



# HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## 3 October 2017

### SECOND DESPATCH

**Please find enclosed the following items:**

**Item 2** Housing Communications Scrutiny Review: Witness Evidence

1 - 4

b) Evidence on online housing services

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Evidence supplied by: The Deputy Head of Communications and Change

Housing Scrutiny Committee	Date: 3 October 2017	Wards: All
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### **SUBJECT: Housing Communications Scrutiny Review: Evidence on online housing services**

#### **1. Synopsis**

- 1.1 This briefing provides the Committee with background information on the council's approach to online channels and encouraging residents to use them to transact with us.

#### **2. Overview of digital trends in Islington**

- 2.1 Digital use in Islington: according to the heatmap developed by our digital inclusion partner Go On UK around 90% of adults in Islington have access to the internet. 10% of adults are reckoned never to have been online. 83% of adults were reckoned to have all five basic digital skills – managing information, communicating, transacting, problem solving and creating. In other words, most residents are enabled to transact online either via a PC, tablet or mobile phone.
- 2.2 Online and digital services are already transforming different aspects of our lives – from shopping, to banking, health and communication – and influencing expectations around access to services. Online channels offer us new opportunities to improve the services we provide as well as making them much more cost effective. We reckon it costs £7.40 to provide a face to face transaction while an online transaction is nearer 32p. In these tough financial times it makes sense to encourage as many people as are able to go online to help us fund services for those who can't. The council's customer transformation programme has been co-ordinating our work to encourage residents to increase digital transactions. Our aim is for 80% of all transactions to be carried out online by 2020.
- 2.3 More of our residents are making more use of online options. The council dealt with 157,377 transactions online in financial year 2016/17 – up 10% from the previous year - and we have over 200,000 registered My eAccount users. Council tax, which generates a high volume of transactions, has seen a 28% shift in online transactions between 2015-17 while face to face enquiries have dropped by 60% (we have introduced an appointments system for enquiries which has probably contributed to this drop). 100% of primary and secondary schools admissions are online. Similarly our bidding system for council homes is 100% online. 74% of births in Islington were registered online in 2015/6.

### 3. Encouraging residents to move to digital channels

- 3.1 We know that certain groups of residents are more likely to be at risk from digital exclusion than others:
- People over 65
  - People on low incomes
  - People with learning disabilities
  - Families where English is a second language

We also know the main barriers we need to overcome to encourage more people to use online channels:

- access to the internet
- skills to make the most of online resources
- motivation
- trust.

So encouraging channel shift will require a mix of support to improve access and skills along with well-designed and reliable systems that deliver a good experience for residents.

- 3.2 We are taking a segmented approach to our audiences, in line with their ability and motivation to get online as follows:

People who can but won't go online <b>Online by default plus support by agent</b>	People who can and will go online <b>Online by default</b>
People who can't and never will <b>Offline services (telephone etc.)</b>	People who can't now but could do with support <b>Digital inclusion</b>

Our digital inclusion scheme is seeking to support less enabled residents to get online by recruiting volunteer champions to show residents how to use the web through gadget workshops; providing digital champions in libraries and customer centres and providing training and access to computers across arrange of council outlets including the Customer Centre, libraries, learning and community centres. We are testing the impact of providing mobile devices to more deprived residents on the Andover and Dibden estates and Housing's Resident Engagement team facilitate an IT mentoring scheme in 11 community centre hubs. The council is also working with a range of voluntary and community sector partners to reach out to our communities. Of course we are continuing to provide telephone and face to face services for those who cannot use digital.

