



Overview Scrutiny Committee

Housing Repairs Function Topic Review

Report – April 2016

Contents

- 3 - **Foreword**
- 4 - **Introduction and Summary of Recommendations**
- 5 - **Review Findings**
- 11 - **Appendices**
 - Appendix one - Housing Tenancy matrix - Detailed Analysis

Foreword

Given the challenging financial times facing the council, the Overview Scrutiny Committee felt that it would be prudent to review the way in which the council undertakes its repairs in respect of council housing and the expenditure associated with this. The council has a duty to its tenants in terms of the provision of suitable housing but it is recognised that the tenants also have a responsibility in ensuring that they maintain the properties they live in. There is a need to make sure that the council is achieving best value for money in the works it undertakes and that, where necessary, tenants are contributing to the cost of repairs work as required.

This topic review has identified potential improvements that can be made to the repairs process, particularly with regards to fencing and has also confirmed that the council has a good process in place by which to recharge tenants for repairs works where it is necessary to do so.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers involved in the review for their time and assistance in providing comprehensive information which has enabled Members to discuss, debate and identify potential improvements for consideration.

Cllr John Burden
Chair of the Sub-group

Cllr David Hurley
Vice-chair of the Sub-group

1. Introduction and Summary of Recommendations

1.1 In October 2015, the Overview Scrutiny Committee selected the subject of Housing Repairs for a topic review. The terms of reference for the review focused on :

- analysing the council’s tenancy agreement in order to identify the aspects of repairs service the council is and/or should be responsible for as well as clarifying tenant’s responsibilities.
- a review of the council’s Recharging Policy and tenancy enforcement process for those tenants who cause damage to their council-rented properties.

Throughout the review, Members of the sub-group have been provided with a significant amount of information to review and analyse, which has prompted the further direction that the review has taken.

Summary of Recommendations

1.2 In summary, the Scrutiny Topic review of Housing Repairs has identified three recommendations for Cabinet consideration:

	RECOMMENDATION	Report page
1.	It is recommended that the council change the way in which it undertakes fencing repairs across all council housing stock (as detailed in the report).	- 6 -
2.	The Overview Scrutiny Committee receive a report in 12 months’ time to provide details on how the implementation of the changes to the fencing works has impacted on tenants, any unintended consequences that have been identified and the impact on the council’s overall expenditure in this area	- 7 -
3.	Adequate resources are made available across the council to ensure that the Tenancy audit project is fully supported and any actions that are identified as a result of the Housing Officer visits are completed as required.	- 8 -

1.3 The detailed information to support these recommendations is held within the body of the report and referenced above.

2. Review Findings

Workstream One – Tenancy Agreements and Rechargeable Policy

- 2.1 The first meeting of the sub-group took to review the council’s tenancy agreement in terms of repairs activities, in comparison to a number of other local authorities and housing associations. Appendix one provides a matrix which shows the comparison information provided to Members.
- 2.2 This table prompted Members to ask for additional financial information on the level of repairs works undertaken in regards to Fencing and Garages (both areas that are not a statutory requirement for local authorities), and these two elements became the focal point for the topic review.

Fencing

- 2.3 The information provided to Members identified that the council currently has a significant amount of expenditure in relation to fencing:

	2013-14 Expenditure	2014-15 Expenditure	2015-16 Expenditure (to 30.09.15)
Cost	£334,372.40	£329,511.52	£130,921.19
No. Jobs	796	934	422
Average cost per job	£420.07	£352.80	£310.24

The types of jobs that are associated with expenditure on fencing are:

- Renewal of hinges on gates
- Repairs to damaged fencing
- Works related to washing lines (attached)
- Erection of new fencing
- Making safe dangerous panels
- Replacement of gates

- 2.4 There is currently no statutory requirement for a local authority to undertake works relating to fences. As such, the sub-group considered a number of different options with regards to the provision of fencing, as detailed below:

2.4.1 Fencing repairs offered to all tenants as presently done

Members felt that it is necessary to make changes to the way we deliver fencing repairs to tenants and therefore we should not carry on as we currently are.

