

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

Report of: Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods

Meeting of: Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee – 14th October 2024

Date: 14th October 2024

Ward(s): All wards

Subject: Update on progress made on the Housing Ombudsman Action Plan

1. Synopsis

- 1.1. This report sets out the progress made by the council so far, in response to the recommendations made by the Housing Ombudsman following their special investigation into housing and complaints services.
- 1.2. It also sets out plans to complete the final outstanding or on-going elements of the plan and how any longer-term goals will continue to be monitored within Homes and Neighbourhoods Department.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To note the progress made and continuing work to ensure that the learning from the report is implemented by the council.

3. Background

3.1. The investigation report and recommendations

- 3.1.1. 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.

3.1.2. An action plan was developed and shared with the Housing Ombudsman in response to their 21 recommendations and Homes and Neighbourhoods, with corporate colleagues in the complaints team and public health, have been working through the delivery of the agreed actions over the past 8 months, making considerable progress and improvements to services.

3.1.3. The Housing Ombudsman has confirmed that they are satisfied by the progress so far and the evidence provided, so they will not be monitoring our progress further against the action plan but will be returning to their usual monitoring practices for Islington.

3.2. Delivering the recommendations

3.2.1. The table below sets out the completed actions and progress that has been made against delivering the 21 recommendations made by the Housing Ombudsman:

| Recommendation | Progress made |
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| 1. Take a consistently SMART approach to improvement measures, using active language to plan and to drive accountability, with regular oversight from senior staff. | New departmental template has been in place since January 2024 for all departmental action plans, including a Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) for all actions to ensure delivery. |
| 2. Enable and empower services to work together effectively, both internally and with external agencies. This should include allocating ownership of cross-departmental issues, to co-ordinate the investigation and analyse the issue before planning the most effective response. | Allocation of an SRO for all cross-department improvement projects to co-ordinate delivery. Staff pulse survey undertaken in H&N and actions take forward from this. The survey demonstrated high levels of empowerment and confidence in their roles by staff. 92% of staff reported being clear on their objectives and 72% of staff feel empowered to delivery excellent services. |
| 3. Improve the quality of the investigations into service requests | The majority of staff across Housing Operations and Housing Property Services |

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| <p>carried out by its staff or contractors to address the failings identified in this report.</p> | <p>have complete complaints investigation training (a few remaining staff will complete it this month) to better understand the expectations of the Housing Ombudsman about how they approach both service requests and resolution of complaints.</p> <p>The Fair, Inclusive and Accessible Service Commitment encourages staff to show curiosity and look out for less obvious vulnerability and challenges residents are experiencing. Now this has been signed off by the Executive, staff will be briefed during the autumn.</p> <p>Other actions below also contribute to achieving this recommendation.</p> |
| <p>4. Train its staff and its contractors on how to communicate clearly and appropriately with residents about who will do what, why, and when.</p> | <p>A programme of communication training has been developed for all frontline staff and is being rolled out in October.</p> <p>The repairs service has ensured that a suitable communications training is in place for all their contractors.</p> |
| <p>5. Put in place formal procedures for proactive managerial oversight of record-keeping designed to ensure records are complete and accurate, and stored in the correct place.</p> | <p>A record keeping procedure is now in place.</p> <p>100% of H&N managers have completed the knowledge and information spotlight report online training provided by the Housing Ombudsman learning centre.</p> <p>Compulsory communications training for frontline staff includes the importance of record keeping in supporting our service delivery.</p> <p>Quarterly learning from complaints reports now include any record keeping learning identified that quarter.</p> |

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| <p>6. Ensure that its staff are properly considering any vulnerabilities of a resident and how that might impact the landlord's response.</p> | <p>Fair, Inclusive and Accessible Service Commitment has been approved by the Executive in September, staff briefings will take place this Autumn.</p> <p>Processes are in place for recording vulnerability data during all home visits to improve data held in our housing systems.</p> <p>Annual training offer for staff offering empathy and trauma informed practice training.</p> <p>Training available to contractor staff has been reviewed to ensure their training offers are adequate for working with vulnerable residents.</p> <p>Data analysis and data matching has been undertaken to assess whether the service had suitably prioritised vulnerable resident in its work on damp and mould, using NHS data. The analysis showed (where data matching could be achieved) that households with 3 or more vulnerabilities did experience a quicker service than households with 1-2 vulnerabilities.</p> |
| <p>7. Carry out comprehensive research into the reasons for ineffective appointments and create an action plan to reduce the number.</p> | <p>Review of missed appointments has been completed and improvements have been made to avoid missing appointment.</p> <p>Backstop and leaks teams is in place to improve performance on complex repairs follow up and avoid missed appointments.</p> <p>Sharing of good practice with Partners who have adopted improvements to their processes.</p> |

