

Homes and Neighbourhoods
222 Upper Street, London, N1 1RX

Report of: Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods

Meeting of: Housing Scrutiny Committee

Date: 8th January 2024

Ward(s): All

Housing Ombudsman Action Plan Update

0. Synopsis

- 0.1. As reported to the Housing Scrutiny Committee at their last meeting in November the Housing Ombudsman concluded their special investigation into Islington Council in October 2023 and published their finding [Special Islington Council Report | Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#). The council accepted the finding and confirmed their commitment to service improvement on publication of the report. As well as finding areas for improvement the Housing Ombudsman commended Islington on its proactive approach to remedying areas identified for improvement and those having begun ahead of the launch of the investigation.
- 0.2. A draft action plan was shared with the Housing Scrutiny Committee at their last meeting and work has begun on delivering the action plan as well as refining it since then. This report sets out the progress that has been made.
- 0.3. Further the Corporate Director, Homes and Neighbourhoods will meet again with the Housing Ombudsman in January 2024 to discuss progress and their plans for monitoring arrangements following their report.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. That the Housing Scrutiny Committee note the progress made against the Housing Ombudsman Action plan since November and the refined version of the action plan and provide feedback on the work so far.

2. Background

- 2.1. As reported to the Housing Scrutiny Committee at their last meeting in November the Housing Ombudsman concluded their special investigation into Islington Council in October 2023 and published their finding [Special Islington Council Report | Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#). The council accepted the finding and confirmed their commitment to service improvement on publication of the report. As well as finding areas for improvement the Housing Ombudsman commended Islington on its proactive approach to remedying areas identified for improvement and those having begun ahead of the launch of the investigation. The Housing Ombudsman has announced a number of further special investigations this year for social landlords and details of this can be found on their website [News - Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#).
- 2.2. An action plan has been developed to respond to the 21 recommendations made by the Housing Ombudsman, a draft of which was shared with the Housing Scrutiny Committee at their last meeting. Since then work has continued on delivering the action plan, as well as refining and consolidating some of the actions and delivery timescales, as the service has developed its response. This report sets out the progress that has been made under the four areas of recommendations made by the Housing Ombudsman – cross-cutting issues, disrepair (including damp and mould), anti-social behaviour and complaints handling.
- 2.3. The Corporate Director, Homes and Neighbourhoods will meet again with the Housing Ombudsman in January to discuss the council's progress and to better understand the Housing Ombudsman's plans for monitoring progress in service improvement following from their report.
- 2.4. The draft action plan has been tidied to contain 81 actions in response to the 21 recommendations. 21 of the 83 actions have been completed or are in place already, 43 are in progress with many of the remaining following on from other actions once complete. The below progress update provides a summary of the work undertaken within Homes and Neighbourhoods so far.
- 2.5. **Progress update**
- 2.6. Cross cutting recommendations 1 – 6. These recommendations focused on the council's need to improve:
- service improvement plans, ensuring they have senior level buy-in and clear success measures and outcomes,
 - collaborative working across services and our partner organisations,
 - frontline interactions with residents, through better investigation of what the resident seeks as an outcome and better communication on next steps,

- oversight of record keeping, offering a better resident experience and efficiency of dealing with service requests from residents,
- consideration of resident vulnerabilities and how they should influence our response as a landlord.

2.7. The council has:

- Developed a departmental format for action plans, which ensures SMART objectives and Senior Responsible Officers are in place for all action.
- A staff survey has been designed for implementation during December and January to seek feedback on staff empowerment and support staff need to feel more empowered in their roles. An action plan will be developed from this.
- A programme of communications training is under development for all staff, which will focus on staff interactions on the frontline supporting staff to providing high quality interactions and clear follow up actions to residents. The training will incorporate the importance of record keeping as part of our commitment to good communications.
- The Housing Ombudsman training on Knowledge and Information Management is compulsory for all managers to complete and recommended learning for staff. Managers are to complete this during January and completion will be monitored.
- Work has started on developing a Vulnerabilities Policy, a draft policy will be developed by February for consultation with stakeholders and residents, before being finalised for sign-off by the Council's Executive. The Housing Ombudsman is due to issue a spotlight report on the subject and any further learning from this will also be considered.
- 180 staff in Tenancy, Housing Needs, Housing Options and Income teams have completed Trauma Informed Practice training – this is now compulsory for staff in these areas and will be included in new staff inductions. The training is being rolled out into Housing Direct and for the surveying team who deal with complex repairs and disrepair and further roll out will be considered after this within Housing Property Services.

2.8. Disrepair related recommendations 7-14. These recommendations focused on the council's need to improve:

- the number of missed appointments, through better understanding of why these are occurring and how they can be reduced,
- greater oversight of delivery by third party contractors and managing agents,

- proactive mitigation of the impact of complex repairs on residents,
- communications with residents who have previously experienced damp and mould,
- how we ensure void properties are reserviced whilst vacant, and free from long term issues when let,
- our mutual exchange policy, to ensure that there is not an overly onus responsibility place on residents to identify damp and mould or other disrepair,
- our repairs policy to ensure it has clear escalation pathways and is resolution focussed, for repairs that are delayed.

