of the final report, delivered in March 2023.

The final recommendations and further details on progress can be found on our [website](#).

2. Feedback from Resident Workshops

The main themes arising from the resident workshops were:

Customer service standards

- There are sometimes extremes of customer service (lack of consistency)
- Ownership of issues is often unclear
- Responses can be formulaic or 'robotic'
- Finding the right contact can be difficult, with lots of email addresses and telephone numbers
- Escalation process for enquiries is unclear in many cases
- Reporting issues, especially repairs, can be difficult

Communication with residents

- There is a lack of two-way communication with residents
- People feel they are not always kept informed on issues that matter to them

Repairs

- Chasing repairs because they are not done
- People not kept informed / updated
- Length of time taken on many repairs, especially communal ones
- Quality / workmanship issues are a problem
- No/not enough post inspections
- Concerns about inadequate contract management
- Communal repairs – "go into a black hole"
- Complex repairs never get done

- Repeat repairs happen regularly

3. Overall Findings

The feedback from residents, staff and elected Members identified common themes, which demonstrates that these three stakeholder groups have similar concerns about – and hold similar aspirations for – the Housing Service.

Customer Service – there was a desire for a clear set of customer service standards which are communicated to staff and customers. This was not just for overarching customer service standards, but specifically for each area. As an example, a service standard for repairs and maintenance was high on the list of priorities. It was felt this would push more ownership of customer service and pro-active maintenance of standards. Other issues raised included the measuring of performance, flexibility, and the utilisation of feedback.

Ownership & Accountability – it was clear across all workshops that ownership and accountability was an issue. This was particularly prevalent when staff internally are trying to direct queries or obtain information. A lack of understanding internally over who looks after what, as well as processes relying on individuals understanding someone who may know or be able to help. Staff felt they often had to rely on either experience or finding someone who may know.

Resource Availability – this issue was raised from two perspectives. Firstly, by City of London staff who felt more resources are required to allow them to discharge the responsibilities of their role to the appropriate standard. Secondly, several residents felt staff could be more present on site to allow them the opportunity to raise queries and report repairs. From a resident point of view, they also wanted more visibility of the responsible individuals and seeing more repairs staff on site.

Training – concerns were raised about the onboarding process for new City of London staff. It was reported that it currently lacks structure, and in some departments, new starters are being trained to varying standards as a result. Residents highlighted that they felt complaint handling and managing resident expectations could be improved. Similarly, staff members highlighted they would benefit from more training on how to handle and deliver complaints.

Restructure – ensuring that the wider business and customers understand the new structure, the allocation of roles and responsibilities, and the benefits expected to be realised by the change. Both residents and staff highlighted that they struggled to understand who is responsible for some of the issues and

queries being raised. Staff felt this took up a lot of their time when trying to direct queries to the right individual or team. It was highlighted that this is not just in relation to the recent restructure, but the structure in general following years of natural tweaks and changes.

Communication – it was evident across the workshops that communication could be improved both internally at the City of London, and externally to residents. Workshop attendees reported that they felt clearer lines of communication were required within the organisation to ensure the expectations of leadership are properly understood and to facilitate better outcomes when working across different teams. Several residents reported that more information should be provided to update them on repairs including timescales and updates if repairs cannot be fixed first time – this was particularly relevant to repairs in communal areas.

Repairs - several issues were raised in the context of repairs. It was felt that the current reporting system is flawed, and repairs 'fall into a black hole'. The process needs to be made more accessible, with more information available once a repair is logged, for example where a live job is up to, what the current timeline for resolution is and the ability to escalate if required. The feedback on quality was mixed across the different groups. Some residents reported a positive experience for low level repairs logged and completed within their properties but then felt this was less accurate for repairs delivered in communal areas. Residents also felt that more clarity could be provided on the expected standard of works. For any repairs that became complex and required further input there was a consensus across all groups that these take too long. People are required to constantly chase, and nobody appears to take ownership or accountability for them.

3.1 - Themes from Resident Workshops

The primary customer focus was on **easy and accessible systems to contact the City of London**, as well as timely outcomes. Residents spent a lot of time highlighting the repairs service and ensuring issues were resolved within an appropriate timescale and to a satisfactory standard. The key feedback included the difficulties in reporting repairs, the lack of updates provided once they have been logged, the timescales taken to complete them and the quality of the workmanship. The phrase 'lack of ownership' was raised in all three resident sessions on numerous occasions.

Communication was also key to residents and ensuring they can communicate with the right person or team to resolve their issue. Residents in attendance felt it was difficult to know who to contact, especially with repairs if they wished to escalate these further. They also reported that the dialogue

with City of London could be more open. From their perspective they are often told about changes without being invited to participate in them or provided with an understanding of why decisions or changes are made.

Estate offices were discussed, which were seen as a good thing from a resident's point of view, however more importantly to them was that they wanted the ability to interact with the City of London on their terms. It was accepted that ultimately residents just wanted a simple way of communicating with the City of London that provided the easiest and quickest resolution for their issues.

Customers would like to see **estate walkabouts** return and at different times to allow the participation of all residents e.g., evenings and weekends, as well as repairs staff joining these to be held more accountable. It was felt the walkabouts resulted in better kept estates both physically and visual, as well as more ownership on repairs being completed.

Finally, residents recognised that staff members ultimately were trying to deliver a good service for them. They recognised that internally there were issues restricting front line staff members in their ability to deliver services. This was at the exclusion of repairs however where they felt the team could be doing more and communicating better.

3.2 - Staff Workshops

The quality of the current induction process was raised as a concern. It was felt that staff are expected to deliver their roles without any structured training – this sentiment was echoed by those who had been in the business for a while and felt they had similar experiences/concerns when they were employed. It was felt that there is a lack of clarity between teams as to what people's roles and responsibilities are. The concern is that this results in lost time due to issues being passed around internally between teams and individuals without anybody taking any ownership or accountability. In turn, the standard of the service delivered to residents is impacted and frontline staff then feel they receive negative feedback for things that are outside of their control.

Some staff raised concerns that they did not have **access to the IT system** for several weeks, whilst others had not received their mobile phones - both issues were negatively impacting their ability to do their jobs. It is also felt that limited access to key information limits staff's ability to quickly deal with queries as time is lost trying to find either the appropriate team or response.

Estate offices were generally regarded as a positive by staff. However, it was felt this resulted in an impact on resources as estate office staff spend time dealing with queries that little is left to sit down and complete other work. This is also accentuated by the points made above regarding staff not having the right information and tools at the front line to deal with issues quickly.

3.3 - Workshops with Elected Members

The feedback provided by the elected members was broad ranging and covered several key elements associated with delivering the service. Common themes included:

• Internal & external communication

• Accountability

• Roles & responsibilities

• Front line staff

• A centralised contact centre

• Straight forward and simple to access services

They echoed a lot of what the customers put forward but understood some of the challenges being faced internally. As a priority for the elected members, they wanted to see **more ownership and accountability** from individuals and teams. We were provided with several examples of where elected members had received a better and quicker response than customers had. This has led to more queries and requests for support being directed at these members who then get more involved.

Elected members in one of the sessions seemed more protective of the **estate offices** than the residents are themselves. Residents as already detailed are more interested in having easily accessible systems to report issues or talk to staff, with quick and relevant outcomes. Although residents do recognise their importance this was not necessarily a key priority for them.

4. Recommendations

A total of 24 recommendations were made in response to the findings of the review. These are available to view online, along with the latest progress.

Work has already begun to implement changes, which will be publicised on the project web page each month.