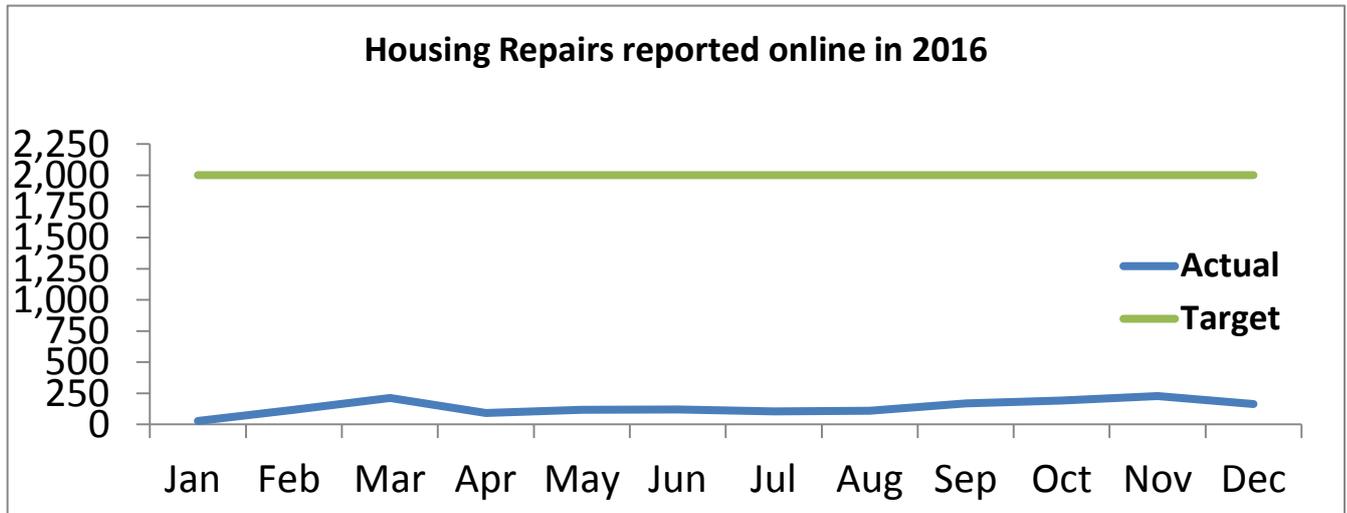
- 3.3 Encouraging more digitally enabled residents to make more use of digital involves a range of activity:
- Raising awareness of opportunities to transact online – we replaced our council 'A-Z of council services' with a guide to useful weblinks this year for example. We have also actively cross-promoted opportunities – for example the recent communication to residents that regularly transact online to sign up to e-billing for council tax. This resulted in a 29% uplift in sign-ups. We are also reviewing our tenancy sign up process with a view to introducing more digital elements – such as cross promoting My eAccount; providing a pre-interview email with e-forms and links to a new online tenancy guide and also an interactive guide through the interview.
  - Making it as easy as possible to transact online - the redesign of our website for example has made it easier to find information; made information more accessible with the use of graphic and buttons as well as providing new online forms.

## 4. The challenges of channel shift: online repairs

- 4.1 Changing established behaviour is a challenge as our experience with online repairs reporting has shown. Our Housing Direct helpline receives some 4,000 calls a month about repairs, many of which are non-emergency repairs. As part of the Customer Transformation Programme we have developed an online reporting system aimed at reducing the volume of traffic to the helpline and delivering some £315K savings. In order to achieve this target it is estimated that approximately 500-600 non-urgent repairs per week need to be reported online. If we can't achieve these savings by reducing this non-urgent traffic there could be an impact on other aspects of the service that we provide. So, given the tough choices, we consider moving non-urgent repairs reporting online to be our preferred option.

As well as delivering savings, the online system offers some advantages to residents. For example, it enables them to report non-urgent repairs 24/7 rather than between the hours of 8am and 8pm and the solution has also been designed to make it easier to report problems more accurately (when compared to the online form previously used). This is because it provides users with a range of clear and simple graphical illustrations enabling them to click on items/areas where there is a problem. This also makes it easier for people who don't speak English as their first language to report – so there are advantages for accessibility too (the system is also designed to use online translation programmes to further assist non-English speaking residents). The system was carefully designed to address the most common issues reported to us and was tested with residents, including the housing repairs reference group, to ensure usability. It is 'mobile first' meaning that the interface works both on phones and PCs.

- 4.2 The system went live in January 2016 and has been promoted to residents through a range of council channels – and directly by call centre staff when dealing with calls - in order to encourage take up. However, usage has been low – around 23 repairs a week on average were reported on the system from January to June 2016. (note less than 1 online repair a month was received by the old system)



- 4.3 As well as custom and practice – the phone line is the established means of reporting repairs - the high level of service provided over the phone has been identified as a barrier to encouraging our residents to use the new online channel. The repairs telephone service is a Freephone number, available for 12 hours a day during the working week and 4 hours on a Saturday.

Desktop research of the 20 north London councils showed us that Islington is the only one to provide phone access 12 hours a day, Monday – Friday (above the average access time offered by other councils on weekdays at 9 ½ hours). We are also one of only two councils to offer weekend access. Of the 13 councils who offered an online repairs solution, Islington is one of four to offer a Freephone number in addition. The responsiveness of the service, which includes an average call waiting time of 20 seconds and an abandonment rate of 2%, also suggests that our operating model is above 'industry standard'.

We have also recognised that the system could be improved further by making it easier for residents to reorganise appointments online as part of the online reporting process. This involves some complex work to join up various back end systems, including the scheduling system used by our repairs operatives.

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