2.9. The council has:

- Introduced a backstop team to prevent missed appointments through reallocations processes. Protocols are drafted and measures of performance for the team are in place, to ensure these measures achieve the required outcomes.
- A damp and mould team in place, with specific timeframe measures – to help isolate and monitor service performance.
- Regular learning/sharing meetings are now in place between the council and Partners to ensure new working is embedded throughout council services.
- Monthly operational meetings with repair contractors are in place and focussed on resolution of outstanding repairs, greater levels of post inspection arrangement are now in place. Further works is underway to seek to implement live updates via contractor PDAs into the council systems – as new contracts come into place.
- Additional checks are in place for complex repairs delivered by Partners and annual performance reporting through Housing Management Team and Political Leadership meetings focusing on Partners performance and improvement programme have been implemented.
- Another round table event sharing learning on damp and mould was held in November and a further meeting is planned for Q4 next year. Partners are a key contributor alongside the council, taking part in this best practice sharing exercise.
- Risk assessment for damp and mould calls has been developed and requires technical updates to the system that will be completed in January.
- Trigger points for damp and mould repairs have been developed ready for roll out.
- Repairs policy revision with dedicated damp and mould section is in draft and being shared with key stakeholders for review.
- Partners are working proactively with the council to imbed changes into their service arrangements and incorporating updated policies and processes.
- Improvements being developed in voids processes to ensure damp and mould and other complex works take place before occupation.

- Mutual exchange process has been updated to remove any onus on residents to identify damp and mould issues and new surveying arrangements will be in place early in the new year.

2.10. Anti-social Behaviour related recommendations 15 – 17. These recommendations focused on the council's need to improve:

- ensure the learning from the Housing Ombudsman's spotlight report 'A Time to be Heard' is embedded in our service delivery,
- how staff are empowered and support to apply procedures for responding to ASB and noise complaints,
- monitoring of officers complying with the processes and policies related to ASB and noise.

2.11. The council has:

- Carried out a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman 'Time to be Heard' insight report and action plan has been developed.
- The Housing Operations Director and Senior Officers have attended Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee to share how housing management services deliver ASB services – taking part in their scrutiny review to identify service improvements.
- The complaints team will ensure learning is drawn on ASB services from complaints and share them with service leads to develop improvement, this process will be strengthened once the new complaints system is in place early in the new year – providing trend reporting on this and other complaints issues.
- Put in place annual opinion survey for staff, identifying how empowered and supported they feel in delivering services. The survey has been designed for implementation this month and will be carried out annually to monitor staff confidence and improvement in this and other areas each year.
- Good Neighbour Policy has been drafted and is being further developed with residents, partners and stakeholders.

2.12. Complaints related recommendations 18 – 21. These recommendations focused on the council's need to improve:

- Executive and director level oversight of the complaints process, including learning from complaints,

- training for all staff in complaints handlings and learning from complaints – to promote the benefits from and importance of the complaints process,
- our complaints process and procedures to ensure they are clear and have expectations for quality responses,
- that apology letters or stage 2 level responses are brought to the attention of the Chief Executive or suitably senior members of staff.

2.13. The council has:

- Developed a complaints handling training programme utilising the Housing Ombudsman online training courses for all office-based staff – which will start to be rolled out to staff from February as compulsory for these staff. Managers will be required to complete a second unit of training to enhance their understanding of complaints investigation and improve the quality of service responses.
- New complaints reporting format is now in place and consistent across all Homes and Neighbourhoods complaints and will incorporate improvements from trends reporting from the new complaints monitoring system.
- Homes and Neighbourhoods complaints service restructure has been agreed, securing additional resources for the team and ensuring that quality management is at the heart of the service. The restructure process will be rolled out in late January for staff consultation and where needed posts recruited too, once the consultation process is concluded.
- Quality audits by the Customer Solutions Manager will be carried out on a weekly basis from January, ensuring that improvements are being embedded in the service.
- The Corporate Complaints Team will ensure that apology letters are notified to complaints leads and the Chief Executive to ensure visibility and compliance with the Housing Ombudsman’s expectations and stage 2 letters will be signed off by a senior officer (Director).

4. Implications

4.1. Financial implications

4.1.1 None to be reported.

4.2 Legal implications

4.2.1 None to be reported.

4.3 **Environmental implications and contribution to achieving net zero carbon Islington by 2023**

4.3.1 None to be reported.

4.4 **Equalities Impact Assessment**

4.4.1 The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

4.4.2 An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required in relation to this report, because further guidance on equalities impact assessments is available within the Housing Ombudsman action plan (attached as an appendix/supporting document to this paper) as required for respective actions and successful delivery of associated objectives.

5. **Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

5.1 The Homes and Neighbourhoods Service has ensured focus on progressing areas of service improvement identified both by the council and Housing Ombudsman to improve our repairs, complaints and ASB services and responding to the cross cutting issues identified.

5.1.2 This report summarises the significant progress has been made in the delivery of the Housing Ombudsman Action Plan and more is planned for the coming weeks and months.

Appendices:

- Please see accompanying Housing Ombudsman Action Plan

Final report clearance:

Authorised by: Jed Young

Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods

Date: 21/12/2023

Report Author: Hannah Bowman, Assistant Director, Housing Strategic Business Planning and Investment

Tel: 020 7527 4117

Email: Hannah.Bowman@islington.gov.uk