2.4.2 No fencing repairs at all.

It was recognised by Members that this was not a feasible option; there would still need to be some level of fencing repair works carried out, but this should not be something that is offered to all tenants.

2.4.3 Fencing repairs for all elderly / disabled tenants

Members felt that it is important that we continue to provide fencing repairs for those elderly (aged 65 or above) or disabled tenants living within the council's housing stock. The age criteria would be based upon the named tenant in the property and where there is a joint tenancy, only one of the tenants would need to meet this criteria.

2.4.4 Fencing repairs only offered to elderly / vulnerable tenants following a means test to confirm inability to carry out repairs themselves

Members did not support the idea of 'means' testing tenants, particularly vulnerable tenants to identify if they could/should pay for fencing repairs. Members felt that, whilst it is not appropriate to offer fencing repairs to all tenants, there should be some officer discretion in undertaking works where there are extenuating circumstances. As such, it was felt that the Director (Housing & Regeneration) and the Assistant Director (Housing) should be the only officers authorities to signoff any such works if it is felt that there are extenuating circumstances.

2.4.5 Fencing repairs for all residents following a means test to confirm inability to undertake such repairs themselves

Members did not support this option in a similar way to that set out above in paragraph 2.4.4.

2.4.6 Fencing repairs where fence backs onto an alleyway or public footpath

Members felt these types of repairs should continue as it could present a safety issue for the tenants if their properties are not secured from alleyways and/or public footpaths.

2.4.7 Only chain link fencing provided between properties

Where the council will provide fencing between properties, only a chain link fence will be provided rather than a wooden fence. If the tenants wishes to have a wooden fence, this will be recharged to the tenants.

2.4.8 Communal gardens and communal area fencing repairs to be maintained

Members agreed that it would be necessary for the council to maintain these areas and as such any repairs to fencing in this areas would be the responsibility of the council.

2.5 Members were advised that the fencing contract is due for renewal in 2016.

RECOMMENDATION 1

It is recommended that the council change the way in which it undertakes fencing repairs across all council housing stock:

- **Only offer free general fencing repairs to those tenants aged 65 or above or those who are disabled. All other fencing repairs will be recharged to the tenant if they would like the council to undertake the works.**

- **An element of discretion will be maintained where it is felt that there are extenuating circumstances. Only the Director (Housing & Regeneration) and the Assistant Director (Housing) will be allowed to authorise such works.**
- **Maintain fencing repairs where a fence backs onto an alley way or a public footpath.**
- **Where the council does provide fencing between properties, this should be as a chain link fence.**
- **Maintain fencing repairs for fencing to communal areas within the council housing estates i.e. those areas where the council has a responsibility to maintain the land.**

It should be noted that it is recognised that a full Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) will need to be undertaken should Cabinet agree to the suggested changes set out in this recommendation.

- 2.6 In terms of implementation of these changes, if agreed there would be a need to notify the tenants of the changes along with some additional guidance and advice about the types of fencing repairs they may encounter. As such, it was felt that implementation of these changes would likely come into effect from July 2016.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Overview Scrutiny Committee receive a report in 12 months' time to provide details on how the implementation of the changes to the fencing works has impacted on tenants, any unintended consequences that have been identified and the impact on the council's overall expenditure in this area. The report should be presented to the Committee in September 2017.

- 2.7 Coming out of the general discussions regarding the repairs works, the Assistant Director (Housing) provided Members with details of a pilot scheme that had been undertaken by one of the Housing Officers in undertaking a 'tenancy audit' of all tenants within their housing area. This has involved the Housing Officer visiting every tenant within their areas in order to:
- Identify if there are any concerns regarding the maintenance of the properties in terms of repairs work required or works that have been carried out by the tenants which may not be at the correct standard in terms of safety.
 - Obtain information about the household and the tenant. The current housing system has the ability to store information such as date of birth, disability etc. but this information is not held for a number of tenants. The tenancy audits help in being able to obtain this information so that we have a better understanding of the people that live within the council housing stock.
 - Identifying those 'quiet' tenants who may not contact the council very often and may have other needs such as social care or mental health requirements. This has enabled the Housing Officer to liaise with other agencies to ensure the tenants are receiving the support they need.