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| <p>8. Improve oversight of repairs which involve third party contractors or managing agents.</p> | <p>Contractor meetings in place focusing on works in progress to avoid delays and lack of follow up with residents. Increasing oversight of quality, through quality assurance.</p> <p>Ensure record keeping by contractors meets our expectations of our own staff.</p> <p>Council team clienting Partners have ensured auditing of repairs delivery is in place. 10% for standard repairs and 50% on major works. Annual reporting to HMT and Housing Scrutiny on Partners performance.</p> |
| <p>9. Proactively consider what can be done to mitigate the impact of more complex repair situations on the resident as far, and as soon, as possible.</p> | <p>Backstop Team now in place and embedded into structure to deal with live updates and ensure work are completed for complex repairs.</p> <p>Leaks team now in place and embedded into staffing structure to monitor works to completion.</p> <p>Damp and Mould Partnership Events have been held to review service changes and their impact with key support partners.</p> <p>Sharing of best practice with Partners – monthly joint meetings now in place.</p> <p>Major works transfer procedures has now been updated to include complex repairs.</p> |
| <p>10. Include in its damp and mould procedure an early risk-assessment that specifically factors in any vulnerabilities, with corresponding timescales for a surveyor visit dependent on the preliminary risk assessment. The damp and mould</p> | <p>Short risk assessment now in place for use in Housing Direct to help priorities visits for the most vulnerable households.</p> <p>New service standards have been incorporated into procedures and newly drafted repairs policy (completing governance processes).</p> |

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| <p>procedure should also clarify the escalation trigger points and be clear about ownership and accountability for ensuring a final resolution for the resident.</p> | <p>Partners have adopted damp and mould processes in line with the council's approach and ongoing sharing of best practice in damp and mould in place.</p> <p>New policy has been shared with TMOs and briefings given to TMO managers.</p> |
| <p>11.Create an action plan for additional steps designed to establish communication with the residents it has identified as having previously reported damp and mould.</p> | <p>Communications action plan in place for damp and mould, promoting the need to report to residents and staff.</p> |
| <p>12.Review its void process and procedure to remove unnecessary hand-over points and use the void period more effectively to address any disrepair.</p> | <p>Voids standard has been reviewed and amended and changes are being embedded into the service and monitored.</p> <p>Damp and mould checks are included in Partners voids standard too. Regular monitoring of complaints regarding voids is in place through contractual meeting.</p> <p>Council's voids processes have been shared with TMOs who complete void works.</p> |
| <p>13.Review its mutual exchange policy to ensure it does not place unreasonable onus on the resident to identify damp and mould or other disrepair.</p> | <p>Mutual Exchange Policy has been updated and arrangements are now in place for surveying homes to be exchanged.</p> |
| <p>14.The repairs policy should contain a clear escalation pathway if repairs are delayed beyond agreed or expected dates, ensure senior involvement and oversight, and processes to ensure all relevant teams within the landlord work</p> | <p>Repairs website has been updated to reflect new processes and ensure resident access routes are clear. Repairs stories have been incorporated to help residents understand how complex repairs will be managed and resolved.</p> |

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| <p>together in a resolution-focussed way.</p> | <p>Repairs policy incorporating improvements and resolution focused approach has been reviewed and approved by the Executive.</p> <p>Partners processes have also be been reviewed and updated to ensure escalation pathways are clear.</p> |
| <p>15. Self-assess against the recommendations in Time to be Heard and use this insight in its policy development. In particular, the landlord should ensure its Good Neighbourhood policy and ASB policy work together coherently.</p> | <p>Self-assessment complete and action plan developed to be monitored to conclusion of delivery.</p> <p>Presentation to Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee on ASB performance.</p> <p>Staff trained on the use of the noise app and guidance for resident on using the noise recording app is in place.</p> |
| <p>16. Ensure that relevant staff are fully empowered and supported in applying the procedures for responding to reports of ASB or noise.</p> | <p>Staff empowerment survey has been conducted, actions developed and the survey will be conducted annually.</p> <p>ASB complaints learning will be incorporated into quality complaints reports to Housing Management Team and fed back to the Head of Service on a regular basis.</p> |
| <p>17. Put in place structured proactive processes for monitoring officers' compliance with its policy and effectively addressing any failure to do so.</p> | <p>Case quality and recording being monitored through 1:1 case reviews between line managers and officers.</p> |
| <p>18. Put in place more effective executive and board level oversight, including its member responsible for complaints, to ensure accountability, and effective and timely learning from complaints.</p> | <p>Learning from complaints will be incorporated into all future Quarterly Complaints reports and reported annually to Service Improvement Board.</p> |

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| | <p>Any significant actions from complaints learning will be included in the departmental improvement plan.</p> <p>Annual complaints learning reports to be provided annually to Housing Scrutiny incorporating all complaints learning from HO investigation outcomes.</p> |
| <p>19. Provide mandatory complaint handling training to all staff, even those not directly involved in responding to complaints, to promote the benefits of complaints and ensure all staff appreciate the importance of complaints, as well as raising the standard of investigation and response.</p> | <p>Complaints training from the Housing Ombudsman's learning centre has been completed by most Housing Operations and Housing Property Services (outstanding training to be completed this autumn). Managers have also complete the complaints resolution training. Ensuring all staff have a full appreciation of the importance of responding to and resolving complaints.</p> |
| <p>20. Put in place a coherent complaints process and procedure with clear expectations of quality</p> | <p>The complaints team restructure is now complete, with new staff being inducted over August and September. The new structure embeds additional resource and quality checklists reviewed by leaders to ensure quality improvements are consistently applied and embedded.</p> <p>Meeting with Service Managers in place to provide quality feedback from the Complaint Teams directly to service leads, to ensure improvements in quality of information provided for complaints responses.</p> <p>Complaints quality checklist is completed by new team leaders since the summer and will be incorporated into Service Audit plan.</p> |
| <p>21. Ensure that complaint response letters that are escalated to Stage 2, or apology letters in response to orders from an Ombudsman, are</p> | <p>Arrangements are in place for stage 2 review of complaints escalated to the HO and apology letters required by the HO. Service Director sign-off of all stage 2 responses is in place.</p> |

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| brought to the attention of the Chief Executive and are signed off by a suitably senior member of staff. | |
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Complaints quality checklist to be completed by new team leaders from June and incorporated into Service Audit plan.

3.3. Remaining work being completed this year

3.3.1. Some actions are following on from earlier completed work or are part of longer-term improvement projects. Many of these will be completed this Autumn, with others becoming part of our business-as-usual processes on an on-going basis.

3.3.2. Actions that require some further work are:

| Recommendation | Progress made |
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| 5. Put in place formal procedures for proactive managerial oversight of record-keeping designed to ensure records are complete and accurate, and stored in the correct place. | <p>Audit plan will be developed for all key services to ensure that required standards are being met by staff during the summer.</p> <p>Housing Systems improvement project to address good record keeping improvement requirements – single view for frontline staff.</p> |
| 6. Ensure that its staff are properly considering any vulnerabilities of a resident and how that might impact the landlord’s response. | <p>The new Fair, Inclusive and Accessible Service Commitment was signed off by Executive on 5th September. Staff briefings will take place this Autumn to embedded in service delivery.</p> <p>A six-month review of the policy will be carried out in April 2025 and annually thereafter.</p> <p>Actions have been identified for improving vulnerability data held by H&N (including</p> |

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| | through tenancy audit) has become part of the Challenging Inequalities Action Plan for Homes and Neighbourhoods. |
| 8. Improve oversight of repairs which involve third party contractors or managing agents. | Work with contractors through new procurement arrangements to ensure they have access to and update repairs on Oneserve system. |
| 16.Ensure that relevant staff are fully empowered and supported in applying the procedures for responding to reports of ASB or noise. | Training for staff on the new ASB policy will be carried out on the new policy which was agreed by Executive on 5 th September 2024. |
| 17.Put in place structured proactive processes for monitoring officers' compliance with its policy and effectively addressing any failure to do so. | Tenancy Service Audit Plan to be put into place to cover ASB case quality monitoring. |
| 19.Provide mandatory complaint handling training to all staff, even those not directly involved in responding to complaints, to promote the benefits of complaints and ensure all staff appreciate the importance of complaints, as well as raising the standard of investigation and response. | First annual independent mystery shopping of key housing services has been commissioned and will take place this Autumn. |

3.3.3. Arrangements are in place to monitor the action plan through to the end of the Autumn, when the final standalone actions will be complete. Any longer-term actions, such as the review of newly implemented policies, have been incorporated into business area improvement plans, as part of our business as usual improvement monitoring and will be monitored to conclusion by the Service Improvement Board.

3.4. **Conclusions**

3.4.1. The majority of the work has been completed on delivering the Housing Ombudsman Action plan following on from the recommendations made by the Ombudsman to improve services. Most of the remaining improvement work will be fully completed by the summer.

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