- 2.8 The pilot project has taken place and this process is to be rolled-out across all Housing Officers from April 2016 with the process due to be completed by the end of March 2017.
- 2.9 Members of the sub-group are fully supportive of the 'Tenancy Audit' approach that is being undertaken by officers. It is recognised that there may be an impact on other departments in terms of identifying potential works etc. but that the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term implications.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Adequate resources are made available across the council to ensure that the Tenancy audit project is fully supported and any actions that are identified as a result of the Housing Officer visits are completed as required.

Garages

- 2.10 Similarly to fencing, the council currently has a significant amount of expenditure in relation to garages:

	2013-14 Expenditure	2014-15 Expenditure	2015-16 Expenditure (to 30.09.15)
Cost	£21,358.82	£28,789.44	£15,255.78
No. Jobs	67	71	46
Average cost per job	£318.79	£405.49	£331.65

The types of jobs that are associated with expenditure on garages are:

- Replacement of garage doors
- Repairs to garage mechanisms
- Repairing garage door frames
- Response to criminal damage to garages

- 2.11 Details of the council's stock and income in relation to garages was provided to the sub-group which clarified that:
- 2.11.1 Approximately a third of council garages are vacant; of these 91 sites have been identified as potential development sites and therefore are not being allocated to applicants. In addition, garages at Wallis Park are not being allocated as they are deemed to be a fire risk, due to them being sited beneath the actual block of flats.
- 2.11.2 Approximately 8-10% of garage income is actually spent on repairs to the sites.
- 2.11.3 There is low demand for a number of the garage sites at present. The Housing department are in the process of actively promoting these areas in order to increase take-up and income to the council.

- 2.12 Members were advised that, following an Internal Audit investigation and report into the management of garages owned by the council in November 2015, a new policy and procedure for the letting and management of garages is in the process of being worked on by officers. The policy which will be presented to the Housing Delivery Committee for adoption will focus on improving income collection rates from the letting of the council's garages and parking spaces. It will include a review of the rents charged (particularly in terms of reviewing charges in respect of town centre garages and parking spaces), eligibility criteria and publicity of vacancies.
- 2.13 Members were keen for the council to explore commercial opportunities in relation to the garage sites. Members were advised that, linked to the work on the policy is an ongoing survey of all garage sites owned by the council to current condition, determine levels of usage of all areas and help inform decisions about possible alternative uses for some sites i.e. possible development opportunities.

Rechargeable Housing Repairs and the Recharging Policy

- 2.14 Members of the sub-group were keen to explore further the council's approach to recharging tenants for repairs works, where it is appropriate to do so. The following procedures are in place to clarify when a works will be recharged:
- **Void properties** - a pre-void inspection of the property is carried out and it is indicated to the outgoing tenant, that there are, or may be rechargeable works.
 - **Rubbish Clearance from Occupied Properties** – clearance of rubbish including vehicles, caravans and trailers from gardens of occupied properties, where the tenant has been requested in writing to remove the said items and or have been served with a formal written notice which has now expired.
 - **Malicious and Accidental Damage** – where the tenant has deliberately caused damage, whether by misuse, malicious intent or accident to their property. These items would normally only be repaired or replaced following a prepayment by the tenant. However if the work is deemed to be a health and safety issue, then the cost of the work will be recharged.

- 2.15 Members were provided with details of the income and expenditure in relation to rechargeable works:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Original Amount</i>	<i>Amount Outstanding</i>	<i>Collected Amount</i>	<i>% Collected</i>	<i>% Outstanding</i>
Apr-15	£329,111.53	£107,971.50	£221,140.03	67.19	32.81
May-15	£329,111.53	£107,571.56	£221,539.97	67.31	32.69
Jun-15	£335,793.43	£113,645.53	£222,147.90	66.16	33.84
Jul-15	£335,857.93	£112,096.04	£223,761.89	66.62	33.38
Aug-15	£335,878.93	£105,216.25	£230,662.68	68.67	31.33
Sep-15	£335,878.93	£104,536.81	£231,342.12	68.88	31.12
Oct-15	£337,926.80	£105,022.32	£232,904.48	68.92	31.08
Nov-15	£343,694.07	£107,984.07	£235,710.00	68.58	31.42
Dec-15	£349,952.83	£113,412.49	£236,540.34	67.59	32.41
Jan-16	£350,141.56	£111,655.30	£238,486.26	68.11	31.89

- 2.16 The figures shown in the table above are cumulative i.e. the original amount column shows the recharges raised since 2006, whilst the amount outstanding column shows what is still owed to the council and the collected amount shows what has been recovered to date.
- 2.17 Members discussed the collection of income and the processes that the council currently has in place and were satisfied with the process and will make no recommendations in this area.
- 2.18 Members were also interested in exploring the option of introducing a Housing Deposit scheme for new tenants whereby a nominal sum is taken as a deposit from the tenant, which is returned when the tenant vacates the property if it is left in a suitable condition. This is something that most private landlords require when they take on new tenants.
- 2.19 Research into this however found that there are no local authorities (that could be identified) that require a Housing Deposit when a new tenant occupies a council property. It was felt that, as a high number of council tenants are also in receipt of housing benefit, it would be very difficult to enforce a deposit scheme.
- 2.20 As such, it was felt that, whilst this was an option considered by Members, it was not something that should be introduced at Gravesham.

Appendices

**Overview Scrutiny Committee – Housing Repairs Function Topic Review
- Member’s Information Pack (November 2015)**

KEY:

GBC are able to change

GBC are able to change but may lead to implications

GBC is not able to change as statutory obligation



Repairs Responsibilities	Gravesham BC	Rugby	Canterbury CC	Dover DC	Medway CC	Hyde Housing	London & Quadrant	Notes
Structural repairs i.e. roofs, chimneys, drains, gutters, pipes, doors, windows, walls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Water, Gas and Electricity (inc annual inspections)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Meters and meter boards are responsibility of the tenant and leaseholder are to supply certification to GBC
Fixtures and fittings owned by provider	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Kitchens and Bathrooms - repairs/replacement through wear and tear only	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
External decoration, inc communal parts	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Main pathway and stairs to property	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Taps - owned by provider repaired when damage due to wear and tear and not misuse	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
General repairs due to age / wear and tear e.g. ceilings, main floor, skirting boards, staircase, etc	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Repairs to communal TV aerials and lifts	Yes	?	Yes	?	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Broken or cracked glass (unless caused by crime)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	If damaged by tenant and H&S issue - repaired by LA and re-charged to tenant
Taps - owned by tenant	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	DDC - any internal plumbing
Replacing plugs, chains to basin, baths and sinks and washers	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Repairs and Maintenance of fencing / gates / walls such lead onto public pathway	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	?	No	No	Hyde - Minor repairs by tenant.
Internal decoration including plaster and small cracks (except OAP and disabled tenants)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Internal flooring, eg carpets, tiles	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Shed, lean-tos, clothes line/post	No	Yes	No	No	?	No	No	
Garden, rear paths and patio areas	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Garages	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	?	Yes	?	
Replacement keys / locks / letterboxes / door handles / bells	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	
Replacement WC seat, lids and chains	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Blockages - WC, drains, pipes etc due to tenant misuse	No	Yes	No	No	?	No	?	
TV aerials	No	?	No	No	No	No	No	Only communal
Pest Control	No	?	No	No	?	No	?	
Plumbing works to appliances and extra pipework	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	

Repairs Responsibilities	Gravesham BC	Rugby	Canterbury CC	Dover DC	Medway CC	Hyde Housing	London & Quadrant	Notes
Electric - plugs, fuses, light bulbs	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	
Repairs due to Tenant damage	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	
Repairs to property with a pending Right To Buy application	No	?	?	?	?	?	?	GBC will only carry out repairs if H&S issue
Disabled adaptations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Stairlifts and through floor lifts and flush floor showers
Various Compensations (right to repair /where a repair service has failed or inefficiently delivered).	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	?	

Please Note:

Leasholder have responsibility for all repairs within their properties.
Repairs to communal areas is the Landlords responsibility